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Patterns of social change make it necessary for us periodically to take stock of the ways in which we make sense of the world. Within everyday life our understandings of ‘families’ and ‘households’ are often taken for granted, but closer examination reveals a good deal of uncertainty about their character and how they are changing. But changing they certainly are. Most obviously, the last quarter of the twentieth century saw major shifts in the demographic constitution of families and households, especially in aspects of their formation and dissolution. As a consequence, there is now far greater diversity in people’s domestic arrangements than occurred earlier in the century. Living patterns are less and less adequately captured by conventional models of ‘the nuclear family’. Against this background of change, the exploration of what we mean by ‘family’ and ‘household’ has considerable importance.

The use in sociological analyses of terms which have everyday meanings can create difficulties. Yet, necessarily many of the concepts used in sociology to understand social relationships are also used in everyday characterisations of that world. This becomes problematic because in common usage the terms themselves are imprecise, signifying a range of different meanings. This is particularly evident in examining family life. To ask questions about the ordering of family ties and how domestic relationships are altering requires that we draw on terms which have a significance within the culture being examined but which are generally poorly defined.

Consider, for example, the concept of ‘family’. Everybody knows what ‘family’ means; it is a term we use routinely, normally without any need for reflection or self-awareness. Yet it is
also a term which in everyday usage signifies a range of different relationships, practices and emotions. At times ‘my family’ can mean my partner and children; at other times, it may be taken to include my children’s children too. Alternatively, its reference may be my own natal family, my parents, brothers and sisters, or it may signify a wider range of kin including, for instance, aunts and uncles. It may also mean a much smaller group, for example, just a married or cohabiting couple living alone. Often the meaning intended is clear enough from the context in which the term is being used. However, in writing sociologically about family issues there is a need for greater precision in the deployment of terms.

The problematic nature of conventional concepts for analysing different aspects of family life has come more to the fore over the last twenty years as a result of the demographic changes which have been occurring within the family realm. Details of these changes will be provided in Chapter 2. Here it is sufficient to recognise that increases in, for instance, cohabitation, births outside marriage, the level of separation and divorce, and the number of lone-parent and stepfamilies have all resulted in old certainties about family and household arrangements being questioned. The different changes there have been – summarised by Lewis and Kiernan (1996) as the increasing separation of sex, marriage and parenthood – have highlighted the imprecise boundaries around our everyday conceptions of ‘family’. They have also informed new understandings of how families and households operate, as discussed in the chapters that follow.

Until the 1980s, it was quite common within sociology to talk about the ‘family cycle’. Inherent in this notion was the idea that people typically followed a similar family pathway. From living with parents and siblings in their natal nuclear family, they left home, married, usually had a relatively small number of children, and then once these children became adult, lived out their lives until one or other spouse died. Of course, there was far more to family life than this simplistic model suggests. The changing socio-economic conditions under which families lived ensured this, but this broad pathway was one which most people followed. It allowed sociologists and other analysts to look at patterned change over the life course and to emphasise the similarities there were in people’s experiences.
No longer is this the case. There remain many similarities in people’s family experiences, but there are also now many differences (McRae, 1999). These differences may not occur randomly, but they are not entirely predictable either. Instead of ‘family cycle’, with its notions of routine stages, each one tidily following the last, the concept of ‘family course’ is far more appropriate (Finch, 1987). This latter term allows for variations in how people’s family lives develop and in the family commitments they generate over time. Although some people do follow ‘conventional’ pathways, many people’s experiences are far more complex, with cohabitation, divorce and remarriage all complicating the sets of family relationships in which they are involved. Moreover, even if their own family course is relatively straightforward, they are likely to experience the impact of these changes indirectly, through the more varied patterns generated by children, friends or siblings.

These demographic shifts in family formation and dissolution have been significant in framing contemporary understandings of family and domestic issues. No longer is ‘the family’ so readily seen as a static social entity – a view which was always suspect. Instead the complexities of what was previously subsumed under ‘the family’ have become the focus of much more popular and research attention. Thus, it is now recognised that a distinction needs to be made between family and household activities. As will be discussed more fully below, many domestic activities are household-based, that is, they arise through people sharing a home. They are not of themselves family activities, though frequently, of course, it is family members who are involved. But equally, other members of that same family may live elsewhere, depending on what ‘family’ is taken to comprise.

