

“A” Level Sociology

Teaching Notes

Module: Family Life

Unit 4: Is The Family In Decline?

Is The Modern Family in Decline?

1. We are going to look at a number of specific areas of family life that I've organised under the above heading for two main reasons:

- Areas of study such as "marriage" and "divorce" go together quite neatly.

For example, for "divorce" to exist in any society, "marriage" ceremonies have to take place.

- As we've seen, the family is a central institution in most - probably all - societies and it is useful to consider questions relating to it's overall social significance through the ideas of family formation and dissolution.

2. The family is normally considered to be a central social institution for two reasons:

- Firstly, children grow-up within some sort of family structure. Through their experiences in this social group children make their first contacts with a sense of "wider society".

It is through this socialising agency that children are introduced to the cultural traditions and expectations (values, norms and social roles) of the society into which they will eventually take their place as adults.

- Secondly, because of this experience of primary socialisation, the family group plays a vital part in the framing of the way people develop individually (in terms of their "personality") and socially (in terms of wider relationships with others).

3. The family group is generally seen as the bridge between the developing child and the wider society into which they are born. The things that are learnt within the family group (through the socialisation process) are carried with the individual into his / her adult life and, consequently, affect the basic ways this person interacts with others in wider social institutions (the education system, the workplace, etc.).

4. Sociological questions about the nature of family life - both in institutional and personal terms - tend to focus upon the importance of the socialisation process, for both the developing individual and "society as a whole".

- Given the significance of the socialisation process in the creation of adult personalities and the central role played by the family group in this initial process, it is not surprising that journalists, politicians, social commentators and the like should be concerned about what happens to - and within - the family group.
- If we accept that the socialisation process within the family is important, it clearly has significant implications for the future development of the society into which these socialised individuals eventually take their (adult) place.

5. In these Notes we are going to look at the nature of such things as **marriage, divorce, illegitimacy, separation, cohabitation** and so forth, within a **framework** of a **debate** that focuses around the question of whether or not the family is undergoing a **crisis** / is on the verge of **breakdown**.

6. There are a number of possible general responses to the question of whether or not the family can be considered a "dying" or "crisis-ridden" institution in our society:

"Yes" - it's definitely on its last legs.

"No" - it's actually alive and well.

"Maybe" - it certainly doesn't seem to be as chirpy as it once was.

• In addition, a number of **evaluations** accompany such answers:

"Yes - and good riddance to it / what can we do to save it?"

"No - and it's a scandal that it isn't / what can we do to support it from attack?"

"Maybe - the damn thing refuses to die / it's still alive, but it's not as healthy as it used to be".

7. In the following Notes we are going to look briefly at:

a. The methodological question of whether or not we can usefully talk about any social institution in terms of such evaluative concepts as "life", "death" or "crisis".

b. Non-sociological conceptions of the possible "family in crisis" thesis (and the implications they have for social policy towards the family).

c. Possible ways of **evaluating** the question of whether or not we can conclude that:

The family, as a social institution, is **declining** in significance in our society.

Historical changes in family life / organisation **are / are not indicative** of a general **breakdown** in the institutional role played the family in our society.

8. If we are going to look at concepts such as "decline" and "breakdown", we need to have some way of **operationalizing / measuring** them. We can use areas of family life relating to marriage, divorce, cohabitation, separation and illegitimacy as social indicators of the relative state of family life in **contemporary Britain**.

Is The Family A Dying Institution?

1. It is logically nonsensical to talk about institutions - such as the family - as if they were living things when they patently are not "alive". The technical term for this is the "**error of reification**", which can be defined as:

"Attributing living characteristics / emotions to something that is not alive".

2. We can see this form of error in everyday life when we hear people talk about:

Cars ("She's been a bit temperamental lately");
Boats ("...and God bless all who sail in her") and
Society (as in "Society's to blame for football hooliganism").

• I've mentioned this idea for two main reasons:

Firstly, to highlight the concept of **reification** (a useful one to remember if only because it looks rather good when you write it in an essay).

Secondly, to suggest that it's **not particularly useful or sensible** (sociologically or otherwise) to talk in terms of a social institution such as the family "dying" - precisely because it was never "alive" in the first place.

3. To talk in terms of "**the death of the family**" as an institution in any society is not particularly useful because:

a. It implies that institutions have recognisable / identifiable life-spans.

b. It implies that social institutions pass through "phases of development" akin to the human life-cycle (youthful vigour, old age and the like), which they evidently do not.

4. When critics / supporters of "the family" talk about the "death of the family" what they actually mean is:

- It should be destroyed (and this is a "good thing").
- It is in danger of being destroyed (and this is a "bad thing").

5. The question of "institutional death" has more to do with a **subjective interpretation** on the part of some social commentators than with an objective assessment or analysis of the condition of the institution in question (in this instance, the family).

6. A more-useful way of looking at the question is to consider its role as an **agency of cultural reproduction**; that is, in terms of its "effectiveness" as an agency involved in the general socialisation process. In this respect, opinion is varied / divided:

- **Functionalists (Murdock, Parsons, Fletcher, Shorter, etc.)** have emphasised the vital consensus / stabilising role played by the family in society.
- **Conflict theorists (Marxist and / or Feminist)** have drawn attention to such things as the oppression of women within the family, whilst at the same time concluding that, ideologically at least, family structures are relatively stable.
- **Critical theorists** such as **Leach** ("A Runaway World?", 1967), **Laing and Esterson** ("Sanity, Madness and the Family", 1970) and **Cooper** ("The Death of the Family", 1972) have argued that:
 - The close-knit family group is a source of social and psychological conflicts that damages people and their lives (**Leach**).
 - The family group is an institution that stunts the individual's social / psychological development, restricting people's freedom of expression and so forth and results in the "murder of their selves" (**Cooper**).
 - The family is an "emotionally exploitative" institution, whereby problems created within it are reproduced in society as a whole (**Laing and Esterson**).

