

“A” Level Sociology

Teaching Notes

Module: Family Life

Unit 3: Family Diversity

The Aims of these Notes are to allow you to understand:

- 1. That contemporary British society has a wide diversity of family structures.**
- 2. The idea of family life being considered in terms of social groups (rather than as an institution in society).**
- 3. Historical changes in family structure and the theoretical diversity of relationships within the family.**

The Objectives of these Notes are to allow you to understand:

- 1. The difference between commonsense and sociological conceptions of family life.**
- 2. The interpretation of statistical evidence relating to family diversity.**
- 3. The concepts of life-cycle and family structure in relation to various theoretical forms of family diversity.**

Introduction

In this set of Notes we are going to consider family life in terms of the idea of families as a social group within different societies. In particular, the emphasis will be on the concept of family diversity; that is, the different forms of family relationship it is possible to note and outline.

The Diversity of Contemporary Family Life

When we examined the "**fit thesis**" (see: **Teachers' Notes Unit 2: Family and Industrialisation**) in relation to the way family structures have changed over to past 300 years in Britain, we noted that writers such as **Laslett** and **Anderson** focused part of their criticism on the notion that a single type of family structure could be considered "dominant" in whatever period of time one chose to examine (for example, the idea that the "extended family" was the dominant (main) form in pre-industrial Britain or that the "nuclear family" is the dominant form in industrial Britain).

As Anderson's research clearly indicated, this "**monolithic**" or "**homogeneous**" approach to the study of the family as an institution is conceptually inadequate, precisely because different social classes:

- Experience structural pressures in different ways

The economic position of the working class is radically different to that of the upper class and so forth
- Adapt themselves differently to the demands (or "**imperatives**") of structural pressures.

Question:

How would you define the idea of the "homogeneous family institution"?

This idea is interesting for two main reasons:

1. It suggests that family diversity is a concept that is worth exploring if we are to arrive at an adequate explanation for the relationship between:
 - The family and other social institutions / structures
 - Relationships within the family as a social group
2. It highlights a **methodological "problem"**, namely the idea that the overall sociological perspective within which one - as a sociologist - chooses to operate may radically affect the way in which you choose - or are able - to study institutions such as the family.

For example: Functionalist theory ,

- Tends to emphasize broad structural pressures
- Views social systems in terms of a broad value consensus
- Emphasizes the way people adapt to structural imperatives / pressures.

Thus, if your **overall theoretical perspective** places primary importance on such ideas, this will affect the way in which you carry-out your research. In short, in relation to the family, it will mean:

- That you end to treat "the family" as some kind of homogeneous entity in society
- That your approach is broadly ahistorical (that is, that the theoretical approach you are forced to adopt is one whereby you construct a logical theory about the world as you consider it to be / have been and then look around for evidence that confirms your theory).
- That you tend to underestimate the significance of social action as an explanation of social change (or, at least, the relationship between social action and social structure).

Question:

How might your "sociological perspective" affect the way in which you choose to study family life? (Think about the things that a Functionalist and an Interactionist might focus their attention on).

In the light of the above observations, it would, therefore, be useful to briefly examine **explanations** relating to the nature and **diversity** of the **family** as a social group (primarily, but not exclusively, in relation to Britain), prior to a closer examination of specific relationships within the family group.

As we have seen already, one starting-point for an analysis of family diversity in contemporary Britain might be to identify four main types of family structure, namely:

- **Nuclear**
- **Extended**
- **Reconstituted**
- **Single-parent**

and to recognise that - to greater or lesser extents - all of these "family types" exist in contemporary Britain.

Question:

Using these examples, how could we define the concept of "family structure"? (Think about what makes the above different types of family structure).

However, it should be evident that within each of these broad types there must exist a wide range of diverse forms of family life. For example:

Extended family:

Vertically extended

Horizontally extended

Close kinship network (based upon mutual aid, for example)

Diffused kinship network (based upon financial ties, nepotism and so forth)

In this example, the quality of family relationships and family life will differ quite markedly depending upon the precise form the extended family takes.

