Family Variety and diversity
In the past 30 or 40 years there have been some major changes in family and household patterns. For example:

- The number of traditional nuclear family households - a married couple with their dependent children has fallen.
- Divorce rates have increased.
- There are fewer first marriages, but more re-marriages. People are marrying later in life.
- More couples are cohabiting.
- Same-sex relationships can be legally recognised through civil partnerships.
- Women are having fewer children and having them later.
- There are more births outside marriage.
- There are more lone-parent families.
- More people live alone.
- There are more stepfamilies and more couples without children.

In this topic, we examine the changes in patterns of family life in Britain and the reasons for them. These changes include marriage, cohabitation and divorce. Such changes are contributing to greater family diversity, and we examine how sociologists have interpreted them.

It is not difficult to see why supporters of the traditional family, such as the New Right, are so alarmed by trends such as those above. They believe these indicate a crisis in the family, which will inevitably result in increasing antisocial behaviour and moral breakdown. Many postmodernists and feminists look at these trends in a very different way they see them as indicators of greater personal choice in our private lives, and as evidence of a rejection of patriarchal family arrangements.
**CONSENSUS**

**FUNCTIONALISM**
People are still getting married; they’re just postponing it. Men and women today often cohabit before getting married to established partners. In addition, young people have a long period in education, so they’re not ready to marry as young as people were in the middle of the twentieth century. We should also recognise the increase in gay couples living openly together. It’s taking place because gay men and gay women are far less pressurised into marriage with a partner of the opposite sex than they used to be.

**MARXISM**
Many young people are not getting married because they can’t afford to, given the price of houses in relation to wages. That’s why we have so many boomerang families. The New Right attack is not really on single-mothers: it’s on working class single-mothers. Single middle class women can have children and pay nannies and nurses to look after them. It’s poverty, not single-parenthood, that causes social problems.

**CONFLICT**

**NEW RIGHT**
The family is in decline because more and more people are not committing themselves to marriage. The welfare state provides perverse incentives for young females to have children outside marriage and this encourages a decline in marriage. The consequences are bad: children brought up by lone parents die younger than children brought up by two parents. They are also more likely to go to prison, more likely to become alcoholics, more likely to commit suicide, and more likely to get divorced themselves.

**INTERACTIONISM**
People today can choose their lifestyles – whether it’s as singletons, LATs, gay couples, or single-parents. We don’t need any further explanation. Social conditions only appear to us as problems because we label them that way.

**FEMINISM**
According to Liberal Feminists, fewer women are marrying because marriage is not such a good deal for them. As long as they can remain independent, that’s a good thing. Marxist-Feminists add to this argument that the problems of single-parenthood are mainly due to poverty.

Radical Feminists agree with Functionalists on the facts: that marriage is still important. Unlike Functionalists, they don’t think that this is a good thing. Singlehood is better for women.
Similarly, Kath Weston (1992) describes same-sex cohabitation as 'quasi marriage' and notes that many gay couples are now deciding to cohabit as stable partners. She contrasts this with the gay lifestyle of the 1970s, which largely rejected monogamy and family life in favour of casual relationships.

Others sociologists have noted the effect on same-sex relationships of a legal framework such as civil partnerships. For example, Allan and Crow argue that, because of the absence of such a framework until recently, same-sex partners have had to negotiate their commitment and responsibilities more than married couples. This may have made same-sex relationships both more flexible and less stable than heterosexual relationships.

Similarly, David Cheal (2002) notes that, while many gays and lesbians welcome the opportunity to have their partnerships legally recognised, others fear that it may limit the flexibility and negotiability of relationships. Rather than adopt what they see as heterosexual relationship norms, they wish to retain a status of 'difference'.

Stonewall (2008), the campaign for lesbian, gay and bisexual rights, estimates that about 5-7% of the adult population today have same-sex relationships. It is impossible to judge whether this represents an increase because in the past, stigma and illegality meant that such relationships were more likely to be hidden.