7. Such writers have pointed-out the "**darker, social and psychological, side**" to family life without either locating the family within the structure of society as a whole or, most significantly, creating a logical alternative to the family structure that will do away with the petty emotional squabbles and psychological traumas that, they argue, characterise family life.

8. Whilst we may see the above views as rather more "realistic" or representative of family life than Functionalist arguments (which tend to emphasise social harmony - an **exception** to this being **Bell and Vogal** ("A Modern Introduction to the Family", 1968) who argue that some aspects of family life may be **dysfunctional** to some members - especially children when they are "scapegoated" by their parents for problems that arise within the family group) - such writers tend not to adequately address the question of "If not the Family - then what?".

Given that children need to be socialised, for example, what institution in society can perform this necessary task if the family group does not do it adequately?

9. Of more interest at this particular juncture is the second of the main questions posed above, namely, that of "non-sociological" conceptions of the possible "family in crisis" thesis (and the implications they have for such things as social policy towards the family).

10. We can begin by noting the following quote which outlines / sums up the general "family in crisis" thesis position:

"There are those who deplore the high divorce rate, sexual permissiveness, the stress on youth, glamour, the pleasures of the senses and the declining birth rate. To some people, these trends seem to be real threats to the family - the institution that acts as a pillar of society. They view changes in the family as symptoms of decay and fear that the decay will spread to the entire society."
J. and R. Perry "The Social Web", 1973.

- This kind of "family in crisis" thesis tends to be put-forward by politicians and journalists and tends not to be theoretically well-founded or developed. Three main themes can, however, be established to characterise the general position.
- Firstly, that, compared with "the past", modern family life is less stable.
- Secondly, that the family is the cornerstone of social organisation and, as such, its breakdown would have / is having grave consequences for "social life as we know it" (the "domino theory" - if one domino falls (the family), it will have a "knock-on" effect on all other social institutions).

All kinds of "social ills" (crime, delinquency, unemployment etc.) are held to stem from the breakdown in family organisation.

- Thirdly we can note the fact that "crisis theorists" tend to have a clear (if not always openly stated) view about how family life should be organised - a "hidden agenda", as it were, for the rejuvenation of the family (and, by extension, for the elimination of what such theorists see as "social problems").

11. We can consider each of the above ideas in turn. Firstly, compare the two quotes reproduced below:

- **"Family life is collapsing and responsible parents can no longer afford children", the government was warned yesterday. And lack of parental control and guidance lies behind many of today's pressing social problems, said Lord Joseph, the former Education Secretary, Sir Keith Joseph.**

"Part of the background to crime, to drug addiction, to low motivation at school, to poor job prospects and to the transmission of all these problems to the next generation comes from inadequate parenting. If you want to destroy a country, you debauch its currency - and the way to destroy a society is to destroy its children."

M.Benns "Save our Children from the Collapse of Family Life", 1990.

- **"The withdrawal of women's attention from the care of her offspring, and from domestic duties is an unnatural arrangement and a stigma upon the social state. Young children are left at home under very inadequate conduct and**

~~almost without restraint. They are left to play at will and to expand into every lawless form. Ignorant of cooking and needlework, unacquainted with all that is necessary to promote the comfort and welfare of a home... slatternly and ignorant. The unfortunate man who marries a woman of this class suffers also. There is neither order nor comfort in the home and his meals are so irregular and ill-prepared and his own fireside presents so few attractions that he is tempted to the beerhouse. The social evils are aggravated by the independence of the young of both sexes. The child receives his wages on his own account and in some cases he will even remove from the parent roof. It is palpably a system fraught with innumerable evils, especially when we consider the early direction of the child's mind to the value of money and the consequent temptation to procure it by illicit means."~~

T.Beggs "An Inquirey into the Extent and Causes of Juvenile Depravity", 1849

- Comparing the quotes should have sensitised you to a number of ideas:
 - a. The "family in crisis / decline" thesis is not a new one in popular culture. It is a recurrent theme throughout the history of our society, sometimes dormant, sometimes exploding into a full-scale moral panic, such as those concerning:
 - "Latch-key kids" - panic about working mothers.
 - Co-habitation - panic about decline in marriage.
 - b. Such arguments contrast the family "in the past" (with its attendant images of happy, loving, parents and well-adjusted, respectful, children) and the "modern" family (with its attendant images of squabbling parents, illegitimacy, rising divorce rates, delinquent children and so forth.
- The unstated theme is that we have to recapture the grandeur of the past, when everyone was contented, knew their place in society and when you could buy a house, six head of cattle and still have change out of sixpence...
- The fact that such images of the family - both past and present - are myths is self-evident (Lord Joseph implicitly refers to the "ideal family" in the past that Beggs characterises as being in crisis), but they represent myths in two ways:
 - a. That such statements are untrue (in the sense that they do not accurately describe reality).
 - b. More importantly, such myths contrast a particular form of "family ideology" (what the writers believe the family should be like) with a (caricatured) picture of the family both past and present.

Such myths are prescriptive in that they tell us something about the subjective beliefs of the writer (what he / she believes the family should be like - how adults should behave, what the relationship between the sexes **should** be like).

12. The idea that the family is a significant social institution is not one with which many sociologists (of whatever perspective) would disagree. However, where sociologists disagree with "crisis theorists" is in terms of the relationship between the family as a social institution and other institutions in society.

- In the first place, the relationship between institutions is not a simple, hierarchical, one, whereby such institutions are somehow "separate but inter-connected". The family cannot "breakdown" unless other institutions in society (such as work, government, the Church and so forth) are "breaking down".
- Secondly, and more significantly, we are not given any means of measuring the concept of "breakdown" - how, for example, could we tell if the family was in danger of collapse?

