

Introduction

The content of The Family topic falls into four main areas, which, in turn, are further subdivided.

- key concepts and key trends within the family
- the role of the family in society
- family diversity
- roles, responsibilities and relationships within the family

| Content | Guidance |
|--|---|
| 1 Key concepts and key trends within the family | |
| (i) Key concepts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • nuclear families • extended families • households | This is an introduction to the family. Stress key definitions, key structural trends and the importance of extended family networks in contemporary society. |
| (ii) Trends in families and households: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • family size • marriage • divorce • cohabitation • single-parent families • single-person households | Trends over the past 30 years, longer only if they illustrate a significant point (e.g. Divorce Reform Acts). |
| 2 The role of the family in society | |
| Functionalism Marxism | Functionalist views of the role of the family and an evaluation of the views. Include views on the domestic division of labour. Stress positive role of nuclear family. Marxist views of the family and evaluation of the views. Stress conflict and change. |
| 3 Family diversity | |
| Different types of family diversity: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lone-parent families • beanpole families • re-constituted families • cultural diversity • class diversity • sexual diversity Contemporary views of family diversity: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • postmodern • New Right | The key issue to explore is the range and extent of diversity in contemporary family life. Contemporary views of family diversity, which should include postmodernism and New Right ideas. New Labour views can be referred to. Include evaluation of each. |

4 Roles, responsibilities and relationships within the family

Roles, responsibilities and relationships in family life, including:

- between men and women
- between children and parents

Sociological explanations:

- functionalist
- Marxist
- feminist explanations (liberal, Marxist, radical)

Demographic changes, including:

- ageing population
- family size

The key issues are the relationship between men and women in family life, and between children and parents. Links should be made to current government policy.

A range of theories/explanations should be covered with an evaluation of each. You could include reference to the dark side of family life as a criticism of functionalism.

Demographic changes and the impact on family life. Changes such as an ageing population, the importance of carers, smaller family size, and reliance on extended kin could be considered.

The OCR AS topic The Family is designed to give you a good understanding of the relationship between individuals, the family and wider social structures. In particular, it aims to examine influences such as gender, social class, ethnicity and religion on people's experience of family life and on family organisation, as well as the relationship of the family to other agencies and the significance of social policy for family life. The Family topic has particular relevance for the synoptic Unit G674 in A2 (*Exploring Social Inequality and Difference*), where issues of family lifestyle, consumption, work and income, family structures and ethnic diversity all impact upon life chances, poverty and inequality. So, A2 students preparing for the synoptic test may also benefit from revisiting aspects of The Family topic and students intending to progress to A2 should annotate their notes in some way to highlight the synoptic links.

For the purposes of guidance, each of the four subsections that follow relates to the content headings from the specification outlined above.

Key concepts and key trends within the family

Family concepts and definitions

A **family** is a group of people who are united by blood, marriage or adoption. Members are usually bound by legal, moral and economic rights and duties and consequently have distinct obligations to one another. In addition, there are normally emotional ties. Members also tend to perform particular roles in line with social norms (e.g.

husband, wife, son, daughter etc.). The nucleus of the family — father, mother and children — may share common residence but other extended family members may live elsewhere. **Kinship** involves interaction between groups of family members (i.e. kin) expressed in various mutual forms of emotional, economic and social support.

The concept of a **household** refers to a group of people who share common residence. A family that shares a common residence is a household. However, those who make up a household need not be necessarily related — a group of students who share a house constitute a household.

Families take many diverse structural forms but the type of family discussed most by sociologists has been the **nuclear family**, which consists of parents and their children. It was assumed for many years in modern Britain that a nuclear family was the ideal type of family that people should attempt to achieve. It was assumed that this nuclear family should have the following characteristics:

- Its members should be biologically related.
- It should be based upon heterosexual romantic love.
- It should be based upon marriage.
- There should be a sexual division of labour based on natural differences — women should be primarily responsible for childcare while men should be the breadwinner and head of household.

However, the latter part of the twentieth century saw women moving into paid work in large numbers and men increasing their participation in housework and childcare. Despite its prominence in discussions of family life, this nuclear family only represents 39% of family forms in Britain.

Key trends in family life

The shift from extended families

Fifty years ago it was believed that family life, especially working-class family life, was characterised by the **classical extended family**.

This classical extended family comprised mutually dependent family members, either living together or geographically close. It may have been **vertically extended** (comprised of more than one generation of mutually dependent members such as children, parents and grandparents), and/or **horizontally extended** (involving the mutual dependency and interaction of relatives within the same generation, for example aunts, uncles, cousins, married siblings etc.). In such families, regular — often daily — contact between family members was maintained, compared with the more isolated **nuclear family**, which is thought to maintain less regular contact with wider kin.