In addition, you could go on refining the picture of diversity within the extended family almost indefinitely, as we consider the exact nature of kinship networks and the "functions" they perform for family members.

However, what is important here is a broad consideration of family diversity within these different types of family arrangements, rather than a specific analysis of all possible refinements and combinations.

In this respect, an important point to grasp is one made by Ann **Oakley** ("Housewife", 1974), when she criticises the "**taken-for-granted**" or "**conventional**" notion that we tend to hold about "**the family**" as being:

"...nuclear families composed of legally married couples, voluntarily choosing parenthood of one or more (but not too many) children.".

Family Life In Britain...

When we start to think about family life in Britain, we all start with one big advantage (and, as it happens, one big disadvantage):

The **advantage** we have is that we have all lived some or part of our lives within some kind of family - whether it be a family created for us by our parents (the one into which we were born) or a family which we, as adults perhaps, have helped to create. In this respect, we have an "**insider's knowledge**" about family life which can be valuable to us as we try to look (in our guise as enquiring sociologists) at competing ideas and explanations relating to family life in our society.

The **disadvantage** we have, however, relates to the fact that this "**experiential knowledge**" (that is, the knowledge we gain from our experiences within a family) can easily **blind us to other people's experiences** of family life. In this respect, we may (perhaps wrongly) assume that other people's experiences are much the same as our own - and this applies not just to contemporary family life in our society, but also to family life in the past and in different societies.

The information we receive about family life in our society is not, of course, simply restricted to our own experiences. The **mass media**, for example, bombard us with images (both conscious and subliminal) concerning family life - what it is like, what it was like, what it should be like and so forth. As sociologists, it should be our task to sort-out the truth from the fiction, the myth from the reality, the Margaret Thatcher from the Kings and Queens of England...

What this long - and possibly pointless - preamble is attempting to convey is the idea that we tend, for one reason or another, to **assume** that family life in our society is not particularly complicated or diverse - two people (of different sex) love each other quite a lot, they get married, have kids and everyone lives happily ever after...

In short, we can perhaps identify a kind of "**commonsense**" perception about family life that combines two basic ideas:

1. That there is only **one basic type** of family structure in our society.
2. This **basic type is normal, good and socially valuable**.

Before we start to explore this idea in more detail, it might be useful for you to think about your perception of "family structure". When you read the word "family", for example, a mental picture should pop into your thoughts, describing in general terms the meaning that you give to this concept.

As an exercise, try describing the picture of "the family" that pops into your head.

When I tried this exercise, the mental picture of the "**normal family**" that popped into my head was as follows:

- A man and a woman - a mother and a father.
- Two children (one male, one female) - both quite young.
- The man and woman are also fairly young (between the ages of about 25 - 35).
- Their relationship is a monogamous one.
- The man has a job outside the home. The woman may have a part-time job, but she is predominantly a "full-time housewife".
- These people represent a self-contained family unit - I do not see wider kin / relations in my mental picture.
- Finally, they are all reasonably happy (except the little boy who looks a bit of a brat to me).

From the above, there are two main things that we can usefully consider:

1. Firstly, the **social significance** of this kind of "**commonsense**" perception of "the family".

Clearly, it will be important to **me**, since it is my perception of "normality" against which to measure my family experiences (we could, if we were so inclined, pursue the **ideological implications** of this perception but, you will be relieved to know, this is not particularly necessary here).

More importantly, it will have considerable ramifications for such things as social policies created by governments in relation to family life **if this kind of picture of normality is shared** by those with **political power**. Again, while this is an interesting line to pursue (okay, it would be interesting if you were the kind of person who thinks that standing in the rain on a windy railway station platform noting down the numbers of trains is a wild and exiting kind of lifestyle), we can develop this idea at a later point when we look at family life and social policy (bet you can't wait for that one).
2. Secondly and more importantly in this context, the question of whether or not this kind of "**commonsense**" perception is actually **valid** in relation to family life in our society.

