THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE FAMILY

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS SECTION OF THE FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS MODULE?
You need to have a sound knowledge of a number of different theoretical perspectives - Functionalist, Marxist, Feminist, postmodern - and how they see the role of the family as an institution in society. You should be able to apply these perspectives to your analysis of trends and research in the area of families and households. You should be able to criticise and evaluate each perspective.

Key Issues/Questions
- How do Functionalists see the role of the family in society?
- Why do they think the nuclear family is becoming universal?
- In what ways does the Marxist perspective see the family upholding capitalism?
- What are the main themes of feminist perspectives on the family?
- How can all these perspectives be evaluated?
- How are each of these perspectives undermined by postmodernist ideas?

This section of notes covers
- Functionalist views on the family
- Marxist views on the family
- Feminist views on the family
- The evaluation of each of these perspectives in turn
- A postmodern view of the family

Links between this material and other parts of the Families and Households module.
- Some functionalist views are reflected in New Right views and policies on the family, which also see the family as vital in the satisfactory functioning of society.
- Functionalist and feminist views are particularly relevant in assessing the significance of recent changes in the family and whether they should be seen as a decline/improvement or simply a change in the role of the family.
- Each perspective can be applied to theories of structural change
- Feminist views are shown in much of the research on family roles and relationships and the extent of inequality here
- All perspectives have links with the topic of family ideology
MAIN THEMES OF THE FUNCTIONALIST APPROACH

Functionalist sociologists have traditionally stressed the positive role of the family for society and all its members. It is seen as essential in providing functions for the maintenance of society from one generation to the next.

The family has essential functions which it must perform to meet the basic needs of society and its members. (Murdock/Parsons)

As society develops, the functions become more specialised and some may be given up to other specialised institutions.

The isolated nuclear family is especially suitable for industrial society because it is small and mobile.

The family is a universal institution.

There is a functional relationship between the family and other social institutions.

Males and females are seen as having different functional roles in the family (Parsons)

IMPORTANT AUTHORS
G.P. Murdock (1949)
Following a study of 250 societies, Murdock argued that the family is universal because it is the best way of adjusting to society's basic needs.
The family performs 4 basic functions serving both society and its individual members:
- sexual - provides and controls sexual access
- reproductive - provides new society members
- economic - provide home, food, warmth etc. and economic cooperation
- educational - provides socialisation to pass on culture to the next generation

Talcott Parsons (1959)
In modern societies the family performs 2 ‘basic and irreducible’ functions:
- primary socialisation of children - internalising society’s culture and structuring personality
- stabilisation of adult personalities - adults gain stability from emotional security, responsibility for children and a haven from the stresses and strains of modern society

A process of ‘structural differentiation’ has taken place as society has industrialised. The family has lost some of its functions to other specialist institutions (e.g. health, education, religion). Those left to the family are the most important and vital.

The isolated nuclear family as most typical and suitable for modern industrial society because:
- its geographical and social mobility suits the modern economy
- new status is mainly achieved, not ascribed - applied to individuals rather than families, its isolation from kin prevents possible conflicts of status and ensures warm, close relationships

Male and female partners as performing different functions. The male role was seen as ‘instrumental’, working and competing in the world as a breadwinner. This led to stress and anxiety, which would be relieved by the female, acting out her ‘expressive’ role providing care, love, warmth and emotional support. This sexual division of labour Parsons believed was based on biological differences.
CRITICISMS OF THE FUNCTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

Some of these criticisms are general; some refer to specific functionalist authors:

- Concentrates on harmony and ignores conflicts within the family (Marxist)
- A very conservative theory which defends the status quo - the way things are - and does not allow for any need for change (Marxist)
- The family is not universal - there are a number of possible alternatives to the family (e.g. Kibbutz, Nayar, Onieda community, New World Black family)
- The nuclear family is not necessarily more applicable to modern industrial society:
  - it is becoming a minority in many societies
  - it was also common in pre-industrial society
- Mobility in modern society may be more limited than functionalists suppose
- The family fulfils the needs of the economy, rather than the needs of its members (Marxist)
- The view of the family as ‘normal’, ‘natural’ or universal is ideological - aimed at conserving the existing social order (Marxist)
- The functionalist view of women’s role simply justifies their oppression (feminist)
- In other societies, men and women take very different roles (feminist - Oakley)
- The nuclear family produces problems and misery as well as harmony - such as mental illness and domestic violence (radical psychiatrists, feminists)

MARXIST PERSPECTIVES

Unlike functionalism, Marxism emphasises conflict and inequalities and, in particular, the dominance of the economy over other institutions such as the family.

MAIN THEMES OF THE MARXIST APPROACH

- the nature of the family is determined by the economic system - in modern society it serves the interests of capitalism
- in early communal society, the family was not needed - it only became necessary with the accumulation of wealth and the need to defend it (Engels)
- the family provides a steady supply of new workers for the economy at no extra charge
- these workers are socialised by the family into discipline and the ‘correct’ attitudes of obedience and conformity
- the family provides a ‘safety valve’ - a release from alienation and oppression at work - thereby allowing that oppression to continue (Zaretzky)
- by giving workers responsibilities, it encourages them to work and reduces their bargaining power
- it provides consumers to buy good produced by the economy
- it acts as an ‘ideological state apparatus’ defending the status quo, patriarchy and power the role of the wife is to maintain the worker and absorb his frustrations
IMPORTANT AUTHOR

Friedrich Engels (1884)

Originally there was a communal life which did not need notions of marriage and the family.

With the rise of private property an organised system of inheritance was necessary - fathers needed to be sure that property was passed to their offspring.

Monogamy arose to serve the interests of the economy and women were brought increasingly into the privacy of the home and family, under the domination of men - previously they had been equally involved in the public sphere.

CRITICISMS OF THE MARXIST PERSPECTIVE

Presumes a universal nuclear family where the husband works and the wife stays at home. Disregards the increasing variety in family and household composition in recent years

Too deterministic because it assumes the dominance of the economy.

The family serves the interests of men and patriarchy as well as capitalism (feminist).

Too based on modern western society - there are many variations worldwide.

Does not explain the similarities in family structure in different types of societies.

Seen by some as too biased and negative, starting from an ideological position that condemns the family as an agency of capitalist values.
FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

Like Marxism, feminism is a ‘conflict’ approach to sociological theory. However, whereas for Marxists the family serves the interests of capitalism, for feminists it serves the interests of patriarchy. Feminists of various types see the family as a prime site of female oppression.

MAIN THEMES OF FEMINIST APPROACHES

- Feminists see previous views of the family as ‘malestream’ (Abbott and Wallace).
- Family life is very different for women and is a source of male control over women.

Marxist feminists say
- Whereas men are oppressed by capitalism, women are oppressed by both capitalism and patriarchy.
- Marxist feminists argue that wives ‘service’ workers, produce and socialise new workers, producing more ‘surplus value’ (profit) for the economy (Benston).
- Women not only provide this unpaid role but also provide a ‘reserve army of labour’ - extra, cheap and temporary workers who can be engaged and sacked as and when they are needed by the economy. (Bruegel)

Liberal feminists advocate increasing gender equality through the law and changing values. They claim that power relations and the division of labour within marriage have become more equal, largely as a consequence of changes in women’s work patterns.

Radical feminists see
- The oppression of women as a result of male dominance through biology and physical strength. They view the nuclear family as based on male power and supporting male power. (Firestone).
- The socialisation of women into the mother/housewife role is seen as a form of oppression.
- Historically and in other cultures, women have been more independent - it was largely men and industrialisation that ‘put them in the home’.

All types of feminists agree that women are exploited in some way in society and in particular within the family.
Because feminism has become a political agenda, feminists have over-estimated the extent of female inequality

Feminism assumes that all families have a male head who dominates the rest.

New Right claim feminists undermines traditional family values.

Black feminists have criticised other feminists for their failure to consider the influence of racism as well as patriarchy.

In recent years, women have gained more choices and family life has become more diverse.

They tend to focus on the negative aspects of family life.

CRITICISMS OF FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

All of these feminist approaches might be criticised by sociologists coming from an interpretive or micro-perspective. They would argue that family life has meaning for those involved in it and that individuals have a certain degree of free will and independence. They are not all passively influenced by ideologies and social forces beyond their control.