13. The problem here is that "crisis theorists" place too much importance on the family as a social institution - viewing it in some form of "glorious isolation" from other social institutions - and to locate it as the cause of all "social problems". No theoretical justification for this tends to be provided

14. Finally, the main significance of the "family in crisis" thesis is the fact that such theorists are actively engaged in the attempt to "rebuild" the family along quite specific ideological lines (the "dual-parent", nuclear family model in particular). Point three, above, is particularly applicable here, in that the idea that such conceptions of family life are merely ideological myths should not blind us to the fact that they have some ideological currency (especially when they are elaborated by powerful, influential people or social groups).

- We need to be aware that such **ideological frameworks** can be used to specify (and enforce) ideas about such things as gender relationships within the family, male and female homosexuality, social policies towards the family and the like.

Operationalising Family Decline

1. We can note two possible levels of analysis in relation to operationalising the ideas of "breakdown" and "decline" in the family as a social institution in our society

- **The Macro-sociological level:**

The family is located, as an institution, in its relationship with other institutions in society. Whether we do this in Functionalist terms (stressing the functional necessity of the relationship) or in Conflict Structuralist terms (stressing the part played by the family as an agency of the ideological reproduction of Capitalist hegemony), it is evident that to pose the question "Is the family in crisis?" is to also argue that, either:

- Other institutions in society are undergoing "a crisis" and hence creating a crisis in the family, or
- Something specific to the family, as an institution, is creating a crisis that has ramifications for all other institutions in society.

- **The Micro-sociological level:**

- The family is considered primarily as an organised social group that both satisfies the needs of its members and creates conflicts between those members. Whilst, on this level, widespread family conflict and breakdown will have serious consequences for the people involved (and possibly for other institutions in society) the "crisis" will be largely confined to relations between individual family members in society. Thus, whilst there may be a crisis on an individual, social - psychological, level it does not indicate a wider form of social crisis or breakdown.

2. The two levels are not separate from one another "in reality" (we cannot, for example, separate "individual social-psychological" crises from the wider social structural pressures that surround individuals, limiting their choice of action, their personal freedom and so forth).

- I have **separated** them **theoretically** (that is, treated them as **abstractions** from social reality - taken them out of their inter-connected social context in order to study them more-easily) in order to try and **clarify** the issues involved.

3. Any analysis of a potential crisis within the family will have to be considered in terms of both levels of theoretical analysis. By combining the two, at some point, we should then be able to arrive at a clearer picture of:

a. Whether or not the family is undergoing a "crisis" (that is, whether or not it is declining in significance in our society).

b. The implications for our society is this is - or is not - the case.

4. We can, therefore, now begin to look at a number of different possible **indicators** that will allow us to test the proposition that the family in Britain is "in decline".

A. Marriage in British Society.

1. We can note a number of reasons as to why **marriage** (or lack of same) tends to be seen as one **indicator** of family / wider **social breakdown**:

- **Legal norms**: It is more difficult to break a legal norm.
- **Historical**: The importance of lineal descent (especially in terms of inheritance).
- **Socialisation**: In particular, the significance of a continuity of parental care / responsibility for the upbringing of children.
- **Social control**: A legal commitment means that each partner understands their basic relationship (a form of "anomie" argument, whereby the marriage contract enables each partner to commit themselves to the family group).

2. In the above, the main connection we can make between marriage (as a legal norm) and family life is that by entering a marriage **contract** the respective partners make a binding commitment to each other, such that they agree (in our society at least) to take various forms of responsibility for both their partner and their children.

3. The basic argument here, therefore, is that marriage represents:

a. A stronger norm than a simple decision to live together (**cohabit**). By entering into a legal contract, both partners have rights and responsibilities and it is consequently more difficult to "walk away" from a marriage than it is from cohabitation.

Marriage statistics may be indicative of the number of people willing to make such a commitment. In addition, the number of people divorcing may be indicative (according to "crisis theorists") of family stress and disintegration.

- It needs to be stressed that this is but one interpretation of the significance of marriage. It is a particular form of family ideology that holds that the nuclear family structure is the norm and this is both morally and functionally desirable.

b. A symbolic social norm that reinforces the idea (between marriage partners and other potential (sexual) partners) that the married couple have made an exclusive sexual commitment to one another and a (shared) moral commitment towards the raising of their children.

- In our society, for example, a ring worn on a particular finger is used evidence of this symbolic commitment. In Britain, it tends to be traditional for the female to wear such a ring, whilst for males it's optional.
- In America, on the other hand, the exchange of rings between the male and female is a traditional part of (Christian) marriage.
- Among Hindus, female marital status is indicated by painted circles at the point where the nose meets the forehead (different colours represent different statuses).

4. If we assume that a fall in the numbers of people marrying is indicative of some form of family breakdown (although it is by no-means clear, as I've stressed, that there is any logical connection between the two), it would be useful to look now at various forms of empirical evidence (in this case, Official Government Statistics) concerning the popularity or otherwise of marriage in our society.

5. To some extent, the debate about the general popularity or otherwise of marriage is a good example of the way that the uncritical use of statistics can be used to support the idea that marriage is in decline in our society. As sociologists, we must always consider the concepts of reliability and validity in relation to any form of data we want to interpret.

6. Are marriage statistics **reliable**?

- Marriage statistics may be considered a reliable form of data because:
 - a. Definitions of marriage have not changed over the years (which means reliable comparisons can be made on a longitudinal basis).
 - b. All marriages are recorded by law.

However, some government departments issue "marriage statistics" based upon census / survey data which record not just legally married couples but also "couples living together as man and wife" (that is, cohabiting couples).