In thinking about family life in Britain, therefore, we have to initially understand two main things:

- a. Firstly, the nature of family life itself.

b. Secondly, the significance of empirical evidence surrounding family life.

In order to do this, we need to look closely at **empirical evidence** (and **statistical** evidence in particular) about family life. In addition, we have to **evaluate** the significance of such evidence in relation to such things as:

1. The "internal" consistency of this evidence (and, in particular, its **reliability**).
2. The **interpretation** of such evidence in relation to the idea that family life is a social process (about which statistical evidence may give us a "**snapshot**" of family life in our society at the point at which the data is collected).
3. The concept of **family life-cycle**.

Our initial interpretation of evidence surrounding the question of family diversity would suggest that:

- a. The **nuclear** family structure is the **norm** in Britain.
- b. The "**commonsense**" (or "**cereal packet**") perception of family life consisting of "adults with dependent children" is **not particularly representative** of household types at any given moment.
- c. Although, at any given time, there are more people living outside the "**cereal packet**" type, it does appear that, for the majority of people at least, their **family life-cycle** is **broadly similar**, proceeding along the lines of:
 - Single,
 - Married without children,
 - Married with dependent children,
 - Married with independent children.

Robert Chester ("The Rise of the Neo-Conventional Family", 1985) forcefully presses home this particular point when he argues that, despite what the critics of the nuclear family may argue, most people spend at least part of their life within this type of family structure.

Furthermore, he argues it is **misleading** to simply use "snapshot" statistical figures relating to the composition of family structures at any given moment, simply because people's lives are much more **fluid** (changeable) in modern societies – which, in effect, means they are likely to experience a **diverse range** of "**family experiences**" (most of which will, in some form or another, involve living in a nuclear-type arrangement or, perhaps more significantly, wanting to live in that type of arrangement should the chance to do so be available).

In relation to the above, therefore, it looks initially as if the "**cereal packet**" **norm** is not just a **commonsense** perception (or **myth**) but that, on the contrary, it is a **reality** in our society. However, just as, **methodologically**, we have to **interpret family / household statistics** if we are to understand the reality of family life as it is lived / experienced by people in our society, we have to dig a bit deeper (sociologically) if we are to understand the **social processes** involved in family life. We need, in short, to understand family life in both **institutional** (or **Structural**) terms and **interpersonal** (or **Interactionist**) terms.

Thus, what we have to do now is to attempt to interpret empirical evidence about family life in terms of the concept of a family life-cycle process, since this will help us to evaluate the extent to which diversity in family life is either "normal" or "abnormal" in our society.

In addition, the main reason for doing things this way (looking at empirical evidence and then attempting to interpret its significance in overall terms) is that each statistical category at which we have just looked will contain a range of different behaviours.

Thus, the "married with dependent children" category may hide a range of diverse behaviours - differences in family size, role relationships and so forth - which need to be examined if we are to arrive at some conclusion about the concept of family diversity.

Life –Cycle and Family Structure.

In this final section, it would be useful to cover three main areas:

1. An understanding of the specific (historical background) factors that have conditioned overall family development in a society such as Britain.

We can think of this in terms of the "life-cycle" process noted above.

2. To look at a theoretical framework against which we can broadly sketch some of the main types of diversity in family life.

This will involve looking at the work of **Rhona and Robert Rapoport** ("Families in Britain", 1982) and the way in which they identify five main types of family diversity in contemporary Britain, namely:

- a. Organizational.
- b. Cultural.
- c. Class.
- d. Life-course.
- e. Cohort.

3. To illustrate the above with examples of diverse family types in contemporary Britain and America.

In relation to the first of the ideas noted above (historical background in relation to family formation), **Abercrombie and Warde** ("Contemporary British Society") identify four main demographic changes affecting what they term the "family formation" part of an individual's overall life-cycle.

We can look briefly at each change in turn and offer a similarly brief interpretation / evaluation of their respective significance.