A POSTMODERN VIEW OF THE FAMILY

Main Ideas
- Stresses the pluralism, diversity and fragmentation of modern life
- See no overarching, dominant claims to truth - so there cannot be one dominant, most common or 'correct' type of family.
- There can be no 'normal' or 'natural' form of family relationships or roles - the nuclear family has become fragmented and been dismantled.
- Some feminists may see this idea as a force of liberation; others, such as functionalists, are likely to see it as a source of chaos.
- An important aspect of the postmodern family is the ability for the individual to make choices and for members to make or 'construct' their families through interaction

EVALUATION OF POSTMODERNISM
- Postmodern ideas avoid generalisations and allow us to see the individual meanings of social life
- Postmodern ideas show the possibility of greater choice rather than oppression.
- The emphasis on fragmentation allow us to explore the diversity of contemporary life.
- Giddens suggests that postmodern ideas have led to the rise of a more reflexive approach to social life.
- Postmodernism has been criticised for extreme relativism, in which case there seems little point in trying to study social life.
- It suggests that the main aim of sociology in the past - the uncovering of regular patterns of behaviour - is no longer relevant.
- Some see postmodernism as an 'intellectual cul-de-sac', a dead-end.
WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS SECTION OF THE FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS MODULE?
You need to be familiar with the theory of the transition of the family from an extended structure in pre-industrial society to a nuclear structure in modern society. Alongside this, you should be well aware of the conflicting evidence on this, both historical and recent. You must be able to discuss the evidence for and against the existence of the ‘symmetrical family’ and have a sound knowledge of recent studies on family structures. In addition, you should be able to apply some post modernist ideas to the issue of family structure.

Key Issue/Questions
- What was the ‘typical’ family structure in pre-industrial and industrial societies?
- How do functionalist sociologists explain the changes which have taken place?
- How far does the available evidence support or refute this idea of transition?
- Why do functionalist sociologists see the isolated nuclear family as particularly suited to modern industrial society?
- How typical is the isolated nuclear family in Britain today?
- To what extent are British families today ‘symmetrical’?
- How do postmodernist writers analyse family structure in today’s society?

This section of notes covers
- A summary of the ‘theory of transition’
- Functionalist analysis of the reasons for this ‘transition’
- Examples of historical and more recent evidence on family structure
- A summary of the theory of the ‘symmetrical family’ and criticisms
- Postmodern approaches to family structure

Links between this material and other parts of the Families and Households module
- The idea of a transition of family structure from pre-industrial to industrial society relates very closely to functionalist theories about the family, and also with the functionalist theory of a ‘fit’ between the nuclear family and modern industrial society.
- Many of the theories and studies of family structures include accounts of roles and relationships within these structures also.
- Evidence for the question of whether or not there may be a ‘typical’ family structure today is to be found in the sections on changing patterns of marriage and divorce and on family diversity.
- Postmodernist views of family structure also tie in very closely with the rise of family diversity.
THE THEORY OF ‘TRANSITION’

- For many years many sociologists accepted the theory that pre-industrial societies were characterised by large extended families that supported themselves and acted as units of production, catering for almost all their needs. These families were seen as multi-functional units, looking after all the needs of the family members. This approach was primarily functionalist, but was often referred to later as the ‘March of Progress’ theory.
- It was seen as a ‘March of Progress’ because the later form of the family, supported by many other institutions, was believed to provide much more adequately for its members.
- The ‘transition’ came as the family evolved, through industrialisation, into a modern, isolated, nuclear family which was small and mobile.
- William Goode argued that this type of transition was taking place all over the world, as traditional extended families were being replaced by nuclear families.
- Authors who have put forward this theory include Talcott Parsons, William Goode and Ronald Fletcher.

THE PROCESS OF ‘TRANSITION’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY</th>
<th>INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Large, extended family</td>
<td>Small, nuclear family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Multi-functional unit’ (unit of production)</td>
<td>Few ‘specialised’ functions (unit of consumption)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little movement (extended family maintained)</td>
<td>Geographically mobile (‘fits’ needs of industrial society)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ascribed status clear within family</td>
<td>Achieved status - by individual outside family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Segregated’ roles</td>
<td>More ‘joint’ roles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WHY DO FUNCTIONALISTS SEE THE NUCLEAR FAMILY AS ‘FITTING’ MODERN INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY?

- The nuclear family is small and geographically mobile
- This weakens kinship ties in both practical and social terms
- Functions once performed by the family have been taken over by other organisations, leaving members less dependent on kin
- The nuclear family is socially mobile - achieved status by the individual has replaced ascribed status of birth and family - and an individual may move away from traditional family jobs and social class.

Other family structures do not fit as well into industrial society.
TESTING THE THEORY OF ‘TRANSITION’

We can test the theory of ‘transition by asking three key questions.

Were all families extended in the past?

Peter Laslett - ‘The World We Have Lost’ (1965)
- Analysed parish records from 1564 to 1821.
- No evidence for dominance of extended family.
- Extended families actually quite rare - only 10% included kin other than the nuclear family.
- Average household size of 4.75 was close to today’s norm.
- People were unlikely to live with grandparents as expectation of life was so much lower.
- Laslett argues that the nuclear family probably aided the development of industrialisation.

Did industrialisation lead to a decline in extended families?

Michael Anderson (1971)
- Study of early industrial Preston in 1851.
- Migration and poverty led to an increase in the number of extended families, not a decrease.
- Anderson argues that this was because of people’s need for support and solidarity - no welfare, pensions, unemployment. The family, especially the women, became a ‘mutual aid organisation’.
- Similarly, Liz Stanley (1992) found that insecurity and casualisation of labour led to the same dependence on kin.

Young and Willmott (1962)
- Study of Bethnal Green in East London.
- Found extended families still very important, centred on the mother-daughter tie.
- Mutual aid shown amongst both female and male kin.
- Families did not live in the same house but lived very close and were in constant contact.

Tamara Haraven (1994)
- Argues that extended families suit industrial society.
- A network of kin provides greater workplace stability and continuity of labour through social ties and kin recruitment.
- Members are less dependent on one wage so less likely to strike.

Has the extended family now disappeared?
Has the extended family now disappeared?
Over a considerable period of time, researchers have shown continued contact with and support from kin.

Arensberg and Kimball (1968)
- Study of traditional Irish farming families.
- Still built on patriarchy and ascribed status - father/son as owner/worker.
- Family extended vertically and horizontally.
- A unit of production passed on patrilineally.

Rosser and Harris (1965) and Bell (1968)
- Both studies of Swansea.
- People lived in nuclear families but still maintained close contacts with kin.
- Contacts were predominantly with parents and siblings, through ties of affection, financial aid, help in crisis.
- Ties were maintained by visits, telephone, letters etc.
- Bell found father/son ties were important in providing ‘status props’ for young families through financial support.

Fiona Devine (1992)
- Study of Luton car workers.
- Lived as isolated nuclear families, but had strong connections with kin, especially children, parents, grandparents.
- Kept in touch via cars, telephones etc.

Janet Finch (1989) and Finch and Mason (1993)
- Finch argues that family obligations still exist and are strong, though they vary according to ethnicity and gender.
- women are often expected to maintain ties and give care more than men.
- 1993 study in Greater Manchester found over 90% had given or received financial help and 50% had helped to look after a sick or incapacitated relative.
- Each family had its own rules of reciprocal help and might negotiate the help given.

HOW DO THESE STUDIES CONSTITUTE A CRITICISM OF THE THEORY OF ‘TRANSITION’?
- They show that families before industrialisation were not mainly extended
- They show that industrialisation seems to have increased the importance of the extended family
- They show that extended family ties are still seen as important today, even when families live in isolated nuclear units
- These family ties may be maintained by care and assistance
DID INDUSTRIALISATION LEAD TO THE ‘SYMMETRICAL’ FAMILY?

Willmott and Young in 1975 put forward a theory to describe the development of the family from pre-industrial to contemporary times. They discuss four stages of development:

Stage 1 - the pre-industrial family  the family as a unit of production; all working in agriculture as a team. Some examples can still be found

Stage 2 - the early industrial family  the family of the industrial revolution, with members employed as wage-earners. The extended family became a support unit through the mother-daughter tie, but often had segregated conjugal roles. Still found by Willmott and Young in Bethnal Green in 1962.

Stage 3 - the ‘Symmetrical’ family  the nuclear family of today, living without extended kin. Husband and wife are more dependent on each other for companionship and have joint conjugal roles. Life is home-centred and time is often spent together.

Stage 4 - the asymmetrical family  the family that Willmott and Young predicted for the future. As work becomes a central life interest, those higher and then those lower in the class hierarchy begin to follow more segregated roles again.

HOW CAN THE THEORY OF THE ‘SYMMETRICAL’ FAMILY BE CRITICISED?