There is evidence of increased social acceptance of same-sex relationships in recent years. Male homosexual acts were decriminalized in 1967 for consenting adults over 21. More recently the age of consent has been equalised with heterosexuals. Opinion polls show more tolerance of homosexuality.

Social policy is now beginning to treat all couples more equally, whether homosexual or heterosexual, cohabiting or married. For example, since 2002, cohabiting couples have had the same right to adopt as married couples. Since 2004, the Civil Partnership Act has given same-sex couples similar legal rights to married couples in respect of pensions, inheritance, tenancies and property. Most recently MPs in the UK voted to allow gay marriage.

Jeffrey Weeks (1999) argues that increased social acceptance may explain a trend in recent years towards same-sex cohabitation and stable relationships that resemble those found among heterosexuals. Weeks sees gays as creating families based on the idea of ‘friendship as kinship’, where friendships become a type of kinship network. He describes these as ‘chosen families’ and argues that they offer the same security and stability as heterosexual families.
**Theories About ‘Decoupling’**

**CONSENSUS**

**FUNCTIONALISM**

Major cause of higher divorce rate is that, marriage still being so important, people expect a lot from it. Consequences of high divorce rates can be bad, but can be mitigated by institutional support. It’s poverty that is the immediate causal factor. And most people eventually marry. It can be better (or, to put it clumsily, less bad) for children if their parents divorce than if they stay in an abusive relationship.

They argue that a high divorce rate does not necessarily prove that marriage as a social institution is under threat. It is simply the result of people's higher expectations of marriage today. The high rate of re-marriage shows people’s continuing commitment to the idea of marriage.

**NEW RIGHT**

Causes of the increase in divorce are: the break up of communities, secularisation, Feminism, prolongation of childhood, and the role of the Welfare State in undermining self-discipline. There is no single explanation of rising divorce rates. Indeed, decoupling is a slow process of shifting relationships.

They see high divorce rate as undesirable because it undermines the traditional nuclear family. In their view, divorce creates an underclass of welfare-dependent female lone parents and leaves boys without the adult male role model they need.

**MARXISM**

We need to concentrate on class differences. Middle class couples can more easily afford divorces – and to split up rather than remain as SBLTs. Middle class single-mothers can also cope more easily than working class single-mothers, who are penalised by the welfare state.

**INTERACTIONISM**

Divorce rates have risen because people today can choose their lifestyles. There’s no single explanation of rising divorce rates. Indeed, decoupling is a slow process of shifting relationships.

Postmodernists see a high divorce rate as giving individuals the freedom to choose to end a relationship when it no longer meets their needs. They see it as a cause of greater family diversity.

**FEMINISM**

We need to study the gender aspects. Women are more likely than men to sue for divorce. This is because of men’s inadequacies. At the same time, women suffer more from divorce because they are more likely to be thrust into poverty.

Some see a high divorce rate as desirable because it shows that women are breaking free from the oppression of the patriarchal nuclear family.

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The meaning of high divorce rates

Sociologists disagree as to what today’s high divorce rate tells us about the state of marriage and the family. (See Webb et al. page 60)
1. Changes in the law
Divorce was very difficult to obtain in 19th-century Britain, especially for women. Gradually, changes in the law have made divorce easier. There have been three kinds of change in the law:
- Equalising the grounds (the legal reasons) for divorce between the sexes.
- Widening the grounds for divorce.
- Making divorce cheaper.

Although divorce is the legal termination of a marriage, couples can and do find other solutions to the problem of an unhappy marriage. These include:
- Desertion, where one partner leaves the other but the couple remain legally married.
- Legal separation, where a court separates the financial and legal affairs of the couple but where they remain married and are not free to re-marry.
- 'Empty shell' marriage, where the couple continue to live under the same roof but remain married in name only.