7. Are marriage statistics **valid**?

- While Official Statistics tell us something about the numbers of people marrying (and the marriage certificate provides some indication of social class by noting parental occupations), they represent a snapshot of a social process - they tell us, for example, how many people got married in a particular year.
- In order to be valuable as sociological data, we have to interpret such statistics. Can we, for example, take them at face value, or must our conclusions about family life drawn from marriage statistics be viewed in the light of other factors?
- For example, the total number of marriages between:

1961 and 1971 increased by 90,000 and between
1971 and 1984 decreased by 80,000.
- The statistical trend is a decline in the popularity of marriage. However, the total number of marriages in any society will be conditioned, to some extent, by the total number of people of marrying age. If there are more people in society in the age range 16 - 40, for example, the likelihood / probability that more marriages will take place increases.
- In this respect, an "outside factor" affecting marriage in Britain over this period was the post-war "baby boom" - by the early 1970's there were simply more people of "marrying age" in Britain, hence, more marriages took place.

- Another point to note is that figures for total marriages don't tell us very much about **patterns of marriage** in our society, mainly because people are able to divorce and remarry ("**serial monogamy**").

Statistics for first marriages between 1961 and 1984 show a relatively constant decline (peaking at 357,000 in 1971 and declining to 259,000 in 1984).

Statistics for remarriages, on the other hand, show a relative increase (from 56,000 in 1961 to 137,000 in 1984).

8. To understand both patterns of marriage and the relative status of marriage as an institutional arrangement in our society, we have to consider the relationship between patterns of both first and second marriages.

- Overall, first and second marriage data shows a small decline in the numbers of people marrying. Whilst this might be taken as evidence of a decline in the popularity of marriage (and hence some kind of "crisis" within the family), we also have to consider a number of other social factors that may affect the statistics:
 - a. The figures may represent a long-term trend or simply a short-term shift in attitudes towards marriage.
 - b. Both men and women are marrying at a later age than in the past. If this trend continues it is possible that we might see a long-term decline in the popularity of marriage. If people are coming together later in life this reduces the possibility for childbirth (because the woman is too old) and may represent a conscious choice on the part of women not to have children. In such a situation, the trend may be towards co-habitation, rather than marriage.
 - c. Another factor related to the above is the increasing trend for women - especially middle-class, professional, women - to pursue a career. In this respect, two points are worth noting:
 - Such women may consciously decide not to have children. This may decrease the likelihood of marriage, since one of the primary functions of marriage is to provide a social context for the raising of children.
 - If women are becoming increasingly economically-independent of men, the relative attractiveness of marriage will probably decline (since part of the ideological imperative of marriage as an institution is for women to bear and raise children). Such women are likely to choose a social arrangement (co-habitation) that confers a greater degree of social freedom and independence.
- The **conclusions** we can draw from the above, concerning "family breakdown", therefore, are not as simple or straightforward as "crisis theorists" might have us believe. We can further explore the validity of such interpretations of marriage statistics as indicators of such things as changing patterns of family life / organisation, family breakdown and so forth.

- For example, if we wanted to use marriage statistics to support the claim that "marriage is less popular nowadays" (it is in decline), the best way to do this would be to use "raw" marriage data (that is, the absolute number of people marrying in our society compared with some point in the past).

9. In order to interpret this data sociologically, we have to be aware of the following potential problems of validity:

- The population of Britain was far greater in 1983 than in 1901, for example.
- The post-2nd World war "baby boom" means that, in the early 1970's, for example, there were more people of "marriageable age" in the general population.
- If we choose 1970 as our starting point for a comparison of marriage data (470,000 marriages) and compare it with 1983 (389,000 marriages), we find a decline of some 20% in the popularity of marriage.
- If we choose 1901 as our starting point, however, (360,000 marriages), we find that marriage has increased in popularity.

10. A more statistically-sophisticated way of using marriage statistics would be to use **marriage rates** (the number of people per 1000 in a population who marry). In this respect, we find that,

- Between 1981 and 1989, marriage rates for:
 - a. Men = 56 and 45 respectively and
 - b. Women = 45 and 38 respectively.
- On the face of things, represents a considerable decline in the popularity of marriage for both men and women. However, while the use of "rate measurement" overcomes the problem of validity associated with overall numbers of people in a given population, a major problem remains.
- The problem is that the figures are for all unmarried men and unmarried women in Britain - whether they are of marriageable age or not. Since Britain has an "ageing population spread" (there are progressively more people over retirement age and progressively fewer people under the age of 30);
 - a. It should not be too surprising that the "rate of marriage" is declining.
 - b. It is not possible to compare "marriage rates" between, for example, 1901 and 1990 without taking the "age spread" of the population into account.
- Finally, whilst the use of a "marriage rate" is an advance on the uncritical use of raw marriage data, a more valid picture of marriage is provided by looking not just as marriage rates, but at the marriage rate for people who fall into the "eligible" or "marriageable" population category (for example, most people tend to marry between the ages of 20 - 40 in our society).
- For the period 1981 - 1989, this "marriageable population rate" declined from:
 - 7.1 marriages per 1000 eligible population, to

~~6.8 marriages per 1000 eligible population,~~

- This is a relatively small decline in the popularity of marriage amongst a group of people who are statistically most-important in terms of marriage.

11. The above has demonstrated that, even if we assume that there is some kind of significant relationship between marriage and family stability, a **valid interpretation** of marriage statistics provides us with **little evidence** to support the idea that marriage is significantly "less popular" now than in the past. If this is the case, therefore, there is clearly no significant relationship between marriage and family breakdown.

Summary

1. On an institutional (macro) level of analysis:

a. There is little evidence to support the idea that marriage has declined in significance as a social institution in contemporary Britain (once we have interpreted the statistics validly).

b. Even if it had declined in popularity, the significance of this would be difficult / impossible to evaluate in relation to family life / family breakdown.

