Family

Family structures and diversity, types of marriage, functionalist, Marxist and feminist views of the family, and how demographic change, industrialisation and changing attitudes have altered family life and roles.

The **family** is the first agency of socialisation and one of the most studied institutions. This chapter covers its types, what theorists say it does, and how it is changing. Paper 2 candidates choose two topics from Family, Education and Crime.

4.1 What are the different types of families?

Family structures

Type	Description
Nuclear	two parents and their children living together
Extended	the nuclear family plus other relatives (grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins) in the same household or close by. Types: **vertical or beanpole** (several generations, few in each); **horizontal** (siblings and their families); **modified extended** (relatives live apart but keep in close contact and help each other)
Reconstituted (step/blended)	two families joined when divorced or widowed partners remarry or live together, bringing children from earlier relationships
Lone parent	one parent raising children alone (most often the mother)
Empty nest	a couple whose children have grown up and left home
Childless	a couple with no children, by choice or not
Other types	where local law and context allow, **polygamous** families (more than one spouse) and others may also be taught

Each has **strengths and limitations**:

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Structure	Strength	Limitation
Nuclear	privacy, mobility, close parent–child bonds	less support, pressure on two adults, isolation
Extended	shared childcare and money, support, wisdom of elders	less privacy, possible conflict, harder for young people to move
Reconstituted	two adults share the load and income	conflict between step-relatives, loyalty problems
Lone parent	can be a happier home than a conflicted one	one income, stress, stigma

Diversity

Family patterns vary **cross-culturally** (extended families are common in South Asia and the Middle East; small nuclear families in many Western countries), by **social class** (wealthy families may be more able to afford help with childcare) and by **ethnicity** (for example, higher rates of extended family living in some communities).

Sociological views on diversity

- **New Right**: the **traditional nuclear family** with married parents is the best setting for children; other forms, such as lone-parent families, are **dysfunctional** and linked to poor outcomes and crime.
- **Postmodernists**: family diversity is **positive**: people are free to **choose** how they live (Rapoport and Rapoport described diversity of organisation, cultural, class, life-stage and generational differences).
- **Extent of diversity**: despite diversity, the **nuclear family** is still the most common household type for children in many societies.

Alternatives to the family

Single-person households, **shared households** (flatmates), and **friends as family** (close friends who take the place of relatives).

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Types of marriage

Type	Meaning
Arranged	families choose or help choose the partner, with the couple's consent
Love	the couple choose each other
Monogamy	one partner at a time
Serial monogamy	several partners, one after another (marriage, divorce, remarriage)
Empty shell	a couple stay married in name only, without emotional attachment (for the sake of children or religion)

Where it fits the local context and the law, other types such as polygamy can also be taught.

4.2 What is the role of the family for the individual and society?

Functionalist views

Functionalists see the family as an institution that **meets society's needs and benefits members**. **Parsons** said the nuclear family has two main functions: **primary socialisation** of children and **stabilisation of adult personalities** (the **"warm bath" theory**: the family relaxes adults after the stress of work).

Murdock (1949) said the family performs four functions: **sexual** (a stable sexual relationship), **reproductive**, **economic** (providing for members) and **educational** (socialising children).

Loss of functions: Parsons argued that as society industrialised, many functions (education, healthcare, welfare) moved to the school, hospital and state, so the family became **specialised** in the two it still does best. They saw the **nuclear family** as best suited to an industrial society, because it is mobile and small.

Marxist views

Marxists say the family **serves capitalism**:

- it **reproduces class inequalities** (wealth is passed on within families through inheritance)
- it **socialises children into acceptance of hierarchy** (ideological control)
- it is a **unit of consumption**: families buy goods (and are targeted by advertisers)
- it **absorbs the anger** of workers (the wife and children may take the blame for frustration at work, so workers do not rebel against the boss)

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- the family **exploits** members: the worker earns the wage and unpaid women's domestic work keeps the labour force healthy and ready

Feminist views

Feminists see the family as a place where **men hold power (patriarchy)**:

- **domestic division of labour**: women still do most housework and childcare, even when working full time, a **dual burden**; adding emotional work gives a **triple shift**
- **domestic violence and abuse** is mostly against women, often unreported
- **conjugal roles**: **segregated** (separate tasks for husband and wife) and **joint** (shared tasks and time) (Bott)
- **decision-making**: men often have the final say on finance
- **gendered socialisation**: girls are taught to expect domestic roles

Evaluating the three

	Strengths	Limitations
Functionalism	shows why the family matters for children and stability	too positive, ignores abuse and conflict; the "ideal" nuclear family is not the only healthy form
Marxism	shows links between family and class inequality	ignores gender and the family's positive side; assumes all families serve capitalism
Feminism	exposes hidden inequality and abuse	not all families are patriarchal; ignores that many men now share the work; more equality has come

Is family life positive or negative?

Family life gives **love, support, identity and security**, but can also bring **conflict, violence and abuse, restriction** and, for many women, a heavy load of unpaid work. Views differ by theory and by family.

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4.3 How is family life changing?

Demographic factors

Factor	Change and effect
Birth rates	have fallen in most societies, so families are **smaller**
Family size	fewer children per family
Life expectancy	people live longer, so there are more **four- and five-generation** families (beanpole) and more years of grandparent–grandchild contact
Ageing population	more elderly people to care for (pressure on the **sandwich generation**, who care for both children and parents)
Having children later	women often have children in their 30s because of education and careers

Industrialisation and urbanisation

Industrialisation moved work from the farm to factories and cities. Families moved for jobs, which weakened the **extended family** and favoured **smaller nuclear families**. (Note: Laslett argued that nuclear households were already common before industrialisation, and many extended networks have survived.)

Marriage, divorce and cohabitation

Explanations for changing patterns:

- **Legislation**: easier divorce laws, equal rights for women
- **Societal attitudes and values**: less stigma about divorce, living together, or being a lone parent
- **Role of the internet**: dating apps, wider choice of partners, online relationships
- **Secularisation**: decline in religious belief means less pressure to marry or stay married
- **Cultural expectations**: marriage may matter more in some cultures and families than in others
- **Changes in the status of women** (female empowerment): more women are educated and earn their own income, so they can leave unhappy marriages

Alternatives to marriage: **cohabitation** (living together unmarried), **singlehood**, **lone parenthood** and **civil partnerships** (legal recognition of a relationship, in some countries for same-sex couples).

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Changing family roles

- **Conjugal roles**: a move from **segregated** to **joint** roles. **Young and Willmott** described the **symmetrical family**: husband and wife share work and leisure. The **dual-worker family** has two earners. **Feminists** argue inequality remains (the dual burden). The "**pivot generation**" (sandwich generation) cares for both children and elderly parents.
- **Children**: once an economic asset (working on the farm), now an economic **burden or cost**; families are **child-centred**, and grown-up children may return home (**boomerang children**) because of costs.
- **Grandparents**: provide **childcare**, **economic support** and **wisdom and advice**; but frail grandparents can also be seen as **dependent** or a burden on the family.

TRY IT

Explain why the number of lone-parent families has increased. Divorce is easier and carries less stigma, so more parents separate. Societal attitudes accept having children outside marriage. Women's empowerment means more are financially independent and can raise children alone, and welfare benefits may help in some countries. **But** the rise also reflects bereavement and deliberate choice, and in many societies lone-parent families remain a minority.

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