However, sociologists such as Wilmott and Young have argued that over the past 50 years, this extended unit has gradually been replaced by the isolated nuclear family (which is less likely to maintain regular contact with kin) for a number of reasons.

- Full employment in the 1950s led to rises in pay and living standards, and consequently people were less dependent on other family members for economic supports.

- Full employment led to an expansion in the number of jobs available, which meant that sons did not necessarily have to follow fathers into the same jobs.
- The expansion of secondary education meant that working-class children often experienced upward social mobility into white collar, managerial and professional jobs.
- Full employment led to geographical mobility — people moved away from areas in which their families had traditionally lived in order to better themselves.
- The welfare state, and particularly the benefits system, reduced the need for an extended family mutual support system.

Evaluation

- The concept of 'contact' with regard to nuclear families depends on how it is being measured. While it is true that members of some families do not have a great deal of face-to-face contact with kin, mainly because of geographical distance, links may be maintained in other ways, for example by telephone, e-mails, and so on. It may therefore be unwise to suggest that nuclear families are isolated from kin.
- Litwak suggests that nuclear families should be referred to as **modified extended families** because family life in the UK today is often made up of a coalition of nuclear families who are partially dependent on each other and who exchange significant services with each other. However, unlike the classical extended family, these family relationships are not bound together economically or geographically; members have considerable autonomy, but they are not cut off or as remote as is suggested by the notion of the isolated nuclear family.
- Alternatively, Peter Willmott notes the emergence of a **dispersed extended family**. Members live some distance apart but keep in fairly regular contact, perhaps once a week by car, telephone and public transport. While not dependent on each other, they do feel a family obligation or duty to help each other occasionally if a crisis occurs.
- However, the classical extended family is still very much in evidence in some areas. Janet Foster in her study *Villains* (1991) showed how the lives of working-class people and their children in London's East End were still dominated by the values and traditions of extended kin such as parents and grandparents who lived nearby. Also, there is evidence that many ethnic minority communities, particularly Asian communities, have horizontal extended family structures at their heart.

The rise of lone-parent families

There has been a significant growth in the number and percentage of families headed by single or 'lone' parents (the overwhelming majority of whom are women). The **lone-parent family** unit now comprises almost one in four of all families with dependent children.

There are a number of reasons offered for the growth in lone-parent families:

- The increased incidence of separation and divorce.
- The feminisation of the economy and workplace, which has increased the economic choices available to females (compared with 50 years ago). There are now more opportunities for women to enjoy careers and to be economically

independent of men. There is some evidence that these women are choosing to have children in their mid- to late thirties but are less likely to do this in a conventional relationship (i.e. they choose to bring up children alone).

- Helen Wilkinson argues that a radical change — which she terms a ‘genderquake’ — has occurred and consequently the idea of bringing up children alone is no longer unthinkable to modern women.
- New Right sociologists have argued that a breakdown in traditional family and moral values is occurring and that the high divorce rate and the high rate of teenage pregnancy in the UK are symbolic of this.
- New Right sociologists suggest that the availability of welfare benefits has also encouraged female members of a so-called underclass (see page 22) to choose to have children rather than go to work and earn a living.
- Changing religious and social values, especially the decline in religious belief among the majority of the population, mean that single mothers are less likely to be stigmatised and labelled as deviant.

New Right thinkers such as Murray (1994) suggest that children of single parents suffer from lower educational achievement and are more likely to become delinquent.

Evaluation

- Only 3% of single parents are teenagers.
- The average age of a single mother is 34; these are mainly divorced women.
- Despite welfare benefits, the economic situation of single parenthood offers little financial incentive to become pregnant as the New Right suggest. Seventeen percent of those officially defined as poor are single parents.
- Single parenthood can be a realistic strategy in poor areas where fathers cannot offer economic support due to unemployment or low wages.
- Home Office reports have found no difference in the crime rates between youngsters from single- and two-parent families.

Other trends

Marriage and cohabitation

There has been a fall in the marriage rate, and a growth in **cohabitation** over the last 30 years. Although marriage is still the usual form of partnership between men and women, the number of marriages has declined substantially since a peak in 1970. Currently, roughly a quarter of all non-married men and women between the ages of 16 and 59 are cohabiting at any one time. Cohabitation is, of course, often followed by marriage and thus the age of first marriage is increasing. In 1971 the average age of first marriage was 22 for women and 24 for men. By 2001 this had increased to 28.4 and 30.6 for women and men respectively.

Wilkinson (1994) has noted that female attitudes to marriage have undergone a ‘genderquake’, whereby many middle-class young women are weighing up the relative advantages of family life against the opportunities offered by education and an increasingly feminised workplace and so are opting out of marriage and motherhood altogether.