2. On a micro level of analysis:

a. The decline in first marriages may be significant in terms of the nature of relationships within the family group.

b. The increase in second marriages may be significant in relation to divorce, family dissolution and reconstitution.

B. Cohabitation in British Society.

1. In terms of the "family crisis" thesis, **cohabitation** (sometimes called "**consensual unions**" - people who live as "man and wife" without being legally married) is seen as indicative of potential - if not actual - family breakdown. This is mainly because of the absence of a legal contract to reinforce (or strengthen) the moral / normative contract people enter into when they decide to live together (and have children).

2. The "failure to marry" seems to be viewed with a degree of suspicion by family breakdown theorists - almost as if it represents a lack of moral commitment to one's partner. This represents a belief, perhaps, that cohabiting partners can simply "walk away" from a relationship without fear of any (legal) consequences. The State is left to "pick-up-the-pieces" through financial support for a mother / father and their children.

3. Thus, two main objections appear to relate to cohabitation:

- Firstly, the idea that it is easier to dissolve a non-legal partnership.

- ~~Secondly (and this relates to divorce as well), the financial and moral implications are significant, since the dissolution of a family, it is argued, results in:~~
 - a. The State having to step in to support single parents.
 - b. A "culture of dependency", where people expect the State to help them at all points in their life. Rather than people "helping each other to overcome problems", the fact that the State will take financial responsibility for the care of the parent and the raising of children represents an "easy option" for people who cannot - or will not - take responsibility for their own affairs.
4. Whilst it is true that it is legally far easier to dissolve a cohabiting relationship than a marriage relationship, it's not clear how significant this is for family relationships.
- For example, is it socially and personally preferable for two people who have grown to hate each other intensely to "stay together for the sake of the children" - or are the consequences of this potentially far more serious (in terms of violence, child socialisation and so forth) than a decision to dissolve a relationship?
 - Perhaps the central point here is that for "family crisis" theorists the argument has more to do with the socialisation of children within a family-type unit than with male / female relationships. "Crisis theorists" are more concerned with the propagation of a particular form of family ideology (one that involves dual-parent nuclear families with a relatively clear demarcation of gender roles and relationships) than with any clear-sighted, objective, analysis of family life.
5. The other main concern of crisis theorists is clearly the wider social consequences of family breakdown (which has tended to be identified with such things as crime, unemployment, mental illness and so forth).
6. We need to look briefly at the social significance of cohabitation as a form of family organisation in contemporary Britain.
- Cohabitation as either an alternative or prelude to marriage has become increasingly popular over the past ten years in Britain. The significance of this trend is difficult to evaluate (in terms of family organisation) mainly because many couples appear to cohabit for a number of years prior to marriage (in effect, cohabitation is less an alternative to marriage than a sort of "trial marriage").
 - One significant point to note, however, is that if increasing numbers of people in our society are choosing to have children with a cohabiting - rather than legally married - partner, the number of technically-illegitimate children in our society will increase.

Illegitimacy.

- We need to **evaluate** the significance of illegitimacy (and, by extension, single-parenthood) in relation to the "family breakdown" thesis. In this respect, the process of data analysis has, as I've noted above, two main aspects:

- Firstly, we have to look at various methodological processes and problems involved in the production and analysis of statistical data relating to illegitimacy.
- Secondly, we have to interpret the significance of this data in relation to the wider social context to which it relates (and, in particular, to consider its significance in relation to both family life and other areas of the social world).

A. Methodology.

1. We need to consider **questions of reliability and validity** whenever we analyse sociological data. One problem we have when dealing with illegitimacy statistics is that of how to define the concept.

- In legal terms, a child is considered "illegitimate" if it is born out of wedlock. That is, its parents are not legally married.
- Following changes in the law in recent years in Britain, it is possible to legitimate an "illegitimate" birth by the fact that the child's parents subsequently marry.

2. Even if we avoid this particular problem of reliability by considering any birth outside marriage as illegitimate, further problems exist:

- In the past, for example, the problem of social stigma and secrecy arises. In Victorian Britain the practice of passing-off children as the legitimate offspring of "deceased" relatives was not unknown.
- In the present, the availability of abortion has tended to muddy the statistical waters (especially for comparative purposes), since:
 - a. Children who may have been born outside marriage may be aborted (although this does, of course, apply to children aborted by married mothers).
 - b. Abortion may distort the percentage relationship between births inside and outside marriage, since aborted children are neither legitimate or illegitimate.

3. We must be aware that "illegitimacy" data has a social context that involves consideration of such things as:

- The number of people marrying.
- Average family size.
- The number of abortions in society.
- The availability of contraception and so forth.

4. It is not enough to simply take "raw illegitimacy data" at face value - although, having said this, we can look at this raw data as follows:

Illegitimate births as a percentage of all live births:

1850	1961	1980	6
1901	1977		4
1950	1979		5

Family Life	Unit 4: Is The Family In Decline?	
6	1981	25
9.7	1982	21
10.6	1983	28
8.4	1988	12
	1989	14
	1990	16

5. The above table appears to show that illegitimate births, as a percentage of all births, have generally increased over the past 150 years. More significantly, there has been a massive increase in illegitimate births from 1981 onwards

6. However, before we interpret the significance of the above figures in terms of family breakdown, we can look at an example of how the social context of such statistics can affect the interpretation we are able to make. In this instance, we are concerned not so much with "legal legitimacy", but with people's actual behaviour.

- In 1988, the raw data tells us that 25% of all births were illegitimate.
- However, 70% of all illegitimate births were registered by both parents (In British law every birth has to be registered, but it is not a legal requirement for both parents to register the birth).