- Fails to show how extended kin may still be important
- Men may be more home-centred but women are probably less so
- Many feminists have attacked the assumption that couples have joint conjugal roles. Evidence seems to suggest they are not really joint
- There is little evidence of the change to a Stage 4 family. More rather than fewer women are working full time outside the home
- As part of the ‘March of Progress’, Willmott and Young have been accused of neglecting the negative aspects of the modern family

THE POSTMODERN FAMILY

- Postmodernists argue that society has entered a new historical period
- Unlike previous periods, knowledge has become relative and people are faced with many choices and possibilities
- There is therefore no overall, dominant claim to truth - in the case of the family, no particular family type that is more common, more ‘normal’ or ‘better’ than others
- Individuals have become freer to choose lifestyles that have meaning for them at a particular time
- Whereas the traditional and modern stages of development could be seen as having a typical family structure, this is no longer the case. What we have today is family diversity.
FAMILY DIVERSITY

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS SECTION OF THE FAMILY MODULE?

You need to be familiar with the wide diversity of family and household arrangements in Britain. This must include both the diversity explained in the section on changing patterns of marriage and parenthood, and also the other types of diversity - such as ethnic, regional and cultural diversity - explained in this section. You need to be able to discuss the possible reasons for the growth in diversity and to interpret this diversity from a number of theoretical perspectives. Lastly, you must be able to consider some of the implications of this diversity for society and for family life in general.

Key Issues/Questions

- What have been the main changes in family and household structure in the last 40 years which have led to a high level of family diversity?
- In what ways has the structure of the family and households become more diverse?
- What have been the main causal factors bringing about this diversity?
- Does such diversity mean that the family as an institution is disintegrating?
- Does such diversity show the development of a postmodern society?

This section of notes covers

- A summary of the types of diversity of family life in Britain
- Typologies of different types of diversity
- Examples of ethnic diversity
- A summary of some of the reasons for this diversity
- Explanations of different theoretical perspectives and other views on the significance of diversity

Links between this material and other parts of the Families and Households module

- The question of whether the family is seen to be threatened by such diversity may depend on the theoretical perspective taken. Feminist, New Right and Postmodern ideas are discussed.
- Questions are raised about family structure and what is typical today
- The notion of diversity is clearly very important to a postmodern image of family and household patterns
- A high level of diversity is largely resultant from the changing patterns of marriage and divorce covered in other sections.
## TYPES OF DIVERSITY IN CONTEMPORARY BRITAIN

### Families and Households
As discussed in the section on changing patterns of marriage and parenthood, households in Britain contain a wide variety of structures and relationships. Some of the most common are listed below:

- **nuclear family** - couple married or cohabiting
- **couple** - married or cohabiting
- **extended family**
- **reconstituted family**
- **single-parent family**
- **single person**
- **group of friends**
- **members of an institution or organisation**
- and so on...

Some sociologists would suggest that we need to sub-divide some of these - for example, are the couple gay or heterosexual?

Willmott (1988) argues that there are four main types of extended family:

- **extended family of residence** - where the members live in the same household.
- **local extended family** - where 2 or 3 nuclear families live separately but in close proximity and see each other often.
- **dispersed extended family** - nuclear families who see each other frequently but live further apart and do not see each other as regularly.
- **attenuated extended family** - similar to the dispersed extended family but the contact is even less frequent.

### Rhona and Robert Rapoport (1982) - Five types of Diversity

- As a result of recent changes in society, there is more flexibility and choice of options for family living.
- They identify **five types of diversity**:
  - **Organisational** different structures or ways of organising the household. Who is included, who earns a wage, who performs each role, and so on.
  - **Cultural** the nature of family life and relationships can vary considerably between different ethnic and cultural groups.
  - **Class/economic** differences may be based on class, such as sharing of domestic roles and decisions, employing a nanny.
  - **Life-course** the nature of the family can change over the life-course of the individual. For example, living in a nuclear family is more likely for those in their 30s than those in their 60s.
  - **Cohort** individuals born at the same time may have similar experiences because of wider social and historical events, such as economic depression, war, expansion of education.
Eversley and Bonnerjea (1982) - Diversity and Location
They suggest that local influences produce different life experiences and so diversity. They identify six different areas or types of area in Britain which offer different types of family organisation:

- **The affluent South or ‘sun belt’** attracts mobile two-parent families, higher social classes and owner-occupiers.
- **The ‘geriatric wards’** mostly coastal areas which attract elderly and retired couples who may be living at some distance from relatives.
- **Older industrial areas** with declining industry often have traditional family structures and relationships, and older populations with strong community ties.
- **Recently declining industrial areas** are more likely to be found in the Midlands, have been prosperous but are now declining. Young families often have moved there and have little support from extended kin.
- **Rural areas** families who work in agriculture and related areas of the economy and tend to be of the extended and traditional family type. Many of these areas have now been taken over by commuters.
- **Inner cities** experience high levels of social deprivation, a large turnover of inhabitants, many single person households and a high proportion of immigrants. There are also many single-parent families and people are likely to be isolated from kin.

**Note on Ethnic Diversity:** You will need to be able to refer to one or two types of ethnic diversity. For example:

- Many **South Asian families** have a more traditional family structure - larger families, more extended, less joint conjugal roles. (However, Westwood and Bhachu (1988) argue that most Asian families are now based on the nuclear family, though they may have stronger kinship ties and respect for the elderly.
- These differences are likely to have resulted from the fact that many Asian immigrants have come from a traditional agricultural economy where family patterns are more like pre-industrial Britain.
- **West Indian families** are more likely to be single-parent families or ‘mother households’, in which the mother is the breadwinner and female kin and friends help out with childcare and other duties. However, this support is less likely in Britain than in the Caribbean and nuclear families are also common.
- There are a number of possible explanations for these differences. Firstly, this pattern is common in the Caribbean. Secondly, the pattern is thought to have arisen originally as a result of slavery, where husbands would often be sold separately to wives and children, so that the family could rarely stay together. Thirdly, it is argued that a West Indian male finds it hard to stay with his family if he cannot support it as he feels he should - therefore unemployment may play a part.
REASONS FOR INCREASED DIVERSITY

- effects of changes in marriage, cohabitation and divorce patterns
- effects of demographic changes - decline in birth and death rates
- effects of changing social attitudes
- changes in the position of women in society
- secularisation
- welfare support from the state
- increase in Britain in the variety of cultures and ethnicities
- changing patterns of social life
- historical events and periods

NB: many of these reasons are explained in detail in the later section on changing patterns of marriage and parenthood

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS INCREASED DIVERSITY?

FEMINIST VIEWS
- Diversity is valued as a liberating force for women, opening up choices (Gittins 1993)
- New opportunities are also available to men - it has become more acceptable to be a househusband and to play a less traditional masculine role
- Diversity is seen as critical of family ideology - how can one type of family be ‘best’ or more suited to modern society, if there is no common type (Barrett and McIntosh 1991)

NEW RIGHT VIEWS
- As the traditional family is seen as the best family form, diversity is seen as a threat. The New Right wish to defend the nuclear family and traditional morality.
- Diversity therefore means that the family is in a state of crisis
- This is leading to breakdown and an increase in the levels of educational failure, delinquency and so on.
- The New Right answer to this threat is to cut benefits, enforce responsibility on parents, as an attempt to reinforce the position of the traditional family.

POSTMODERNIST VIEWS
- Stacey (1996) argues that Western family arrangements are now diverse and fluid. This does not mean the emergence of another form of family - it no longer makes sense to ask what type of family is dominant. This fluid situation is here to stay and it would be impossible now to go back to having a single standard family type. Instead, social attitudes and social policies must adjust to the more diverse situation.
- Morgan (1996) sees diversity in family forms as evidence of the wider plurality and fragmentation in society - which characterises postmodern society. What were seen in the past to be exceptions to the family form are no longer problematic.
- Bernades (1993) argues that such fragmentation is a positive development after the oppression of modernist sociology, such as the functionalist view of the universal nuclear family.
- Cheal (1993) suggests that one sign of the postmodern nature of the family is the experience of great difficulty in finding a common definition for the family.
SO HAS THE NUCLEAR FAMILY DISINTEGRATED AS AN INSTITUTION?

A number of sociologists have argued that the nuclear family is still seen as ‘normal’, desirable and acceptable.

**Johnson** (1982) argues that those who do not conform to the model of the nuclear family still have problems with their social arrangements - childcare, for example.

**Chester** (1985) argues
  - that the most typical is now the ‘neo-conventional’ family, made up of two parents and a small number of children. The main change is in the economically active role of the wife.
  - whilst it is true that the nuclear family makes up only a minority of households, more people actually live in this type of family than any other.
  - if we look at people’s life-cycles rather than a ‘snapshot’ picture of the numbers of different types of households, we can see the continued importance of the nuclear family.
  - most people are still born into a nuclear family, most will be a member of one or two nuclear families during their lifetime, and most still see the nuclear family as the norm.
  - he therefore concludes that diversity is not quite so widespread as we might think. The family is more resistant to change than we thought.