- a. A reduction in the average age of marriage.

Leete ("Changing Patterns of Marriage and Remarriage", 1977) has noted the following about the marital status of women aged 20 - 24:

- 1931 - 26% married.
- 1951 - 48% married.
- 1961 - 59% married.

In addition, the **age at first marriage** for males and females was:

	1900	1975
Men	27	25
Women	26	23

From the above we can see that:

1. There appears to be an **increasing proportion of women marrying**.
2. **The age at which people marry has been decreasing**.
3. In relation to **women's propensity to marriage**, we can also note that the numbers **unmarried by the ages 35 - 44** have **declined** from 14% in 1931 to 6% in 1974.

b. Life expectancy.

	1926	1976	1999
Women	59.3 years	75.8 years	79 years
Men	55.4 years	69.7 years	74 years

The significance of greater longevity is two-fold:

1. Firstly, **married people are potentially together longer** (especially after their children have become independent).
2. **The longer the life-expectancy, the longer a marriage has to last** and the more-likely is the marriage to end in divorce (rather than the death of a partner, for example).

c. The proportion of people marrying.

A rough comparison of the proportion of married people in the population is given in the following table:

	1901	1974
Men	36%	52%
Women	34%	50%

In addition, two further points are significant:

1. **Upper class males and females** tend, on average, to marry slightly later in their life-cycle than people of other classes.
2. Amongst **all women**, those most likely to remain **single** come from the **upper / upper middle classes**.

The above is perhaps explained by a couple of ideas:

- a. **Different social attitudes to starting a family** - as we will see in a moment, a general decline in average family size over the past 100 years has meant that people do not have to delay marriage in order to ensure that they can support a larger family.
- b. The increasing availability of **contraception** has meant that sexually-active couples can "safely" have sexual relationships without the fear of pregnancy. In addition, families can be more easily planned.
- c. As the number and proportion of **women** who are able and willing to pursue a career outside the family increases, the average age of marriage for these women has also increased. This observation applies particularly to **middle-class, professional, women** who appear to be delaying marriage / family life until they have established a professional career to which they can return following childbirth.
- d. **A decrease in average family size.**

Although in **contemporary Britain** approximately **90% of all marriages in Britain involve children**, the average family size over the past 100 years has declined dramatically:

1860	7
1900	4
1950	2.3
1990	1.9

In addition to being **relatively smaller**, the **modern family** tends to be **completed earlier** in a **couple's life-cycle**. The figures for "**child-bearing life span**" illustrate this idea:

1860 - 20 year span between 1st and last child.
1900 - 14 year span.
1950 - 10 year span.

Abercrombie and Warde note that "one of the most significant changes in the labour market in the 20th century" is the "rising proportion of married women returning to work after completing their families...Greater participation by women in

paid work and changes in family structure thus seem to be closely related, although what the mechanisms are that connect the two changes are less clear".

Question:

What explanations can you find for the fact that "Greater participation by women in paid work and changes in family structure thus seem to be closely related".

In relation to the **second** of the areas to be covered that I noted at the start of this section, we can now look at a **theoretical framework** against which we can broadly sketch some of the main types of diversity in family life.

Rhona and Robert Rapoport ("Families in Britain", 1982) **identify five main types of family diversity in contemporary Britain**, that we can outline in the following terms:

1. Organisational Diversity.

This occurs **within the family group**, in terms of variations in:

- Family structure
- Household type
- Kinship networks
- Division of labour
- Marriage and Cohabitation
- Role relationships

Between families, this occurs in terms of **broad family types** such as:

- Conventional families (Husband, wife, 2.2 children)
- Single-parent families
- "Dual-worker" families (where both parents work)
- Reconstituted families (the product of divorce, remarriage or cohabitation).

As should be evident, there are **huge organizational differences** involved in the above - differences that perhaps make it difficult to talk about "the" family as an institution in society.