**Families and households**

There is, thus, a need for greater precision about how the terms ‘family’ and ‘household’ are used in sociological analysis, though often they merge into one another in sociology as much as in everyday life. The essential distinction is not particularly complex, but if we are to generate satisfactory analyses of the organisation of
domestic life, it is one about which we need to be clear. Moreover, as we shall see later, conceptually distinguishing between ‘family’ and ‘household’ encourages some significant questions to be posed about topics which might otherwise be overlooked.

Despite the differences there are, what holds the diverse notions of family together is the theme of *kinship*: that is, family is essentially about the solidarities which exist between those who are taken to be related to one another through ties of blood or marriage (Schneider, 1968). Competing ideas exist about how these relationships are best ordered (Finch and Mason, 1993), though broad cultural beliefs about the solidarity of ‘family’ are pervasive. While a variety of discourses exist around the family – think here of the different images of ‘family’ used in advertising, or political rhetoric, for example – most emphasise the boundaries to be drawn between those who are ‘family’ and those who are not, between those who do and those who do not ‘belong’ to this collective. In other words we can recognise the existence of powerful ideologies imbued with notions of the proper ordering of family ties and a strong sense of inclusion and exclusion.

In reality, however, specifying who belongs to families is no longer as straightforward as it was. There have always been instances of people who are not kin being treated as though they were part of the family. Usually, however, it was recognised by all that these were fictive or ‘honorary’ kin ties and that the people involved were not ‘really’ family. What has made for more complex kinship issues in recent years has been the radical increase in patterns of cohabitation, divorce and remarriage (Allan, 1996). Consider, for example, when a cohabitee is regarded as ‘family’. Almost certainly, this will happen at different speeds and in different ways for different people in the ‘family’. For instance, those cohabiting for a period of time may see themselves as family, be regarded as such by each other’s siblings, but not by their respective ‘parents-in-law’. Equally it is not always clear when people stop being kin. People defined as kin through marriage – a sister-in-law, for example – are likely to continue to be seen as kin after the death of the intermediary sibling/spouse, but it is much more questionable whether they are after a divorce. There is little research evidence on this, but often it seems that kin relationships are regarded quite differently once a marriage is terminated (Finch and Mason, 1990).
Importantly, stepfamilies raise all sorts of difficult questions about what ‘family’ means. The perceptions of the different people involved can vary a good deal. The couple, whether married or cohabiting, are likely to see themselves as part of a new family, while the children involved may resist this notion strongly, emphasising the absence of familial bonds in the new unit. Similarly, other family members outside the immediate household may have different views and perceptions about the ‘family-ness’ of the newly-formed stepfamily. Finch and Mason’s (Finch, 1989; Finch and Mason, 1993) research suggests that such variation is quite common and that the degree to which different individuals are treated as ‘family’ will be a consequence of the personal relationships which have developed between them. Thus the fact of divorce does not necessarily mean that family links are severed between, say, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law (Finch and Mason, 1990). Nor does even quite prolonged cohabitation necessarily lead to step-children or other kin fully accepting the partner as part of the family. The basis of kinship is rooted in marriage and biological connection, but the ties which are honoured and the solidarities which develop are socially defined.

Because of this greater complexity, recognising that ideas of ‘family’ and ‘household’, while overlapping, frequently refer to different social entities and involve different processes, has become much more important. Issues of solidarity, cooperation and conflict are often different in practice between the two categories and, as importantly, raise separate conceptual and analytical questions, for example, following marital separation, cohabitation or remarriage, membership of ‘family’ and ‘household’ can be different, at least as far as children are concerned, even when ‘family’ is defined in its narrowest sense of parents and offspring. The household represents one focus of activity but family relationships constitute a different, albeit overlapping one. This can be seen quite clearly when the notion of ‘household’ is examined. Although definitions of ‘household’ vary, essentially what they all refer to are social groupings which typically share a range of domestic activities in common. These include sleeping in the same dwelling as one another, having most meals together, and normally sharing in a common domestic economy and household budgeting (Anderson, Bechhofer and Gershuny, 1994; Harris, 1983; Morris 1990a, 1990b). Clearly these activities do not
require that those involved share any kinship link with one
another. Indeed many households now consist of single individu-
als or of individuals who are unrelated (Social Trends, 1998).
Many student households are of this latter type.