**Giddens** (1984) argues that we need to take account both of individual choices and also the context of the social structure and the influence on individuals of their own family environment - it’s not all just up to individual choices. Giddens’ structurational view of diversity includes meaningful actions by individuals, made to help them make sense of the world they live in, their relationships and themselves.
CHANGING ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS SECTION OF THE FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS MODULE?

You need to be familiar with the research and theories which suggest that the nature of conjugal roles within the family have altered, to become 'joint' rather than 'segregated', and that the most common type of family today is 'symmetrical'. You should also be aware that there has been a great deal of research that has investigated different aspects of this question, largely by feminist writers, spanning a period from the 1970s to the 1990s.

In addition, you need to be able to discuss the changing attitudes towards children and the extent to which we have become a child-centred society. Historical and cross-cultural evidence is important here.

Key Issues/Questions
- What is meant by a ‘symmetrical family’ and ‘joint conjugal roles’?
- Why was it assumed that joint conjugal roles were becoming more prevalent?
- What aspects of conjugal roles and relationships have been studied?
- How has feminist research challenged this assumption?
- What have recent researches in the 1990s found?
- What is meant by the ‘social construction of childhood’?
- How have we become a more child-centred society?

This section of notes covers
- An explanation of the meaning of conjugal roles and the difference between roles and relationships
- A summary of the theory of change to joint conjugal roles
- Evidence from a wide range of research on different aspects of roles and relationships
- An explanation of the term ‘social construct’
- A description of changes in our construction of childhood
- A summary of aspects of childhood today

Links between this material and other parts of the Families and Households module
- Much of the research on conjugal roles and inequality is related closely to feminist perspectives.
- It is important to understand evidence on roles and relationships when assessing the significance of recent changes in family structures.
- An awareness of changing patterns of marriage and divorce helps us to understand changes in roles and relationships.
- Knowledge of family and household diversity is important when considering the position of children in modern society.
- Our view of childhood should be seen as an element of family ideology and how we treat our children is affected by government policy and legislation.
CHANGES TO CONJUGAL ROLES

The idea that roles within marriage have been changing arises mainly from two pieces of work:

Elizabeth Bott - ‘Family and Social Network’ (1957)

- Describes two predominant types of conjugal role relationships:
  - **Segregated conjugal roles** - where there is a clear division of labour in male and female tasks; separate interests and activities; different friends and leisure pursuits
  - **Joint conjugal roles** - where many activities are carried out together by husband and wife; minimum task separation and tasks often exchanged; close interests and planning of family affairs together; much leisure time spent together
- Bott found that joint roles were more likely to be found amongst middle class and young couples, but these were not the most important factors.
- Most importantly, those with **close-knit social networks**, where many friends and relatives lived close by and knew each other, were more likely to experience segregated roles. This was probably because husband and wife were less dependent on each other for social life and attitudes.
- In contrast, those couples with **loose-knit social networks**, where few of their friends and neighbours knew each other, were more likely to have joint conjugal roles.

Willmott and Young - ‘The Symmetrical Family’ (1975)

- Used the concept of conjugal roles in their explanation of the symmetrical family, which they saw to be the typical family of today.
- The symmetrical family is seen to have three main characteristics:
  - **nuclear in structure**
  - **‘Symmetrical family’**
  - joint conjugal roles
  - home-centred
EVIDENCE FROM RESEARCH ON CONJUGAL ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

KEY TERMS:
ROLES: What someone does; their position and activities associated with that position
RELATIONSHIPS: Interaction between the couple; their behaviour towards each other

What does ‘equal’ mean? We can measure this in a number of ways:
- who does which jobs
- how much time is committed by each partner
- balance - do they make an equal contribution?
Feminists would argue that researchers such as Willmott and Young did not look closely at what this really means. Oakley criticises them for assuming that answering ‘yes’ to one question about doing at least one chore per week was a sign of equality.

How can we measure the level of equality?
Sociological researchers have looked at a number of different areas - some have more to do with roles and some with relationships. The main areas of study have been:
- Household chores - who does them; how often; which jobs?
- Finance - who has control; type of bank account; who contributes most?
- Childcare - who spends most time; takes time off work; plays and disciplines?
- Decisions - who makes them; what type of decisions; who has most power?
- Work outside the home - type of job; hours worked and income?
- ‘Emotion work’ - who keeps things happy and smooth?

EXAMPLES OF RESEARCH
Much of the research in this area has found little evidence of real equality, though more recent studies have found some movement towards equality.

Household chores
Oakley - ‘The Sociology of Housework’ (1975) and others
- 40 married women between 20-30
- Found greater equality in domestic tasks in middle class than in working class
- In both cases, most marriages showed low participation by husbands, so few could be described as egalitarian. There was more male participation in childcare than in housework
- Only 15% had high participation in housework and 25% in childcare
- Socialisation and ideology found to be very important - many women did not expect husbands to share
- Saw the role of housewife as created by industrialisation and the exclusion of women and children from the world of work by men

- Found some more evidence of equality; more tasks done by men; more sharing
- Women had become more involved in traditional ‘men’s work’, such as household repairs
- Some tasks still largely done by women (eg washing and ironing 79% in 1997)
- Households in which men are mainly responsible still formed a small minority
Childcare

Boulton - ‘On Being a Mother’ (1983)
- Study of 50 young married mothers
- Found that men often helped but never took primary responsibility
- Women were more likely to put their own lives and interests second
- Only 18% husbands gave extensive help; 46% gave minimal help

Ferri and Smith (1996) ‘Parenting in the 1990s’
- Found similar results to Boulton, but with a much larger sample of several thousand
- Little evidence of more equal sharing of household chores
- Father was main carer in fewer than 4% of families
- Fathers still rarely looked after children when they were ill
- Women’s employment seems to have had little impact on the sharing of tasks

Decision-making

Edgell (1980) ‘Middle Class Couples’
- Husbands dominated three areas of decision-making - moving house, finance and car - all seen as important by both partners
- Wives dominated decisions on internal decorations, children’s clothes, domestic spending on things like food - all seen as relatively unimportant by both partners
- Half the husbands and wives interviewed saw equality as a bad thing

NB Davis (1991) suggests that this approach is flawed as it does not take account of the ways in which power and persuasion can be exercised in a number of subtle ways. She suggests that many women accept the situation or may use their social and manipulative skills to undermine men’s power.

FINANCE

Pahl (1993) ‘Money, Marriage and Ideology’
- Interviews with 102 couples with children - seen both alone and together
- Described four patterns, depending on type of bank account and who had control:
  - husband-controlled pooling - most common. Money shared but husband had most control. Wife often had lower income.
  - wife-controlled pooling - Next most common. Money shared but wife did most of spending and paying bills. Often where couple both had well-paid jobs.
  - husband-control - husband often had main or only wage and complete control. Wife often only given housekeeping money.
  - wife-control - least common. Often where there was low income or no earner. Women given responsibility of ‘making ends meet’.
- Therefore, in just over ¼ of couples, there was some degree of equality, but in most cases men had more power.
- Men spent more on themselves. Women were more likely to go short themselves to have more for husband and children.

Vogler (1994)
- Study of money management in 1211 couples.
- Found fewer women were given housekeeping money than in Pahl’s study
- Pooling increased to 50%, but majority still had unequal financial control (80%), despite the increase in women’s employment.
- Wife-controlled systems were still usually in struggling low-income households.
EFFECTS OF WORK OUTSIDE THE HOME

Martin and Roberts (1984)
- Survey of 6000 women aged 16 to 59
- Found men more likely to be involved in housework and childcare if wife worked full time
- But - 54% of full time and 77% of part time women workers did all or most of the housework

Gershuny (1992)
- Used data from 1975 and 1987 to study the effects on roles of the increase in the number of married women working
- Where the wife is not in work, husband’s share of total hours spent working is more than the wife on average.
- Where the wife is in full time work, the husband’s share of total work time is less - so wives tend to have a worse deal when they work full time.
- When wife is employed full time, the time spent by the husband on cooking and cleaning increased from an average of 20 minutes (1975) to 40 minutes per week (1987)

Hardill et al (1997)
- Study of dual-career families, where both partners had well-paid, responsible jobs
- In 63% of couples the man’s career took precedence
- In 17% of couples, the woman’s career took precedence; in 20%, neither.
- The man was most likely to decide where they lived and which car was bought
- However, there was evidence of joint decisions and some movement towards equality

Sullivan (1996) study of leisure time
- Men spent more time in paid work, but women spent more of their free time on housework and childcare
- Men spent more of their time in socialising, sleeping, eating and relaxing.