2. Declining stigma and changing attitudes
Stigma refers to the negative label, social disapproval or shame attached to a person, action or relationship. In the past, divorce and divorcees have been stigmatised; For example, churches tended to condemn divorce and often refused to conduct marriage services involving divorcees. Juliet Mitchell and Jack Goody (1997) note that an important change since the 1960s has been the rapid decline in the stigma attached to divorce.

As stigma declines and divorce becomes more socially acceptable, couples become more willing to resort to divorce as a means of solving their marital problems. In turn, the fact that divorce is now more common begins to 'normalise' it and reduces the stigma attached to it. Rather than being seen as shameful, today it is more likely to be regarded simply as a misfortune.

3. Secularisation
Secularisation refers to the decline in the influence of religion in society. Many sociologists argue that religious institutions and ideas are losing their influence and society is becoming more secular. For example, church attendance rates continue to decline.

As a result of secularisation, the traditional opposition of the churches to divorce carries less weight in society and people are less likely to be influenced by religious teachings when making decisions. For example, according to 2001 Census data, 43% of young people with no religion were cohabiting, as against only 34% of Christians, 17% of Muslims, 11% of Hindus and 10% of Sikhs.

At the same time, many churches have also begun to soften their views on divorce and divorcees, perhaps because they fear losing credibility with large sections of the public and with their own members.

4. Rising expectations of marriage
Functionalist sociologists such as Ronald Fletcher (1966) argue that the higher expectations people place on marriage today are a major cause of rising divorce rates. Higher expectations make couples nowadays less willing to tolerate an unhappy marriage.

This is linked to the ideology of romantic love - an idea that has become dominant over the last couple of centuries. This is the belief that marriage should be based solely on love, and that for each individual there is a Mr or Miss Right out there. It follows that if love dies, there is no longer any justification for remaining married and every reason to divorce so as to be able to renew the search for one’s true soul mate. In the past, by contrast, individuals often had little choice in whom they married, and at a time when the family was also a unit of production, marriages were often contracted largely for economic reasons or out of duty to one’s family.
The growth of remarriage and reconstituted families shows that the family is not in decline. It shows that people want the best out of marriage. It’s usually better for children to be included in a reconstituted family than to live with single-parents.

The growth of remarriage and reconstituted families shows that there are still great social pressures on people to be married. Marriage serves the interests of the capitalist system in passing on property and in preparing children for work.

People have a natural tendency to be married. Though divorce is not good and widowhood tragic, remarriage is better than the alternatives. However, the children of reconstituted marriages suffer compared with children of couples who stay together.

If there are more choices, as there are, people will take them. People will experiment with different lifestyles. That’s all there is to it.

Though high divorce rates are due to women’s unhappiness with men, women are still forced into dependency on men. That’s why they have to remarry. Patriarchy still governs people’s lives.
Conjugal roles simply mean roles within marriage, and some of the earliest research in this area was conducted by Bott (1957). She argued that there are two types of conjugal roles: segregated and joint. Segregated conjugal roles are where the couple have separate roles. The man would be out at work (the breadwinner role) and the woman the housewife. This was the typical relationship throughout most of the 19th and 20th centuries. Joint conjugal roles are where the couple share housework and childcare, a relationship which has become more common since the 1970s.

Young and Willmott (1973) take a 'march of progress' view of the history of the family. They see family life as gradually improving for all its members, becoming more equal and democratic. They argue that there has been a long-term trend away from segregated conjugal roles and towards joint conjugal roles and the 'symmetrical family'.

By the symmetrical family they mean one in which the roles of husbands and wives, although not identical, are now much more similar.

- Women now go out to work, although this may be part-time rather than full-time.
- Men now help with housework and childcare.
- Couples now spend their leisure time together instead of separately with workmates or female relatives, they are more home-centred or 'privatised'.

Young and Willmott see the rise of the symmetrical nuclear family as the result of major social changes that have taken place during the past century:

- Changes in women's position, including married women going out to work
- Geographical mobility - more couples living away from the communities in which they grew up
- New technology and labour-saving devices
- Higher standards of living.