In terms of family structure and relationships, therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that if both parents bothered to register their child then they are involved in some kind of "family relationship".

- If this is the case, then the "real illegitimacy rate" (as it affects the reality of people's behaviour) is approximately 7.7% (if we interpret "illegitimate" to mean a child supported by only one parent).

7. If we analyse the statistics further, we find that, of the 17.5% of illegitimate births registered by both parents, 70% of these gave the same address (which makes it reasonable to assume they are cohabiting).

- If we take cohabitation as a form of family relationship, the "real" illegitimacy rate becomes approximately 12.5%

8. Once we analyse the raw data in terms of people's actual behaviour (which is the objective of the exercise), we see an illegitimacy rate of between 7.5 and 12.5%. This will have important social consequences, of course, but one that is significantly "less alarming" than the raw data suggests.

B. Interpretation.

1. While the **methodological problems** relating to illegitimacy data are many and varied, of more interest in this context is the interpretation placed upon illegitimacy (as a social phenomenon) by "family breakdown" theorists.

2. A major form of interpretation, in recent years, has been provided by the concept of an underclass. In basic terms, an underclass is considered to be a group of people at the very bottom of society - perhaps, in some interpretations, so far below the

~~living standards of society as a whole that they are almost "outside normal society"~~
(this is the interpretation that tends to be put-forward by family breakdown theorists).

3. A major underclass theorist, the American **Charles Murray** ("The Emerging British Underclass", 1990), sees rates of illegitimacy as one - very important - indicator of family breakdown. From this assumption (which he has not substantiated empirically) Murray relates the supposed breakdown of family life to such ideas as socialisation and social control in a wider social context. Murray considers illegitimacy in Britain to be "sky-rocketing" out of control.

- For example, illegitimate children are considered more-prone to forms of "anti-social" behaviour (high levels of crime, juvenile delinquency and so forth). This behaviour is a "social problem" in terms of its cost to the State and so forth.

4. Whilst there are problems involved with the whole concept of an "underclass", what concerns us here is the relationship between illegitimacy, family breakdown and wider "social problems". In this respect, the main questions we have to ask are:

- Are "high rates of illegitimacy" indicative of family breakdown?
- What constitutes a "high rate"?
- Does Britain have a "high rate of illegitimacy"?

5. To answer such questions we have to consider what writers such as **Murray** mean when they talk about **a relationship between illegitimacy and family breakdown**. It is significant to note that "**the family**" is implicitly **defined** in terms of **marriage**. A "stable family structure" is one where the parents of children are legally married.

- However, there is no logical, dependent, connection between marriage and family stability. People who are married to one another do not automatically become "good" parents, just as unmarried couples, single parents or whatever are not automatically "bad" parents.
- What matters, sociologically, is not the legal status of the individuals involved but the nature of their relationship - and this cannot be considered in isolation from the social context of people's lives (in terms of such things as unemployment, poverty, child-minding facilities and the like).

6. **Methodologically**, a useful exercise would be to look more closely at the **statistics** relating to **babies born to unmarried parents**, since by digging deeper into the "raw data" we can look at the concept of illegitimacy in terms of people's actual behaviour.

- **In 1977 there were 55,000 illegitimate births (10% of all births). Of these;**

11,000 were subsequently legitimated by marriage.
27,000 were born to parents cohabiting in a stable, dual-parent, relationship.
7,000 were adopted into a dual-parent relationship.
8,000 were born to mothers who subsequently married a man who was not the natural father of her child.

~~The remaining 2,000 children were raised by single parents.~~

7. If our definition of "a family" follows the classic one provided by **George Peter Murdock**, it appears that of 55,000 legally illegitimate births in 1977:

- Approximately 96% of these involved children born or adopted into a relatively stable nuclear, dual-parent, family structure.
- 4%, therefore, were not (which means that less than 1% of all births involved only one parent looking-after a child).
- This perhaps represents a more realistic "illegitimacy rate".

Far from "sky-rocketing", looked at in these terms, illegitimacy rates are not only relatively constant, they are also relatively low.

Single Parenthood.

1. Amongst "**family breakdown**" theorists, the issue of **single parenthood** can probably be seen as the **major indicator** of the breakdown in the nuclear family structure.

- Whether or not this is actually the case (and writers such as Robert **Chester** have suggested that single parenthood should not necessarily be seen as some form of "alternative" to the nuclear family) is something that needs to be investigated.

2. In general, we can identify five main types of single parent family:

- a. Single mothers.**
- b. Single fathers.**
- c. Widowed.**
- d. Separated women.**
- e. Divorced women.**

3. It is one of the enduring myths of contemporary British politics that single parenthood is more-or-less synonymous with being young and female. Whether or not this is actually the case is something that we can briefly investigate now.

4. Over a 20 year period between 1961 and 1981 the number of single parent families in Britain increased from 474,000 to 975,000 (in effect, a 100% increase).

5. This type of "raw data" may obscure more than it reveals. By comparing the figures for 1971 with 1979 a number of conclusions can be drawn.

- The "single (unmarried) woman" category accounts for approximately one sixth of all single parent families.
- The **causes** of single parent families are varied and they include such things as:

**Bereavement,
Choice,
Divorce,
Desertion and
Separation.**

- In 1986, 14% of all families in Britain were headed by a lone parent (these families involved the care of approximately 1.5 million children).
- **The "single lone mother" category, therefore, accounted for approximately 3% of all families in Britain.**

6. When dealing with statistical data relating to family life, two things are important to keep in mind:

- Such statistics are a "snapshot" of what was happening in our society at one particular moment.
- Family life is not a fixed phenomenon. It is a social process that involves constant change - ebbing and flowing, if you like, with people's overall life-cycle. We have seen evidence of this idea earlier when we looked at family diversity and this observation is similarly important in this context.
- For example, between 1971 and 1979 one of the largest categories of single parent family (divorced women) increased by some 80% (21% - 36% of all single parent families). We should not simply assume from this that "divorced single parents" in 1971 still had this status in 1979. The number of people who divorce and remarry (creating a reconstituted form of nuclear family structure) is very high.