‘EMOTION WORK’ AND VIOLENCE

Duncombe and Marsden (1995) - the ‘Triple Shift’
- Interviewed 40 couples married for 15 years
- Identified another area of work usually done by women - ‘emotion work’ - keeping people happy, making everything go smoothly
- See women as learning this types of emotional skills and holding relationships together by ‘doing the emotional work’ - many men did not realise there was a ‘problem’.
- Many women felt their partners did not show their feelings enough and they had to maintain family happiness and stability themselves.
- Saw women therefore as doing a ‘triple shift’
( ‘triple shift’ = most of the housework + paid employment + most of the emotion work.)

Dobash and Dobash (1979) - ‘Violence against Wives’
- In-depth interviews with 137 women who had been battered. Found wife-battering is widespread - 25% of all serious assaults were of husbands on wives, though many go unrecorded.
- Argue that it is important to understand marital relationships in order to understand violence.
- Marriage is an unequal power relationship because women are made dependent as wives and mothers.
- This power relationship reflects the social norms and social inequalities in the wider society.
- Women often have to stay in the situation because of economic dependence and the absence of childcare facilities.
Therefore, most of the evidence seems to show two things:
- Firstly, that there has been some movement towards equality in the last thirty years, but
- Secondly, that women are still a long way from real equality; they still take the prime responsibility for household tasks; they still have less power than their partners.
- Even where women have full time jobs, the changes have been rather limited.

**CHANGES IN THE STATUS OF CHILDREN AND CHILDHOOD**

**Childhood is ‘Socially constructed’**
It is a ‘social construct’

- The nature of childhood is what any particular society sees as ‘childhood’
- It is the cultural interpretation of that society at a particular time
- Age is a biological fact but it is also a ‘social fact’ - the way in which a particular age group is seen in any society may vary immensely.

These variations may include:
- expectations of behaviour and capabilities
- rights and responsibilities
- dress and appearance
- typical activities and treatment
- How long childhood lasts and the expectations we have of children will vary

All these points can be illustrated by studying childhood in other societies and in our own society in the past.

**IMPORTANT AUTHORS**

**Phillipe Ariès (1962) - ‘Centuries of Childhood’**
- ‘In medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist’. Childhood did not begin to appear until the fifteenth century.
- After the dependent stage of infancy, children from the age of five or six were ‘absorbed into the world of adults’ and were companions to adults
- Children were not depicted differently from adults in medieval paintings
- The whole society was very young and knew nothing of the modern idea of education.
Neil Postman - ‘The Disappearance of Childhood’
- Like Ariès, Postman sees childhood as ‘invisible’ in the medieval world
- Life was communal and informal and children were not protected from life.
- Dependence on an oral tradition meant that there was little significant difference between children and adults.
- A new definition of adulthood arose with the invention of the printing press and the spread of literacy.
- This led to a new conception of childhood and greater power of adults over children.
- Children were now seen as in need of control, discipline and obedience in order to become an adult.
- We now have a more child-centred form of learning but the status of childhood is still under the control of adults.

So where did ‘childhood’ come from?
- Ariès suggests that childhood as we know it emerged with industrialisation, although the upper and then middle classes began first to treat their children differently - working class children were still expected to work and their lives were much closer to the medieval ones.
- Although at first children provided cheap labour in the factories, from the 1830s Factory Acts limited the age from which they could be employed (to 10 years).
- By the twentieth century childhood was identified as a crucial period of development by doctors and psychologists, and children were later given special dietary, dental and medical care.
- Children’s moral and social welfare became the concern of social services
- The decline in the birth rate and in infant mortality meant that families began to invest more time and affection in their small number of children.
- Children began to have rights of their own.
- Note that Postman sees the printing press as the most important factor bringing about change.

Today we have a more ‘child-centred’ society
- We have small numbers of children and expect to invest a great deal of time, effort and affection in them as future citizens.
- We have a long period of education for all children to prepare them for adulthood
- We spend large amounts of money on this and on toys, equipment etc. for children. Childhood is big business.
- Our most common image of small children is that of innocence and vulnerability.
- We are concerned to be ‘good’ parents and to look after our children well
- We try to protect children from ‘bad’ things like death, sex, violence and conflict
- We treat children differently under the law. In 1800 most children started work at age 6 or 7; today they can not start until the age of 16. In 1800 children could be hung for stealing (and were!) at the age of 8; today a young person cannot go to prison until the age of 17.

EVALUATION
- Ariès’s view of the loss of community shows a nostalgia for the past and romanticises medieval life.
- He tends to overlook the conflicts and inequalities of the past. Children were often brutally treated and their lives are now much improved.
- Child-centredness today is not universal - we hear many stories of child abuse and the numbers of children being exploited through illegal work appears to be growing.
- Children still lack many of the rights of adults - for example, the same rights against assault by adults.
- Big business has begun to dominate children’s lives and commodities.
- Young people are under a great deal of pressure to succeed in education and in other ways.
- Many children are affected by the growth in divorce, single parent families and reconstituted families, despite our concern for their stability and welfare.
WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS SECTION OF THE FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS MODULE?

You need to be aware of the many changes that have taken place in the patterns of marriage, divorce and cohabitation in Britain in recent years. Many of these changes are linked, so it is important to understand what these links are and how they operate. You should be able to explain some of the reasons why such changes have occurred and apply these contributing factors appropriately to specific changes. Lastly, you must be able to consider some of the implications of change for society and family life in general, applying different theoretical perspectives to the issues.

This section also forms an important part of the material on family and household diversity which, you will find, it is essential to add to the notes in your section on diversity.

**Divorce is included here, but remember that there is a whole section on this topic elsewhere in your revision notes.**

Key Issues/Questions

- What have been the main changes in typical family and household structure in Britain in the last 40 years?
- What types of family/household have increased in number particularly?
- What are the main reasons behind the increases in cohabitation, divorce, births outside marriage, single-parent families, reconstituted families, single person and couple households?
- What are the main reasons behind the decreases in first marriages, especially religious marriages, and the increase in remarriage?
- Why do New Right thinkers see these changes as disastrous for the traditional family?
- Do such changes mean that the family as an institution is disintegrating?
- Does such increasing diversity show the development of a post-modern society?

This section of notes covers

- A list of the main changes which have taken place
- A summary of how changes have taken place
- Explanations of the most important reasons for the changes
- Hints on how to tackle questions on this area of the module
- Explanations of different theoretical perspectives and other implications of the changes

Links between this material and other parts of the Families and Households module

- The question of whether the family is seen to be severely threatened by such changes may depend on the theoretical perspective taken, particularly functionalist, New Right and feminist views.
- An awareness of these changes can help us to understand the changing roles and relationships in couples today.
- The effects of these changes will be useful in understanding family structure and whether or not there may be a ‘typical’ family structure today.
- All of the material in this section is very relevant to the whole question of family diversity and our understanding of it. You will need to combine material from this section with the section on diversity in order to address any questions on diversity.
SUMMARY OF MAIN CHANGES

Marriage and Divorce
- **marriage rates** in Britain reached their peak around 1970 and have then since declined. There has been an overall decline in the number of marriages in the last 30 years.
- The greatest decline has been in the proportion of **first marriages**: a much higher proportion of marriages are now **re-marriages** - second or subsequent marriages, in which at least one partner has been married before (15% in 1971; 34% in 1991).
- The **average age** at which people marry has also been rising. By 1997 this had risen to an average age at marriage of 29.6 for men and 27.5 for women.
- The proportion of **religious marriages** has decreased (61% are now civil ceremonies). Marriages can now be held in many more ‘approved premises’.
- The **divorce rates** have increased a great deal in the last 50 years, stabilising at a high rate in the 1990s. (See section on divorce for more details).

Cohabitation
- By 1997, 22% of couples between the ages of 16-59 were cohabiting.
- Later marriages are often preceded by a period of cohabitation. Many marry only after the birth of a child.
- However, many choose not to marry at all - this seems to apply particularly to divorcees.
- The proportion of couples cohabiting has also been increased by the growing numbers of gay and lesbian couples and families.
- Increased cohabitation rates have been partly responsible for an increase in the proportion of births outside marriage. In 1992 75% of births outside marriage were registered by both parents, compared to 45% in 1971. This suggests that the births took place within a stable cohabiting relationship.
Single-parent families

- By 1993, 22% of families with dependent children were headed by lone parents (8% in 1971). 20% were headed by lone mothers and 2% by lone fathers. Britain has the second-highest rate of lone parenthood in Europe, after Denmark.
- In the past, most lone-parent families were the result of the death of one parent. By 1995, only 1% of the 20% of families headed by lone mothers were due to this cause; 12% were due to divorce or separation; 8% were single mothers who had never been married.
- Despite the focus of concern in recent years, the number of children born to single teenage mothers has fallen, though the British rate remains one of the highest in Europe.