Many of the above factors are inter-linked. For example, married women bringing a second wage into the home raises the family's standard of living. This enables the couple to make the home more attractive, and therefore encourages men to spend time at home rather than in the pub with their workmates. It also means the couple can afford more labour-saving devices. This makes housework easier and encourages men to do more.

In their study of families in London, Young and Willmott found that the symmetrical family was more common among younger couples, those who are geographically and socially isolated, and the more affluent (better off). For example, the young couples who had moved away from Bethnal Green and were living at a distance from the extended family and workmates were more likely to have a symmetrical relationship.
Mary Boulton (1983) found that fewer than 20% of husbands had a major role in childcare. She argues that Young and Willmott exaggerate men's contribution by looking at the tasks involved in childcare rather than the responsibilities. A father might help with specific tasks, but it was almost always the mother who was responsible for the child's security and well-being.

Similarly, research conducted in Manchester by Alan Warde and Kevin Hetherington (1993) shows that sex-typing of domestic tasks remains strong. For example, wives were 30 times more likely to have been the last person to have done the washing, while husbands were four times more likely to have been the last person to wash the car.

In general, Warde and Hetherington found that men would only carry out routine 'female' tasks when their partners were not around to do them. Nevertheless, they did find evidence of a slight change of attitude among younger men. They no longer assumed that women should do the housework, and were more likely to think they were doing less than their fair share.

This generational change is partially supported by other research. For example, Future Foundation's (2000) study of 1,000 adults found that 60% of men claimed to do more housework than their father, while 75% of women claimed to do less housework than their mother.

According to the Office for National Statistics, on average women spend over two and a half hours per day on housework, cooking, washing up, cleaning and ironing, compared with men's one hour a day.

In general, car maintenance and DIY are the only chores that men spend more time on. Men have an extra half hour's free time per day compared with women. Although some studies have found a narrowing of the gender gap in terms of time spent on housework in recent decades, overall it is clear that women still do more domestic labour than men.

### Emotion Work

Domestic labour is often defined as household tasks such as ironing and cooking, and time spent looking after children. However, it is also important to consider the emotional side of domestic labour. Partnerships and families are kept together as much if not more by emotion work than by the more practical household tasks. Emotion work refers to the love, sympathy, understanding, praise, reassurance and attention which are involved in maintaining relationships.

According to many women, it is they rather than their male partners who are responsible for most of the emotion work. In other words, emotion work is gendered. A study conducted by Duncombe and Marsden (1993, 1995) based on interviews with 40 couples found that most women complained of men's 'emotional distance'. They felt they were the ones who provided reassurance, tenderness and sympathy, while their partners had problems expressing intimate emotions. Men showed little awareness or understanding of their shortcomings, seeing their main role as a breadwinner, providing money rather than emotional support.

These findings are reflected in other studies. For example, research into family meals shows that women give priority to their partner's and children's tastes, often at the expense of their own. They do their best to make mealtime a happy family occasion (Charles & Kerr, 1988).
The ‘Dual Burden’

Many feminists argue that, despite women working, there is little evidence of a ‘new man’ who does an equal share of domestic work. They argue that women have simply acquired a dual burden of paid work and unpaid housework. In the view of feminists, the family remains patriarchal: men benefit both from women’s earnings and from their domestic labour.

Elsa Ferri and Kate Smith (1996) provide evidence of the dual burden. They found that increased employment of women outside the home has had little impact on the domestic division of labour. Based on a sample of 1589 33-year-old fathers and mothers, they found that the father took the main responsibility for childcare in fewer than 4% of families.

Even where a woman works and her husband is unemployed, there is little evidence of husbands doing more at home. Lydia Morris (1990) found that men who had suffered a loss of their masculine role as a result of becoming unemployed saw domestic work as women’s work and therefore to be avoided.