7. Even if we assume that the single lone mother category consists entirely of women who decide to raise a child alone by choice, nearly 85% of all single parent families are created by the break-up of a nuclear family.

- Although we should not minimise the significance of this (for both society and the individuals involved), this is interesting because single parenthood appears to be more a phenomenon of nuclear family breakdown rather than a "conscious alternative" to the dual-parent nuclear structure (for a significant proportion, for example, the single parent family is created by the death of a partner).

8. The **single parent family as a political issue** has, over the past 20 or so years, been resurrected by the political **New Right** as an example of "family breakdown" that has serious social / moral implications and costs.

- **As Peter Laslett** ("The World We Have Lost", 1979) has shown, one parent families are **not** a new phenomenon in our society.

In Victorian Britain, for example, one parent families were probably as - if not more - common than today (mainly because of high mortality rates).

Then - as now - the **interpretation** placed upon the social significance of one parent families is of interest.

9. One such interpretation, for example, was **Sir Keith Joseph's** in 1974 when he was reported by **The Guardian** (21/10/74) as arguing that:

"The balance of our population, our human stock is threatened...by inadequate parents, very frequently young unmarried women from social classes 4 and 5. Their children will be problem children, future unmarried mothers, delinquents, denizens of our borstals, subnormal education establishments, prisons and hospitals for drifters".

- In 1990, **Kenneth Baker** - the then Chairman of the Conservative Party - was reported in **The Guardian** (13/05/90) as:

"...blaming the rise in reported crime on the breakdown of family life".

- In turn, this was blamed on,

"...the undermining of family life by the permissive 60's and 70's".

- By this Baker implied that greater levels of **sexual freedom** - supposedly arising in the 1960's - are to blame for today's "social problems".
- This theme was - and remains - a favourite of **Norman (now Lord) Tebbit** a mainstay of successive Conservative government between 1979 and 1987. Tebbit blamed what he saw as the "moral and economic decay of our society" on attitudes developed during the "swinging" 1960's.

10. Apart from the inadequate nature of much of this comment, (with its prejudicial overtones of scape-goating), we need to remember that such people have variously been in positions of political power in Britain over the past 14 years - and recent echoes of the above have once again been heard from various junior and senior government ministers (**John Redwood**, for example, has blamed single parent families for rising levels of crime and juvenile delinquency).

11. Whilst politicians like to advocate simple solutions to complex social processes, we can note that:

- Single parent families are more-likely to live in poverty than other family types.
- The "poverty trap" tends to operate against the single parent's efforts to get themselves out of poverty (a trap, incidentally, that operates on all individuals / families in a low wage society).

12. While we shouldn't minimise the consequences of single parenthood (both in wider social terms and in terms of the life experiences and chances of those involved - something that tends to be overlooked by "crisis theorists"), it is important not to over-dramatise these consequences in the context of overall family stability / instability.

Divorce.

1. If supposed indicators of family breakdown such as marriage, cohabitation, illegitimacy and single parenthood do not provide very convincing or conclusive evidence for the "family crisis" thesis, it is left to the area of divorce to provide us with such evidence (presupposing, of course, that it exists).

2. As with marriage, such evidence would be interesting on **two levels of analysis**:

- Firstly, a **macro level**, whereby increased rates of divorce may be indicative of increased levels of social tension, strain and family dissolution.
- Secondly, on a **micro level**, divorces have consequences for the family involved, in terms of such things as stress and potential problems over the custody of children.

3. In looking at the "raw data" concerning divorce we need, as ever, to consider questions of reliability and validity and one initial problem of reliability relates to the fact that "divorce" is a social process which, in our society, involves three stages:

- **Petition for divorce:**
One or other of the marriage partners begins the divorce process by petitioning (that is, "legally requesting") the Courts for a divorce.
- **A Decree Nisi is granted:**
After a legal hearing the request for divorce is either provisionally granted or disallowed. The significance of this will become apparent in a moment.
- **A Decree Absolute is granted:**
At this stage (which can occur a few months after stage two) a divorce becomes legally recognised and legal remarriage is possible.
- **Note:** only a proportion of people petitioning for divorce complete the process.

4. Official figures for divorce have to be treated carefully, since divorce statistics considered in isolation from the wider social changes that produced them give the impression of a breakdown in marriage / family life on a massive scale.

- In terms of **raw data**, divorce is becoming increasingly common in Britain. Thus, it is possible to use such statistics as evidence of a "crisis" within the family as a social institution. However, if we view such statistics in their proper social context, it becomes more difficult to draw hard-and-fast conclusions about such ideas.

5. One significant social factor is **legal changes** over the past century. Whenever divorce has been made easier, more people have divorced. Whether or not this is evidence of "widespread" marital breakdown (always allowing for the fact that the number of divorces in any society will have implications, on the micro level, for family life), we must be careful about the conclusions drawn from divorce statistics:

- Are we comparing "like with like"?

Divorce, in the past, was much harder to obtain (at one time, only men were able to divorce their wives, not vice versa, for example). It was also expensive and out of the reach of working class married partners.

- We do not know how many marriages in the past would have ended in divorce if modern conditions applied.

The suggestion now, for example, is that couples should be able to divorce on a "no-fault" basis - that is, they do not have to show that their partner committed adultery, behaved "unreasonably" and so forth.

In the past, many couples simply **separated** because they could **not divorce** (and we do not have any accurate figures for separation rates) or maintained an "**empty shell**" **marriage** "because of the children".