Divorce

We have seen an increase in the **divorce rate** following various legal changes, particularly the implementation in 1971 of the Divorce Law Reform Act. The increase in the number of divorces appears to have leveled off in recent years, partly reflecting the fall in the number of marriages and the possibility that increased cohabitation may mean that cohabitantes who marry may be better suited, because they have got to know each other's strengths and limitations before marriage.

The reasons for the rise in divorce up to the mid-1980s include the following.

- Legal changes made it easier for divorces to be granted (the Divorce Reform Act only required 2 years' legal separation before a divorce was granted, compared with the previous expensive and lengthy system, which involved proving that the husband or wife was 'guilty' of a matrimonial offence such as adultery).
- Changing social attitudes (partly as a result of the growing incidence of divorce) made marital breakdown more socially acceptable.
- There were signs from the 1980s onwards that people expected more from marriage than previous generations, especially women. Thornes and Collard (1992) showed that women expect more from marriage than men and so are more easily dissatisfied.
- Feminist ideas, particularly the idea that women have a right to personal happiness and fulfilment within marriage, have probably contributed to the fact that women are the main petitioners for divorce — seven of every ten divorce decrees are granted to women.
- The declining influence of the Christian church has meant that moral or religious opposition to divorce has been relatively weak.
- Kin are increasingly isolated from a supportive kinship network whose members in previous generations might have encouraged couples to work through their marital problems.
- There is evidence that modern society is more stressful because of long hours spent at work and financial pressures.

Growth of single-person households

The number of people living alone has tripled since 1960, currently comprising almost 30% of all households. Almost half of these one-person households consist of a person under pensionable age. There are a variety of reasons for this particular trend, some of which are mentioned below:

- The increased economic independence of women (women are no longer 'a husband away from poverty').
- The growth of **young singletons** — young people who may be in a relationship but who choose to live alone.
- The rise in the number of divorced or separated people who have not formed another co-residential partnership.
- The increase in **life expectancy** has added to the number of elderly widowed people living alone.

Many argue, in particular the New Right, that increases in divorce, the decline in the **marriage rate** and the growth of cohabitation and single-person households indicate a decline in family life.

Evaluation

Abbott and Wallace (1992) reinterpret family statistics to demonstrate the continuing stability of the family. They show that:

- Six out of ten couples stay together until one of them dies.
- Seven out of ten children are born to parents who live together, three quarters of whom are married.
- Only one in five children experience parental divorce by the age of 16.
- 78% of British children under 16 live with both natural parents who are legally married.

Changes in family lifestyle

There has been a rise in **dual career** or **dual income families**, who can enjoy a more affluent lifestyle, indulge in more conspicuous consumption and leisure activities such as a new car or family holiday abroad, compared to the single-earner households of the past.

There has also been an increase in the number of **'empty-nest' families**, as children grow up and leave the family while the parents are still relatively young. This is coupled to the rise in life expectancy. However, in parts of the country where living and housing costs are high, there has been an increasing trend for young people either to continue living with their parents for the duration of their studies or to return to the family home after higher education.

Key concepts

family; kinship; household; nuclear family; classical extended family; isolated nuclear family; extended family; lone-parent families; cohabitation; divorce rate; young singletons; life expectancy; marriage rate; dual income families; 'empty nest' families

The role of the family in society

The family has been perceived in both positive and negative terms by sociologists.

Functionalist perspectives

Functionalists see the family as a beneficial institution which has evolved to meet the needs of modern industrial society.

- Parsons (1955) argues that specialised agencies took over many family functions after industrialisation (education, health and economic production). According to Parsons, the family is therefore left with only two basic and irreducible functions: (a) the primary socialisation of children (i.e. the transmission of basic human behaviour patterns), and (b) the stabilisation of adult personality (for example, the

married couple keep each other emotionally and mentally balanced and therefore able to cope with the stresses of modern living).

- The nuclear family is a vital agency of **primary socialisation** because it transmits culture from one generation to another, so ensuring the reproduction of society and social order. **Secondary socialisation** involves more complex elements of human social behaviour developed through socialising agents beyond infancy and the family.
- Parsons argues that the family acts as a personality factory, producing children whose behaviour is shaped by key societal values such as individualism and achievement.
- Parsons argues that individuals also benefit from the family because parents gain stability and satisfaction from having children and are able to sustain each other emotionally, physically and sexually. This latter function has been called the **warm bath theory**, in that the family provides the means to relax and relieve the frustrations of modern living.
- However, Fletcher (1966) disagrees with Parsons and argues that the family continues to fulfil health, educational and welfare functions hand-in-hand with the state.

Some functionalist and New Right sociologists argue that socialisation in modern society is becoming less effective because of trends such as increasing divorce and the lack of a father in many one-parent families. Furthermore, they argue that this is contributing to social problems such as increased delinquency and educational underachievement.