For many women, access to full-day childcare is essential. However, middle-class women may be able to afford this, but many working-class women cannot. As a result, they remain trapped in a vicious circle of childcare responsibilities and low paid, part-time employment.

Summary of ‘the impact of paid work’

There is some evidence that a woman being in paid work leads to more equality in the division of labour, though probably only if she is in full-time work.

Many feminists argue that, in reality, the effect of this is limited: women still continue to shoulder a dual or triple burden. And even if men are doing more in the home, domestic tasks themselves remain gendered. Feminists argue that the root of the problem is patriarchy. Patriarchal gender scripts shape society’s expectations about the domestic roles that men and women ought to perform.

Patriarchy also ensures that women earn less at work and so have less bargaining power in the home. Until patriarchy is successfully challenged in the home and in the workplace, therefore, the domestic division of labour is likely to remain unequal.
Introduction

The number of births and deaths obviously affects population size. Sociologists use the concept of **birth rate** to measure births. The birth rate is defined as the number of live births per 1000 of the population per year. The concept of **death rate** is the number of deaths per 1000 of the population per year. Sociologists are concerned with the causes of the changing birth and death rates and the consequences of these changes for society.

Issues - What are sociologists trying to explain?

*How have birth rates and death rates changed?*

*What has caused changes in birth rates?*

*What has caused changes in death rates?*

*What may be the consequences of these changes for social relations within families?*

*What are the consequences of these changes for the range of family types that exists in Britain?*

Births

There has been a long-term decline in the number of births since 1900. In that year, England and Wales had a birth rate of 28.7, but by 2007 it had fallen to an estimated 10.7.

However, there have been fluctuations in births, with three 'baby booms' in the 20th century. The first two came after the two world wars (1914-18 and 1939-45), as returning servicemen and their partners started families that they had postponed during the war years. There was a third baby boom in the 1960s, after which the birth rate fell sharply during the 1970s. The rate rose during the 1980s, before falling again after the early 1990s, with a recent increase since 2001.

The total fertility rate (TFR)
The factors determining the birth rate are, firstly, the proportion of women who are of childbearing age (usually taken to be aged 15-44) and, secondly, how fertile they are - that is, how many children they have. The total fertility rate (TFR) is the average number of children women will have during their fertile years.

The UK's TFR has risen since 2001, but it is still much lower than in the past. From an all-time low of 1.63 children per woman in 2001, it rose to 1.84 by 2006. However, this is still far lower than the peak of 2.95 children per woman reached in 1964 during the 1960s baby boom.

Changes in fertility and birth rates reflect the fact that:

- More women are remaining childless than in the past.

- Women are postponing having children: the average age for giving birth is now 29.6, and fertility rates for women in their 30s and 40s are on the increase. Older women may be less fertile and have fewer fertile years remaining, and so they produce fewer children.
Until the late 19th century, children were economic assets to their parents because they could be sent out to work from an early age to earn an income. However, since the late 19th century children have gradually become an economic liability.

- **Laws** banning child labour, introducing compulsory schooling and raising the school leaving age mean that children remain economically dependent on their parents for longer and longer.
- **Changing norms** about what children have a right to expect from their parents in material terms mean that the cost of bringing up children.

### Child centredness

The increasing child centredness both of the family and of society as a whole means that childhood is now socially constructed as a uniquely important period in the individual’s life. In terms of family size, this has encouraged a shift from ‘quantity’ to ‘quality’ - parents now have fewer children and lavish more attention and resources on these few.

### Effects of changes in fertility

#### The family

Smaller families mean that women are more likely to be free to go out to work, thus creating the dual-earner couple typical of many professional families. However, family size is only one factor here. For example, better off couples may be able to have larger families and still afford childcare that allows them both to work full-time.