- Another factor we have to consider is that **economic changes**, in terms of living standards, have made divorce relatively **cheaper** now than at any time in the past (although changes in the rules governing Legal Aid may change this situation).

Where custody of children is not an issue and there are no arguments over possessions, couples can, for example, divorce by post for just the administrative costs involved in granting the divorce...

- **Changing attitudes to marriage** - in terms of its **religious aspect** - may play a part in divorce statistics. Secularisation may have weakened the Christian commitment of "marriage for life". Marrying couples may see marriage as less of a moral commitment towards each other than as a search for personal happiness. This may explain why so many divorcees remarry. They are not unhappy with the institution of marriage, just the person to whom they were married...).

- Social **perceptions** concerning both the **sanctity** of marriage and the **stigma** attached to divorce have slowly **changed** - particularly as divorce has become increasingly more common in our society.
6. There are fairly clear **problems of reliability and validity** involved in the way we can **interpret** the significance of divorce.
- In terms of **reliability**, we have to interpret the figures themselves in the light of such things as demographic changes (population size, the effects of two World Wars and so forth).
 - In terms of **validity**, we have to interpret the meaning of the figures - in effect, we need to do two things:

a. Understand the reasons for divorce:

- While increases in divorce are clearly related to legal changes, all this shows (in relation to a "family in crisis" thesis) is that at various times the number of people who want a divorce (but who may have been prevented from divorcing by law) is significantly greater than the number of people actually divorcing.
- If a "no-fault" divorce system is introduced in Britain, it remains to be seen whether the numbers divorcing will continue to rise.

To take an extreme example, the fact that between 1650 and 1857 there were only 250 legal divorces clearly does not mean that married couples were happy and contented with their marriage. It simply means that people could not divorce unless they were male, extremely rich and very powerful.

- In addition, it needs to be noted that the complexity of interpretation in relation to divorce makes it difficult to make hard-and-fast pronouncements. For example;

The 1969 Divorce Reform Act (made law in 1970) abolished the idea that divorce could only be obtained if the petitioners could show that their partner had committed a "matrimonial offence" (things like adultery, mental cruelty and so forth). After 1970, a divorce could be obtained within 2 years if both partners consented and after 5 years if one partner contested the divorce.

If this basis for divorce (allied to other legal changes) had been law prior to the 2nd World War, for example, we simply do not know how many people would have divorced during this period. This should be kept in mind when we examine possible reasons for divorce.

- Before we look at a second aspect of validity, it is worth considering for a moment divorce statistics over the past 20 or so years (since the Divorce Reform Act).

During this period, the number of people divorcing has more-or-less stabilised (demographic factors largely explain the actual difference in numbers). Given that there is really only one more legal change that could be introduced (the "No Fault" divorce - "divorce on demand" when a couple simply decide to divorce), we may have reached a "normal" level of divorce, given that a certain proportion of marriages will always breakdown in our society.

- The significance of this idea is that it would suggest (if valid) that there is not a cumulative, progressive and inevitable increase in marital breakdown.

b. Understand the social implications of divorce:

- In terms of the basic "family in crisis" thesis (that the increasing number of divorces is indicative of the idea that the family, as a social institution, is disintegrating and this indicates a certain "rottenness" amongst all other social institutions), divorce statistics (even taken in combination with marriage and illegitimacy rates) do not support the contention that the "family is a dying institution". A number of points can be noted in this respect:
 - a. Family life is changing - but society involves a constant process of change (some aspects of which we like, others we do not) and there is little empirical evidence to suggest that these changes are evidence of "moral decay".
 - b. The social consequences of divorce (especially in relation to the socialisation of children and the health of the divorced couple) are certainly important for those who divorce, but we have to consider:
 - The social consequences of trying forcing people to stay married when they would rather not be married (things like violence towards women and children). There seems little hope of evaluating the "harm" done to people by forcing them to stay married as against allowing divorce.
 - The fact that large numbers of divorcees (approximately 90%) remarry .

7. To complete these notes we can identify (on the basis of statistical probability) the kind of marriages that are most "**at risk**" of ending in divorce:

a. People from different social backgrounds:

- Pressure from family and friends can create conflict within the marriage that makes divorce statistically more-likely.
- Class, religion and ethnic differences also lead to a higher risk of divorce.
- Rural couples are more likely to have similar social backgrounds and the divorce rate tends to be higher in urban areas.

b. Marriage after a short acquaintance.**c. Long periods of separation between partners.**

For example, where one partner has an **occupation** that keeps them away from the home for long periods (such as long-distance lorry drivers), or where there is a high level of job involvement (for example, actor / actress).

d. Teenage marriages:

50% of teenage brides experience divorce

60% of teenage grooms experience divorce

e. Divorcees who remarry are twice as likely to divorce again.

To conclude this set of Notes, therefore, the areas we have used and examined as indicators for and against the argument that “modern family life” in “in decline” do not seem to support the general “family breakdown” thesis.

We could, if we were so inclined, develop this argument in terms of an explicitly post-modernist perspective on family life – one that emphasises the idea that the clear changes in family life that have occurred over the past 100 or so years (and which continue as I write) are a consequence of economic, political and, above all, cultural changes in our society.

In this respect, changes in family life cannot be considered in terms of simple and (morally) subjective notions about family breakdown, mainly because the concept of breakdown presupposes that “somewhere in the past” lies a “golden age” of family life. This idea, as has been illustrated at various points in these notes, is not only empirically-unsustainable, it is also logically-inept.

However, simply because arguments are “illogical” or empirically unreliable / invalid should not mask the fact that, for some political theorists (and the New Right in general) the concept of family breakdown is real and important. The sociological question you have to ask yourself is, therefore, is the extent to which the ideological beliefs of such theorists impinge upon the arguments about family life they have advanced.