Other important points

- The number of reconstituted families has risen, as new nuclear families are formed when divorcees remarry.
- By 1998, 28% of households contained only one person. About half of these are elderly, particularly women; the other half are younger and likely to be divorcees or those who have not married.
- Another 34% of households contain only a couple - no children, or non-dependent children only.

Explaining these changes

Life expectation

More people today survive into old age. This has a number of effects on household composition:

- Many couple households are composed of those whose children have left home
- As women on average live longer than men, many single-person households are made up of elderly women
- Because people expect to live a long time, they are happier to put off marriage and childbirth until later
- This may lead to more single households and more cohabiting couples
- For women in particular, a long period of life is available after completing families

In addition, the birth rate has also declined, resulting in a high proportion of small families.
More choices available
With less social pressure to conform and more opportunities available for individual achievement:
- marriage and childbirth may be postponed because of career and education
- with more social mobility, there is less pressure or support from the extended family, which may lead to more divorce and more individual choice
- there may be a positive choice not to marry

Changing social attitudes
Many of the changes which have taken place have happened alongside and as a result of changing social attitudes. This becomes a ‘snowball effect’, as people see more and more examples of the changing types of household in their own lives.
- attitudes towards cohabitation have changed - no longer seen as ‘living in sin’. It has become quite a ‘normal’ situation, with new terms such as ‘partner’ regularly used.
- similarly, marriage is no longer seen as so necessary, often as a possible later stage of full commitment.
- attitudes to illegitimacy have become more tolerant as single-parent families have become more common. Even the terms ‘illegitimate’ and ‘unmarried mother’ seem to have been replaced by less judgemental terms such as ‘single-parent family’.
- attitudes to gay and lesbian relationships have become more open and tolerant
- we have begun to focus more closely on the needs and fulfilment of the individual and whatever is seen by him/herself as appropriate
- the cost of marriage may also have had an effect - there is some evidence that this factor now plays a role in decisions about marriage.
- as divorce has become more common, it has been seen less as a cause for scandal and gossip and more as a routine aspect of life which happens sometimes in most families.
- as divorce has become more common, this in itself may put some people off marriage and extend cohabitation.

Changes in the law
- The laws relating to divorce have changed in a number of ways, most of which have made the acquisition of a divorce easier and quicker.
- changes include the grounds for divorce, the speed of divorce, a shortening of the period of marriage necessary before a divorce can take place, the cost of divorce (easier through legal aid), the possibility of ‘no blame’ divorces. See the section on divorce for more details.
- other important changes in the law have been those which have given women equal rights in terms of jobs, opportunities and finance.
- alongside smaller families, the extension of laws protecting children have added to the overall increase in child-centredness.

The position of women
- In the last 40 years, women have gained many rights and begun to achieve equally to men, in education and in work roles.
- The majority of women now have a career or a job and see this as an important part of their lives.
- These changes also mean that women generally feel more independent and able to support themselves without the help of a man.
- This has had a considerable effect on the level of divorce and also the numbers of women who feel able to bring up a child by themselves. In 1950, % of divorce petitions were by men; by 1990, % were made by women - this reflects their increased confidence to be independent.
**Secularisation**
- The proportion of the population regularly attending some sort of religious institution has declined significantly, meaning that religious beliefs and religious vows have a less direct influence over large sections of the population.
- The increase in the number of civil marriages has meant that marriage is not seen by many as a religious institution, one in which unbreakable, sacred vows are made. The possibility of divorce is therefore greater.
- British society has become more diverse in terms of religion, ethnicity and culture. With the increase in marriages that bridge these divisions, couples are less likely to have a marriage ceremony conducted by one particular faith or denomination.

**Support from state**
- Women in particular feel more able to support themselves independently as a lone mother or divorcee, since the state has provided help in terms of child benefit, income support etc.
- Families feel more able to leave elderly relatives to live on their own when the state can provide support for those old people through day-care, meals-on-wheels, supplementary pensions, carelines etc.

**HOW TO TACKLE SPECIFIC QUESTIONS**

When explaining the reasons behind one particular change, it will usually be necessary to extract the probable causes from the different categories.
For example, if explaining the rise in cohabitation and the decline in marriages, you would need to use the following:
- longer life
- positive choice available
- period of career-building before commitment
- changed attitudes to marriage and cohabitation
- cost of marriage
- increase in divorce may make people more wary of marriage
- independence of women
- decline in religion
- cohabitation seen as a prelude to marriage and/or childbirth

You can build up an explanation in this way for any of the changes dealt with above.
IMPLICATIONS OF THESE CHANGES - THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES
Sociologists have disagreed about the implications of these changes for society and for the future of the family as an institution. On the one hand, New Right perspectives have seen them as a threat to the traditional family, resulting in many social problems. From a very different point of view, feminist sociologists have seen many of the changes as a liberating influence on our lives, particularly those of women. Others who are supporters of the family see the changes as less important, hiding what are in fact minor alterations to a relatively unchanging situation.

New Right perspectives
- Changes seen as a worrying challenge to the best family form - the traditional nuclear family
- An increase in promiscuity, cohabitation, divorce, illegitimacy, single-parent families are all seen as detrimental to the family. Easier divorce and abortion etc. are seen as threatening.
- Even feminism and equal rights may be seen as undermining the essential differences in the traditional roles of men and women.
- State support is seen as costing too much, an encouragement to immorality and welfare scrounging and reducing individual responsibility.
- Criticism has focused on single young mothers. Single parent families are seen as a ‘defective’ form of family that cannot function properly.
- Lack of a traditional family structure leads to a lack of adequate socialisation and male role model, resulting in educational failure, juvenile delinquency and drug abuse.
- Murray claims that single parenthood has contributed to creating an underclass.

Feminist Persepctives
- Women have less to gain from marriage and divorce may allow them to escape from conflict and/or violence.
- Many of the changes are positively good for women because they reflect women’s increased ability to feel independent.
- many of the problems cited as resulting from single-parent families are more likely to be due to poverty and the result of ‘bad’ rather than ‘broken’ homes.
- Dallos and Sapsford (1995) show that lone-parenting may now be a matter of positive choice.
- Feminists may criticise New Right views on lone mothers, pointing out that there is little ‘incentive’ in gaining the low income and poor housing provided by the state.

DOES THIS POINT TO THE DISINTEGRATION OF THE FAMILY?
A number of sociologists have shown ways in which the family is still maintained, rather than disintegrating, despite all these changes:
- Dennis (1993) suggests that many single parent families have ‘committed’ fathers.
- Cohabitation and births outside marriage often conceal what are, in all other ways, stable nuclear families.
- Chester (1985)argues that most reconstituted families are ‘neo-conventional’ families, made up of two parents and a small number of children, with long-term commitment. The main change is that the wife is now much more likely to be economically active.
- Brown (1995) points out that we now have fewer ‘shotgun weddings’ than in the past. This leads to more cohabitation and fewer rushed marriages, which may actually mean more stability.
- Similarly, Gillis (1985) suggests that the hundred years between 1850 and 1960 were exceptional - before this period couples often lived together and only married once a child was expected.

FAMILY DIVERSITY
The whole of this section is relevant to the question of family diversity and much of the material here will often be used in answering questions on diversity. You will need to show how much variety there is in families and households in Britain today, as a result of the changes explained above.
In addition, you will need to look at the section on diversity. This includes aspects of cultural, regional, ethnic diversity not included here.
CHANGING PATTERNS OF DIVORCE

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS SECTION OF THE FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS MODULE?
You have to be aware of the increase in numbers and rates of divorces, and when and why they have increased most. You should be able to discuss the main reasons for changes in the divorce rate - legal, economic and social - and assess their importance. You must then be able to discuss the possible consequences and implications of this rise in terms of the role of the family in society. You should also know which social groups are likely to be most prone to divorce.

- **Key Issues/Questions**
  - What are the current patterns of marriage and divorce?
  - How has divorce become easier?
  - Why has the divorce rate increased so much in recent years? What are the main factors involved in this rise?
  - Which social groups seem to be most susceptible to divorce?
  - How have divorce rates affected marriage and contributed to an increase in family diversity?
  - Does this increase mean that marriage is ‘dying’ as an institution?
  - What are the views of functionalist, Marxist and feminist sociologists on divorce?
  - Why do the New Right see divorce as such a damaging influence?