Empirically, of course, the majority of households do contain
family members living together, though not usually in the
standardly-conceived conventional nuclear form. In the 1991
census, only a quarter of all households consisted of a male and a
female adult together with dependent children. And, of course,
an increasing proportion of these entailed a stepfamily rather
than a first-time family. However, the patterns of household
practice which arise are quite varied, making the definition of
household more complex than it first appears. Thus what it
means to share a common housekeeping is not clear-cut. How
much sharing is necessary? How frequently do you need to sleep
in a household to be a member of it? What proportion of meals
must be shared? When do those whose work or study regularly
takes them away cease to be members of the household? Can
people be members of more than one household? Definitionally
all of these questions can be resolved, albeit in a somewhat arbi-
trary fashion. What they indicate though is the complexity of
social arrangements that can be subsumed within the idea of a
household.

Thus while ‘families’ and ‘households’ often overlap empiri-
cally, from a sociological perspective it is useful to keep the two
concepts separate, as different questions arise from considering
each of them. A focus on family matters, for example, brings to
the fore the character of the solidarity and conflict developing
between people who are linked through kinship. It directs atten-
tion to such issues as how parents socialise children; how love is
expressed within marriage and between the generations; and how
care provision is influenced by prospects of property inheritance.
Focusing on households tends to emphasise a different set of con-
cerns. These include, *inter alia*, the division of responsibility and
workload between household members; the extent and character
of the strategies which households develop for coping with the
contingencies they face; and the ways in which resources are dis-
tributed within households between different members (Allatt
and Yeandle, 1986; Hutson and Jenkins, 1989; McKee and Bell,
1986; Morris, 1990b; Pahl, 1984).
In theory there is nothing which stops such questions as these being posed within a ‘family’ framework, and indeed at times they have been. For instance, over the years some family sociologists have focused on systematic differences in the distribution of money and other resources between family members, especially husbands and wives (see, for example, Brannen, and Moss, 1991; Brannen and Wilson, 1987; Delphy and Leonard, 1992; Pahl, 1989). The point though is that more frequently such issues have tended to be disguised by assumptions which are rooted in normative, if not idealised, values about the collective identity of families. Thus, for example, it has often been assumed that if family income is sufficient to meet the needs of those in the family, then poverty is not an issue. However, research has shown that the distribution of these resources between household members is often skewed to such a degree that some within the household may be living below subsistence level while others live well above it (Graham, 1987a).

Approaching such issues from a household rather than a family perspective does not rule out such assumptions. However, it sensitises the researcher into asking the right kind of questions rather than confusing kinship issues with ones of domestic organisation. Just as families and households overlap empirically, so conceptually the questions to be asked of them also have much in common. Nonetheless, being aware of the distinctions between the two makes it more likely that the framework in which questions are posed is appropriate. In turn, this will encourage better descriptions and explanations of the activities in question, as the basis of each type of relationship can be recognised more readily. These issues – empirical and conceptual – should become clearer in the chapters which follow.

There is a more general point here. Just as the demography and character of family and household relationships have been altering significantly over the last twenty years, so too have our understandings of the significance of these changes, both at a popular and an academic level. Certainly, within sociology and social policy a different range of questions is now being asked about the solidarities of both households and families than was the case, say, in the 1960s or 1970s. Where once functionalism largely provided the framework of enquiry – in particular, a concern for the ways in which family life was modified to mesh best with the
‘demands’ of the changing economy – now other theoretical frameworks have emerged which focus on different issues.

Understanding change

It has been the rise of feminism and women’s studies, together with the concerns of late- or post-modernity, which have had most impact on the ways that family and domestic life have recently come to be interpreted. The changes in domestic arrangements and personal relationships, which will be discussed more fully in the next chapter, are clearly indicative of a wider tolerance of alternative family and household formations than that which existed in the past when a more prescriptive social control was exercised. Yet, the greater freedom there is now for individuals to make ‘life-style’ choices involving the construction of their personal, sexual and domestic relationships is linked to the wider social transformations of late modernity in which increased priority is given to ‘the self as a project’ (Giddens, 1991; 1992). Similarly the changes there have been in the politics of gender have opened up fresh areas of enquiry about familial organisation as well as having an impact on the character of that organisation. What are now recognised as important questions, about, for example, the distribution of resources within marriage, the incidence of family abuse, and the gendered character of caring, were largely absent from family sociology until feminist perspectives brought into focus issues that were previously obfuscated.