2. Cultural Diversity

By this they mean **differences in lifestyles** between families of **different ethnic origins, religious beliefs** and so forth. In broad terms, we have to consider such cultural styles related to **marriage / cohabitation** as:

- Serial Monogamy,**
- Monogamy,**
- Polygny,**
- Polyandry.**

In addition, we may have to consider differences in religious beliefs and the way they affect family development.

In societies where the Catholic Church is politically, ideologically and (possibly) economically powerful, for example, serial monogamy and the ban on contraception have significant consequences for the family, in terms of such things as:

Relative size (number of children per family)

Stability (where divorce is not possible)

Division of labour (where "traditional" male / female roles may be ideologically and structurally enforced - especially in terms of child care, for example).

An **example** that the **Rapoports'** give is that of the **South Asian family in Britain**. They note that there are approximately one million South Asians living in contemporary Britain (having emigrated from areas such as the Punjab, Gujarat and Bengal in the 1950's) and they argue that a **distinctive family form** has developed in South Asian communities based around:

Religious beliefs

Area of origin

Caste

Kinship

In relation to this type of family structure, the **Rapoports'** note that **conflicts** tend to arise in relation to the organization of home life (based upon the above) and the organization of such things as education.

For example, whereas **home life** emphasizes such things as:

Conformity to family and religious norms,

Respect for authority,

Loyalty to kin / family.

School life tends to emphasize such things as:

Competitiveness and

Individualism.

This may well be an example of the way in which the organization of different forms of family life creates **conflicts** between the family and wider society.

If you want to pursue this particular example, **Haralambos** ("Sociology: Themes and Perspectives") outlines some of these diverse ethnic family forms in Britain.

3. Class Diversity

Clear **class divisions** exist both **between** different social classes (Upper, Middle and Working) and **within** those broad class groupings (such as, for example, differences between the "traditional" and the "new" **working class** - in the latter case, the concept of the "**privatised family**" (**Goldthorpe and Lockwood et al** (The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure) argue, that this type of family involves both partners sharing a **home-centred** approach to family life) is significant in relation to family relationships). These differences are manifest in such things as:

The relationship between the sexes

Socialization of children

The importance of kinship networks

The different kinds of support provided by wider kin.

4. Life-Course.

This idea refers to differences in family life that occur as the result of the **life-cycle** of the family.

For **example**, the family life of a young couple with infants is quite different to that of an elderly couple with adult children. Similarly, class differences are manifest, insofar as there is a (very) general tendency for working class children to leave the family home to start families of their own at an earlier age than their upper / middle class peers. Similarly, parents with children of school age may develop a "dual-career" family, where both parents work for at least part of the day.

5. Cohort.

This refers to **generational links** within different families.

For example, families with children in Higher Education may have different experiences than families whose children leave home at 16. Kinship networks are also significant in this respect, especially when kin (grandparents, for example) live in close proximity to the nuclear family.

Summary

1. The extent to which contemporary family life in Britain is characterized by a diversity of family structures.

2. The difference between the family considered as an institution and family life considered in terms of social groups.
3. The way in which different family structures have evolved - and continue to evolve - over the past 2 - 300 years.
4. The potential diversity of social relationships within family groups.
5. That the "structure of a family group" is defined by the form of the social relationships that exist within that group.

In terms of the different skill domains you are required to demonstrate, you should also feel confident that you can:

1. Evaluate commonsense and sociological conceptions of family life.
2. Interpret, apply and evaluate statistical data relating to family diversity.
3. Apply the concept of family life-cycle to an understanding of various forms of family diversity.
4. Interpret and evaluate the concept of family life-cycle in relation to the idea of family diversity.

Examination Questions.

1. How far do you agree with the idea that the "typical family model" remains central to all family ideology?

Support your argument with appropriate examples (6 marks).

2. To what extent does sociological evidence support the idea that there is a "contemporary diversity" in the structure of the family? (8 marks).

3. Assess the view that there is an "overall pattern of diversity" in family structure in Britain (10 marks).