This section of notes covers
- **Key Terms**
  - A summary of changes in patterns of divorce
  - Explanations for the rise in divorce
  - Divorce legislation
  - The social distribution of divorce
  - Implications of the rise in divorce

Links between this material and other parts of the Families and Households module
- Whether divorce is seen in a negative or positive light is partly dependent on the sociologist’s theoretical perspective - theories on divorce differ considerably between functionalist and New Right, who hold very different views to those of feminists and Marxists.
- An understanding of divorce trends is essential in any analysis and/or explanation of changing marriage patterns, attitudes to marriage, family diversity and changing family roles.
- The role of divorce is central to any discussion of the decline or ‘death’ of the family as an institution.
KEY TERMS

- **Divorce**: means the legal termination of a marriage. This has three stages - a *petition*, a *decrees nisi* and a *decrees absolute*. Not all petitions for divorce reach the decree absolute stage.
- **Separation**: this may be an informal physical separation of the couple or it may be a legal separation through a magistrate’s court. The couple live apart but are still legally married. Figures for this are not so reliable.
- **Empty-shell marriage**: the marriage has broken down but the couple still live together and are still legally married. However, the marriage exists in name only; the couple stay together but no longer care for each other. The number of such marriages has probably declined as divorce has become possible for more couples.
- **Serial monogamy**: this refers to a cycle of marriage - divorce - remarriage. An individual is married only to one person at a time (monogamy) but may be married to several over a lifetime.
- **Divorce rate**: this is a more reliable guide to the level of divorce than simple numbers, because it takes into account the size of the population and the number of marriages. It is usually expressed as the number of divorces per 1000 married couples.

CHANGES IN PATTERNS OF DIVORCE

It’s important to be familiar with some of the trends that have occurred in recent years, in order to be able to discuss both reasons and consequences.

- Figures for divorce have risen dramatically over the last century - from 800 petitions per year in 1900 to 190,000 per year in 1990.
- The divorce rate has increased from 2.1 divorces per 1000 married couples in 1961 to 13.5 in 1991.
- Although the general trend in numbers divorcing has been upwards, there have been several periods when the number has declined - the early 1920’s; the 1950’s; the 1990’s.
- Similarly, there have been times when the figures have risen very quickly, usually during or after wartime, or following a change in the law (1916-20 numbers trebled; 1936-40 numbers doubled; 1941-50 numbers increased fivefold; 1969-72 numbers doubled).
- Many divorcees remarry later. By 1996 remarriages for one or both partners constituted 41% of all marriages.
- In the 1990s, the divorce numbers and divorce rate seem to have stabilised, around 160,000-190,000 and a rate of 13 per thousand married couples.
- However, by 1996 the falling marriage rate had almost reached the same level as the rising divorce rate.

SUMMARY OF CHANGES IN DIVORCE LEGISLATION

- Prior to 1857: divorce only available through private act of parliament. Very costly; upper class only.
- From 1897: separation orders available to the working classes.
- 1923: Women placed on an equal footing with men - adultery only to be proved.
- 1937: Other ground included, such as desertion, cruelty, unsound mind.
- 1949-50: Legal Aid Act gave assistance to those who could not afford to go to court.
- 1970: Divorce Reform Act. One ground for divorce which was the ‘irretrievable breakdown of the marriage’. No longer had to be a ‘guilty party’ and divorce by consent after separation allowed.
- 1985: Time limit for divorce reduced from three to one year.

Copyright Lindisfarne Press 2001
THE SOCIAL DISTRIBUTION OF DIVORCE
There are discernible patterns among the factors that seem to be associated with divorce. Certain social groups or circumstances are more likely to lead to the experience of divorce.

- **Age at marriage** teenage marriages are much more likely to end in divorce than later ones. If the bride is under 21, the rate is double the national figure; whereas those marrying over the age of 40 experience half that rate. Possible reasons may be immaturity, resentment, financial problems, early pregnancy.

- **Social Class** generally, the higher a couple’s social class, the higher the likelihood of divorce, though those at the bottom of each class are more prone than others. Highest rates are amongst the poor, unskilled and unemployed. Probable reasons may be financial problems, insecurity, lack of education, low status.

- **Previous experience of divorce** When parents have been divorced, there is a greater possibility that their child will be divorced. This is also the case where a spouse has been divorced from a previous marriage - s/he is likely to be divorced again. Possible explanations in each case may be psychological instability, a lower aversion to divorce, taking the same emotional ‘baggage’ into another marriage.

- **Different social backgrounds** Divorce appears to be more likely than average if the couple come from different social backgrounds. This may be in terms of social class, religion, ethnicity, education etc. Explanations are likely to be that the partners have different expectations of marriage and that they are pulled in different directions by their relatives and friends.

- **Occupations** particular occupations seem to have higher rates of divorce than others. Where an occupation takes a partner away from home for long periods, provides opportunities to meet other people, or demands very high levels of involvement from him or her, a high level of divorce is often found. Examples of each of these categories would be: lorry drivers, prisoners, members of the armed forces; actors; doctors, company directors.

EXPLANATIONS FOR THE RISE IN DIVORCE

- **Changes in the law** legal barriers - which once prevented all but the extremely rich from gaining access to divorce - have gradually been removed by successive legislation. (See list below for details)

- **Effects of Wars** divorce rates rose following both First and Second World Wars. This was probably due to large-scale disruption, long separations, changes in roles, differing experiences etc.

- **Secularisation** religion and religious values have lost much of their influence over our lives, so the religious ideal of ‘marriage for life’ has become less prominent. The churches themselves have reacted by becoming more tolerant of divorcees.

- **Social attitudes** attitudes towards divorce have changed and divorce has gradually become more familiar and acceptable. The stigma and scandal once attached to divorce has declined. Cockett and Tripp (1994) claim that divorce has now become a ‘normal’ part of family experience.

- **Changes in the position of women** Whereas in 1946 almost three quarters of petitions for divorce were filed by men, by 1990 three quarters were from women. This clearly shows that women are both less satisfied with marriage and feel more able to cope independently than in the past. Benefits from the state for lone-parent families and greater job opportunities have made them economically more independent.

- **Demographic changes** Marriages are ‘at risk’ for longer today than ever before simply because we are living longer. Once children have left home, a couple may still have another 30 years of marriage.

- **Higher expectations of marriage** Some functionalist sociologists argue that our high divorce rates reflect the high standards we expect of modern marriage, so that those marriages which do not live up to these high standards are dissolved and other, better marriages may be formed. In the past, they argue, much less was expected of marriage in terms of affection and companionship.

- **Individualism and freedom** Gibson (1994) argues that modern society emphasises individual satisfaction, achievement and freedom. We all want self-fulfilment and, if a marriage does not deliver, this is likely to lead to conflict.

- **Postmodernism** Cheal (1991) argues that the fragmentation of the family, through divorce and other means, is just a part of the wider process of cultural fragmentation in postmodern society. There is no longer one type of family or relationship, but a whole range of different possibilities, and individuals want access to them.
IMPLICATIONS OF THE RISE IN DIVORCE

The rise in divorce has had a number of specific effects on our lives:
- Some people are put off marriage by high divorce rates
- others postpone marriage until later, often preceded by a period of cohabitation
- divorce has produced large numbers of lone parent families
- has led to the growth of ‘reconstituted’ families
- has led to an increase in the number of people living alone
- has increased expectations of marriage and a greater willingness to end ‘unsatisfactory’ marriages
- has led to an increase in the proportion of second and subsequent marriages

Different theoretical perspectives have viewed the rise in divorce in very different ways:
- **Functionalists** say divorce can be functional, in that it allows unhappy marriages to end and more satisfactory ones to take their place.
- BUT divorce must not be allowed to get out of hand because this might threaten the stability of the nuclear family, which is seen as essential.
- **New Right** perspectives follow a similar theme. They see the increase in divorce as leading to a decline in the family, a rise in the number of lone parent families, meaning fewer children live in ‘stable’ homes. They see this type of environment, especially the lack of a male role model, as producing poverty, low educational achievement, rising delinquency, and social disintegration. Lone parent families are attacked as irresponsible and depending too much on state benefits.
- **Marxists** see divorce as a direct result of capitalism. Marriage is seen as a bourgeois concept used by the ruling class, so divorce is an escape from this. Divorce is also seen as an escape for women from exploitation. Material aspirations produced by capitalism bring conflict and stress. The nuclear family suits capitalism but children lack a stable communal environment.
- **Feminists** would welcome the increase in divorce as a sign of the greater ability of women to escape from marriage, an exploitative and possibly violent relationship. Women who sue for divorce are therefore seen as exercising more choice, more independence, which must be good for them as individuals.
- **Postmodernist** writers see divorce as part of family fragmentation, which itself is part of a more general fragmentation of social life. Divorce allows individuals to exercise free will over their lives and actions. It is the idea of a typical family that is seen as problematic, rather than family diversity resulting from individual choice. Giddens suggests that divorce can be seen as both liberating for the individual and as a source of disruption and tension - it enables the individual to reflect on their own identity and place in society.
### FAMILY IDEOLOGY AND SOCIAL POLICY

**WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS SECTION OF THE FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS MODULE?**

**Key Issues/Questions**
- What is the nature of family ideology?
- How are we persuaded to see one type of family as more ‘normal’ than others?
- How can governments affect the types of household arrangements we may have?
- What is the New Right view of the family and how did the government try to impose this view through legislation?
- How have government attitudes and policies changed under New Labour?
- In what ways might sociologists criticise government policies?