#### The dependency ratio

The dependency ratio is the relationship between the size of the working or productive part of the population and the size of the non-working or dependent part of the population. The earnings, savings and taxes of the working population must support the dependent population. Children make up a large part of the dependent population, so a fall in the number of children reduces the ‘burden of dependency’ on the working population.

#### Public services and policies

A lower birth rate has consequences for public services. For example, fewer schools and maternity and child health services may be needed. It also has implications for the cost of maternity and paternity leave, or the types of housing that need to be built. However, we should remember that many of these are political decisions. For example, instead of reducing the number of schools, the government may decide to have smaller class sizes instead.
Migration refers to the movement of people from place to place. It can be internal, within a society, or international.

**Immigration:** Refers to movement into an area or society

**Emigration:** Refers to movement out

**Net migration:** The difference between the numbers immigrating and the numbers emigrating, and is expressed as a net increase or net decrease due to migration.

For most of the 20th century, the growth of the UK population was the result of natural increase (more births than deaths), rather than the numbers of people immigrating and emigrating.

This was because, until the 1980s, the numbers immigrating were lower than those emigrating. For example, in every single year from 1946 to 1978, more people left the UK to settle elsewhere than arrived to live in the UK.

From 1900 until the Second World War (1939-45), the largest immigrant group to the UK were the Irish, mainly for economic reasons, followed by Eastern and Central European Jews, who were often refugees fleeing persecution, and people of British descent from Canada and the USA. Very few immigrants were non-white.

By contrast, during the 1950s, black immigrants from the Caribbean began to arrive in the UK, followed during the 1960s and 1970s by South Asian immigrants from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, and by East African Asians from Kenya and Uganda.

One consequence of this immigration was that it produced a more ethnically diverse society. By 2001, minority ethnic groups accounted for 7.9% of the total population. One result of this has been a greater diversity of family patterns in Britain today.

However, as noted earlier, throughout this period, more people left the UK than entered. Nor did non-white immigrants make up the majority of settlers. During the 1950s, the Irish were the

**Issues - What are sociologists trying to explain?**

*How have rates of emigration changed? What has caused this change?*

*How have rates of immigration changed? What has caused this change?*

*How have rates of net migration changed? What has caused this change?*

*What may be the consequences of these changes for social relations within families?*

*What have been the consequences of these changes for the types of family which exist in Britain?*
Though they reach different conclusions, Functionalists and Marxists both ask what role the family plays in society.

Interactionists start with a different set of issues. They study how people make sense of and understand their lives within families. Their research focuses on the social construction of families by studying everyday interaction, speech and talk in family settings.

For example, Berger and Kelner studied what it means to be a husband or a wife and how these roles depend on mutual expectations. The roles are also negotiable. If power is unequal, then the result may be psychological cruelty or domestic violence. If power is more equal, the New Man may play his role on equal terms with his partner.

Finch and Mason similarly studied how family members feel obliged to help each other. Instead of assuming that because people were related they would help each other, Finch and Mason tried to understand how people negotiate these obligations and how they construct their personal identities with reference to their obligations.

Other sociologists have studied the slow process of "decoupling" – that is, ways in which couples grow apart and create new identities independently of each other.

Main Points
- When a couple get married they see themselves as part of a unit. They negotiate their roles within that unit, but they take their identity to be a shared one.
- Family and household forms are becoming increasingly diverse.
- We should recognise the dark side of the family and its increasing role in surveillance. It’s not all good and can crush individuals.

Evaluation
Though they reach different conclusions, Functionalists and Marxists both ask what role the family plays in society.

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Summary of ‘Interactionist Theories’
- When a couple get married they see themselves as part of a unit. They negotiate their roles within that unit, but they take their identity to be a shared one.
- Family and household forms are becoming increasingly diverse.
- We should recognise the dark side of the family and its increasing role in surveillance. It’s not all good and can crush individuals.
- There are severe psychological costs to marriage, especially to women and children. This involves domestic violence, child abuse and mental illness. But there is also the New Man who does his share and is sensitive to women’s needs.