

Teaching Families and households

One thing to keep in mind when teaching this module is that students will already have some prior knowledge of family life. They may, for example, have some understanding or experience of:

- different family types and structures
- different family relationships
- divorce, marriage, cohabitation, separation, lone-parent families
- childhood (which might include thinking about different 'stages' of childhood, as well as the different cultural labels associated with age – 'baby', 'infant', 'teenager' and so forth).

You can plug into these experiences to help illuminate certain concepts, theories, research methods and empirical data. For example, the ability to relate personal experience (such as living in lone-parent families or knowing gay/lesbian couples) to what is being studied may aid understanding and exposure to different ideas and may help students to evaluate both their own preconceptions and sociological ideas about families and households.

In addition, the pool of personal experiences contained in a class of students can be used as a starting point for the application of sociological theories and explanations.

One thing to keep in mind when using the experiences of students, is the significance of ethical issues. Students who have experienced divorce, or living in a lone-parent unit or with gay/lesbian parents may be embarrassed or distressed about relating these experiences 'in public'. Care needs to be taken to ensure their wellbeing.

Defining 'the family'

This is not as straightforward as students may think. The Students' Book gives one classic definition (page 62), but, before introducing this, it can be useful to explore students' ideas about 'the family', for a number of reasons.

- Getting students thinking and talking about 'the family' is a useful ice-breaker for this module.
- It should raise a number of issues such as how to define families, whether we can talk about 'the family' or 'many types of family' and the relationship between different types of family structure.
- It introduces the concept of family diversity at an early stage. The Students' Book contains a number of useful examples of both historical and contemporary forms of family diversity in our society.

Starter activity

Divide students into small groups and ask them to spend 15 minutes thinking about, discussing and identifying what the concept of 'a family' means to them. Emphasise that they should draw on their own experiences. They should appoint someone to make notes on all the ideas raised. It would be helpful to move around the groups, checking on ideas, progress and activity and, if necessary, prompting them.

Once the discussions are complete, map students' observations on the whiteboard in terms of the following three categories.

Features. What are the defining characteristics of 'a family' that make it different to other social groups? Suggestions may involve things like genetic relationships, a common residence and so forth. This material will be especially useful later for thinking about how families can be defined.

Relationships. Identification of particular relationships (husband and wife, lone parents, adults and children, grandparents, etc.) helps students to understand the variety of ways that people can relate to each other in family groups. It also gives an opportunity to refer to this material later in relation to the idea of different family structures and family diversity.

Functions. What do families do? Some of these functions may need drawing out through further questioning and some may be implicit (families are a site for reproduction, child-rearing) rather than explicit.

Material generated here can be applied to key questions such as:

- Definitions of the family. How have sociologists defined the family?
- Family diversity. How do families vary within and between societies?
- Functions of the family. What do families do?
- Theories of the family. How does the experience of family life relate to theories of the family?

This starter activity should generate a wider range of experiential data that can be related to a range of sociological ideas/concepts and theories in the family module.

Follow on

Once this activity has been completed, move on to definitions of the family (Murdock's definition on page 61 of the Students' Book is a good starting point). Having prepared the ground, you will have the basis here for an informed discussion of both the strengths and weaknesses (ideological

and well as empirical) of this definition and an evaluation of its utility and application in contemporary UK society.

Comparisons and exclusions

Getting students involved in the production of knowledge can be a useful way to capture their interest, promote cooperative learning and firm up their understanding of a particular issue or sociological question. The downside, however, is that it is important not to use up too much precious classroom time with activities that are time-consuming to create and complicated to set up, explain and implement.

In modules that have a strong statistical component, such as the Family module, 'compare and exclude' activities are useful for a number of reasons.

- They all have the same basic format and don't require a large amount of teacher preparation. Statistical material from the Students' Book, occasionally supplemented if required, with material drawn from websites like National Statistics online (www.statistics.gov.uk) provides the basis for this type of activity.
- Students learn to work together – in small groups and as a class – to 'solve problems' in a relatively simple, straightforward way that has the added bonus of teaching a comparative technique that can be applied to things like exam questions.
- They are relatively quick to carry out, don't require much in the way of preparation or prior learning and generate high levels of student understanding through their involvement in the knowledge-creation process.

The technique

The basic technique involves the following steps, which are simple to explain and follow.

1. Identifying an issue (such as divorce) that has a comparative (historical, cross-cultural or both) dimension.
2. Present as much or as little statistical data to the class as necessary to demonstrate how the issue has either changed (the historical dimension) or is different when compared to other contemporary cultures (the cross-cultural dimension).

In the case of divorce, for example:

- An historical dimension would be to present statistical data showing how the actual numbers of people divorcing has increased in our society over the past century.
- A cross-cultural dimension would be to present statistical data showing the actual numbers of divorces across different societies (e.g. comparing countries like England and the USA with countries like Eire, Spain and France).

3. Brainstorm a list of as many reasons as possible for its

occurrence (in this instance, why people divorce). It may be necessary to come pre-prepared with a range of possible ideas that need to be seeded into the brainstorming session to ensure that all the main reasons are covered.

4. Go through each suggested reason and compare 'the past with the present' (for a historical comparison). If the reason is the same in both 'the past' and 'the present' this reason can be **excluded** from the list as an explanation for the change/difference. For example, if students suggest 'domestic violence' as a reason for divorce, any discussion around this point will focus on whether it was a reason in 'the past' and in 'the present'.

5. Once all possible reasons have been discussed, those on the list that haven't been excluded will provide a **good guide** as to possible explanations for an issue. These can, if you wish, be used as a starting point for further/deeper explanation.

Please Note: The emphasis on 'good guide' is important because it's possible to argue that something can be a reason in both the past and the present and could, in itself, account for an increase in divorce if this factor has increased. For example, a present-day increase in 'domestic violence' could account for an increased number of divorces even though it has, historically, always been a factor in divorce.