**This section of notes covers**
- An explanation of the term ‘ideology’
- How this term can be applied to the family
- How family ideology is imposed
- Ways in which government policies may affect families
- Explanation and examples of New Right policies
- Explanation and examples of New Labour policies
- Evaluation of each of these policies

**Links between this material and other parts of the Families and Households module**
- Some functionalist views are reflected in government views and policies on the family, especially those of the New Right.
- Criticisms of these policies are largely associated with Marxist, feminist and postmodern views.
- The notion of ideology, and dominant ideology in particular, is associated with Marxist and feminist perspectives.
- It is important to be aware of the extent of family diversity and change, when evaluating ideology and political policies.
WHAT IS IDEOLOGY?
An ideology is a set of ideas - values, beliefs and knowledge - that explain the way society is structured. This set of ideas serve to justify and legitimate social action and behaviour. It also justifies elements of our culture, such as the family. Ideology therefore shapes the way we view the world - what we think of as a ‘family’ and what views we have towards it. This view, then, is likely to be a selective and partial one. Marxist and feminist sociologists often refer to dominant ideologies. This means that those who are in more powerful positions are able to ensure that their ideas dominate the view of the world held by all the rest. Their view of the world is then seen as natural or inevitable.

Marxists stress the dominant ideology of the ruling class, whereas feminists focus on the way ideology helps maintain men’s ‘exploitation’ of women. Summarised as follows:

- set of ideas, beliefs, values
- concept used mainly by Marxists/feminists
- ideas of the powerful, imposed on the rest
- likely to be a distortion of reality
- dominant ideas about what is ‘right’

HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO THE FAMILY?
Despite the growing diversity in family life, we are still encouraged to see a particular type of family as ‘normal’, ‘natural’ and desirable. This family is likely to have the following characteristics:

- nuclear family
- mother and father married with dependent children
- living together in a happy unit
- father as the main breadwinner
- mother as caring homemaker
- doing things together
- plenty of love, care and attention

HOW IS THIS IDEOLOGY IMPOSED?
We are persuaded to see this image as ‘right’, and other alternatives as ‘wrong’ or unnatural, in a number of ways - for example:

- Socialisation through role models, games, toys, stories etc.
- Advertising showing what the ideal family should be like.
- TV and other media dramas, soaps and comedies show a positive picture of the nuclear family; other types often seen to have ‘problems’.
- Products many products, from food to houses and holidays, are packaged and sold ‘for families’
- Social Pressures those not in ‘normal’ families often find difficulties in their social life and pressures to conform from friends and relatives.
- Government policy and legislation governments often refer to ‘family values’ in their policies and pass legislation aimed at supporting families.
GOVERNMENT POLICY AND LEGISLATION
Aspects of family life and the role of families in society are issues which feature strongly in political debates and in the legislation produced.

- traditional family values often stressed in debates on topics such as crime, education, health.
- these principles are held by all three main political parties.
- the welfare state was based on the traditional idea of the nuclear family
- government policies operate through the taxation system, welfare benefits, housing, education, social security and laws.
- these policies encourage people to live in certain ways or types of households, and not in others.
- there are frequent ‘moral panics’ about family life, such as child abuse, ‘absent fathers’, lack of discipline, dependence on state benefits.
- the widely-held political view of the family as the ‘core’ of society is very close to the functionalist view (especially for the New Right in the Conservative Party).
- Feminists argue that this bias disadvantages women:
  - assumes women will be involved in childcare
  - school hours and holidays make it difficult for both parents to be employed full time
  - lack of state assistance for the elderly who live with relatives generally means that women are expected to do the caring
  - there are still differences in the ways men and women are treated; also married and unmarried couples.

THE NEW RIGHT AND THE FAMILY
The New Right is associated with the right-wing Conservative policies of the Thatcher government in Britain and that of Reagan in the USA.

Key New Right beliefs about the family - Rapoport (1989)
- based on heterosexual marriage between two parents
- the ‘building block’ of society
- essential to social stability
- separate roles performed by men and women, according to their biology
- two parents and strong discipline needed in families, to prevent the collapse of social order
- all other arrangements are ‘deviant’ and therefore a threat to society

Other important New Right views
- strong views on morality and responsibility - stress law and order, plus personal freedom and responsibility
- concerned about supposed current disintegration of family life resulting from increased cohabitation, single-parent families etc.
- concerned with welfare dependency, ‘scroungers’ and the rise of an ‘underclass’ - and the cost of these to the state.
- very critical of single mothers and illegitimate children.
- see government policy as a way of upholding moral values and forcing people to take responsibility.
EXAMPLES OF NEW RIGHT POLICIES

- Child Support Agency set up 1993 - intention was to force absent fathers to take financial responsibility for their children. Highly controversial and much criticised, as it mainly attacked fathers who were already paying. It seemed to save government money rather than to help children, as mothers lose state benefits as fathers are made to pay.
- from 1988 benefits were withdrawn from 16-18 year olds, forcing families to maintain unemployed teenagers.
- policy of ‘community care’ extended - in practice meaning care by family members, mainly women.
- 1988 changes in taxation law meant that cohabiting couples could not claim more tax allowances than a married couple. Also prevented from claiming mortgage relief as two individuals.

CRITICISMS OF NEW RIGHT POLICIES

- Feminists such as Abbott and Wallace (1992) see the New Right ideas as a form of patriarchy. Attacks on single parent families are expressions of the view that a woman’s place is in the home.
- They condemn the attacks which label groups such as single mothers and homosexuals as dangerous to normal society.
- Feminists also argue that, if the welfare state is ‘rolled back’ as the New Right wish, then it will be women who will be expected to pick up the responsibilities.
- Abbott and Wallace show how many Conservative policies have actually tended to harm rather than help the family - policies such as the freezing of Child Benefit, cuts in spending on education, cuts in the provision of council housing.
- They argue that the main purpose of such policies is to reduce government spending rather than maintaining the traditional family.
- Marxists see new Right views as an ideological justification for capitalism
- They argue that poverty and inequality are not the fault of the individual but a result of the system and the way the society is structured.

NEW LABOUR AND THE FAMILY

- Policies not so critical of other arrangements as those of the Thatcher/Major governments
- However, still a strong emphasis on the importance of the nuclear family.
- Emphasis on education and law and order, plus a sense of community and citizenship - a ‘moral community’.
- The traditional nuclear family is seen to play an important role in all of these.
- Supporting Families 1999 a Green Paper which set out the New Labour views:
  - aim to strengthen family and marriage
  - the family is seen as important to the moral stability of society
  - aim to support and help the family in carrying out its job
  - but also a recognition that social change has occurred and therefore policies cannot be implemented which pretend that most people still live in traditional nuclear families.
  - Overall, therefore, to encourage the stability of family life. Policies have been designed to help keep families together, support them, help them to support themselves - including single parent and reconstituted families.
  - There is a recognition that most households have two earners and that most mothers do not stay at home long-term to look after children.

EXAMPLES OF NEW LABOUR POLICIES

- Longer maternity leave, plus paternity leave
- Working Families Tax Credit - allowing the claiming of tax relief to enable parents to work without losing income through childcare costs.
- New Deal - to help single parents return to paid employment
- Help with childcare for single mothers.

CRITICISMS OF NEW LABOUR POLICIES

- Despite the changes, many feminists still see this view of the family as patriarchal and backward-looking in terms of the traditional nuclear family.
- The ideal of the cereal packet family still seems to be at the forefront of policy.
- In this way, the New Labour policies are accused of reflecting too closely the New Right agenda on the family.