Evaluation

- The functionalist perspective overestimates the success of the socialisation process, as indicated by the existence of problems such as child abuse, youth suicide, eating disorders etc.
- So-called common values transmitted through the family may be the values of dominant social groups.
- Functionalism presents an **over-socialised view** of children. For example, children may negotiate socialisation with parents and parents themselves may be socialised into particular ways of thinking or behaviour by their children.
- Functionalism presents socialisation as a universal homogeneous experience and consequently neglects differences due to wealth, social class, ethnicity, religion etc.
- There is no universal agreement on how socialisation should occur, as indicated by the debate about smacking children.
- There is convincing evidence from Phoenix (1995) and Cashmore (1985) that one-parent families can successfully socialise children and the absence of a father does not significantly damage children.

Some functionalist sociologists, for example Leach (1967), are critical of the nuclear family. He argues that it is too intense and inward-looking and, like an overloaded electrical circuit or pressure cooker, has the potential to explode.

Marxism

Marxists such as Zaretsky (1976) argue that the nuclear family benefits capitalism more than other forms because it can be used as an **ideological apparatus** to promote capitalist interests. For example, it is targeted as a unit of consumption by advertisers and consequently buys many more consumer items than other family forms. Other Marxists note that in families, children learn to submit to parental authority and discipline and therefore they acquire the appropriate attitudes to hierarchy (passive acceptance, obedience etc.) required of the capitalist division of labour in the workplace. Furthermore, in industrial societies, the family helps to service and maintain the economic system by reproducing the future workforce and promoting a positive work ethic. It also cushions the effects of capitalism by providing opportunities for satisfaction no longer available through work.

Feminism

Many feminists see the family as oppressive for women because it has traditionally confined them either to the home or to subordinate positions in society. It is expected socially that they should be mainly responsible for the care of the young and elderly. These domestic or family roles inhibit their wider social and economic opportunities. In terms of the wider society, the role of the family is seen as one supportive of both **patriarchy** (male dominance of social institutions and decision-making) and capitalism.

Key concepts

primary socialisation; secondary socialisation; warm bath theory; over-socialised view; ideological apparatus; patriarchy

Family diversity

Sociologists note that there are many distinctive forms of family existing today. However, the idea that one particular type of family should be the preferred model has been dominant both in popular culture and functionalist and New Right thinking for over a century. Such thinking is referred to as the **ideology of familism**, which promotes certain values regarding family life over others (for example, it is often assumed without question that the primary care-giver should be the female while the male should be the breadwinner, or that children need both parents to ensure that they are properly brought up and disciplined).

Sociological discussion of these issues is referred to as the **family values debate**. This debate is particularly interested in the fact that government social policy still appears actively to promote the two-parent nuclear family, while other social policies are seen to undermine it. Feminists, for example, believe that family social policies reflect an ideological view that actively tries to promote a particular type of family structure,

namely that of the nuclear family, at the expense of women and to the benefit of men in society.

On the other hand, New Right sociologists argue that certain social policies (for example, providing welfare benefits for single mothers, and making divorce easier) undermine the traditional family structure and contribute to 'social problems'. They accuse the government of being a **nanny state**, creating welfare dependency and disincentives to work as well as discouraging individual responsibility. This, they argue, has created an **underclass** unable and unwilling to work for a living.

Examples of family diversity

Single-parent families

This type of family involves a lone parent, usually a divorced woman. Such families often involve close ties with wider kin, especially grandparents.

Beanpole families

Historically, families have usually contained a larger number of children than parents, resulting in family trees that looked like pyramids. In recent years, especially in Britain and the USA, the number of children per generation has gone down steadily and life span has increased. This has led to a new shape of family tree that some researchers have likened to a beanpole — tall and thin, with few people in each generation.

Julia Brannen argues that people are having smaller families due to divorce and women pursuing careers, and as a result, we are less likely to experience **horizontal intragenerational ties** (we have fewer aunts, uncles and cousins). However, Brannen argues that we are now more likely to experience **vertical intergenerational ties** (closer ties with grandparents and great-grandparents) because of increased life expectancy.

Brannen argues that the **pivot generation** (the one sandwiched between older and younger family generations) provides for the needs of both elderly parents and grandchildren. For example, 20% of people in their fifties and sixties currently care for an elderly person, while 10% care for both an elderly person and a grandchild. Such services are based on the assumption of **reciprocity** (the provision of babysitting services is repaid by the assumption that daughters will assist their mothers in their old age).

Reconstituted or 'step' families

There has been a growth in **reconstituted** or 'step' families following divorce and remarriage. More than two in five of all marriages involve the remarriage of at least one partner, and a growing number of children live with a step-parent. Monogamy (one partner for life) is being replaced by serial monogamy — a series of long-term relationships which result in cohabitation/marriage and children. Each relationship eventually breaks down and is in time replaced by another, resulting in remarriage and a reconstituted family.