In previous periods, family sociology was hampered by the adoption of approaches which were either excessively descriptive and atheoretical or influenced by broad theories embodying overly general functionalist assumptions. The respective problems of ‘abstracted empiricism’ and ‘grand theory’ (Mills, 1970) have taken longer to be recognised in the sociology of the family than in many other branches of the discipline. However, growing recognition of the shortcomings of such approaches has highlighted the need for theoretical reflection, not least about the concepts with which we try to make sense of family relationships. In turn, this development has sharpened awareness of the
excessively abstract and over-general nature of functionalist frameworks of analysis which, by treating family forms as things shaped by external forces, allowed little scope for individual agency or variation from the norm. The prescriptive character of distinguishing between ‘normal’ and other family forms has also come to be seen as a problematic feature of conventional accounts of family life which it is important to avoid.

The reassessment of how best to approach the study of domestic life has involved rethinking what Morgan (1996) calls ‘family connections’. Once the assumption is dropped that family relationships are simply a dependent variable which changes in response to macro-social forces (most obviously industrialisation), the way is opened up for family members to be credited with a more active role in shaping domestic life. Thus one significant current of recent thinking has focused on the importance of individuals and their active consideration of how they connect with others around them in their intimate relationships. A second strand of thinking has been concerned less with individuals than with the implications of treating families and households as units of analysis with distinctive interests, strategies and dynamics into which individuals fit with varying degrees of ease or difficulty. Thirdly, it is possible to identify innovatory lines of thinking which attempt to explain the links between family forms and wider social forces in which causal influences do not all run from the latter to the former but suggest instead more of a two-way relationship. Each of these interconnected theoretical developments warrants discussion.

The need to explain as well as to describe the growing diversity of family arrangements in societies like contemporary Britain has generated a great deal of interest in Beck’s idea of individualisation (Beck, 1992, 1997; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). Beck suggests that people in affluent societies are no longer materially constrained to conform to the conventional gender roles associated with the nuclear family, and that this opens up the possibility of greater individual choice over how a person lives her or his own life. In particular, Beck notes, it is no longer typical for women to be committed to ‘compulsory housework and support by a husband’ (1992, p. 104) because of the educational and labour market opportunities which have opened up for them. The male breadwinner model of family organisation is now merely one of
several possibilities. Modern social structures like those of the welfare state encourage the emergence of ‘the individual as actor, designer, juggler and stage director of his own biography, identity, social networks, commitments and convictions’ (1997, p. 95, emphasis in original). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) treat the rising proportion of single-person households as one indicator of the process of individualisation, but regard other trends like the growth of cohabitation, divorce and remarriage as further evidence of the increasing extent to which people are choosing (or, in some cases, being forced) to depart from traditional norms of family life. In turn, the possibility of choice increases potential conflict between individuals over the contributions each makes to the domestic division of labour, and over the nature of family relationships more generally.

The theory of individualisation highlights the uncertain character of many of the developments taking place in contemporary family life. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue that in this uncertain environment, ‘love acquires a new significance as the very heart of our lives’ (1995, p. 49) as people search for stability and meaning in their personal relationships. What Giddens (1992) refers to as the transformation of intimacy involves the attachment of heightened meaning to the emotional side of intimate relationships which makes them unstable precisely because so much is expected of them. Yet, as individuals become more reflexive about the nature of their intimate relationships so the fragility of these relationships is exposed. Individuals’ concerns with self-identity lead them to treat intimate relationships as ones which are maintained for the satisfactions which they deliver to the partners as individuals. Thus, in its ‘pure’ form, a modern intimate relationship is said by Giddens to be ‘continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it’ (1992, p. 58). In such circumstances, romantic notions of love as fixed and permanent are increasingly brought into question.

The ideas of Beck and Giddens concerning individualisation and the transformation of intimacy place much greater emphasis on individuals’ aspirations and choices than is to be found in conventional family sociology. What such ideas offer is an explanation of diversity and change in family life in which family members are creative agents, actively constructing their relationships rather than
simply adopting pre-set roles. For Giddens, ‘Personal life has become an open project’ (1992, p. 8) in which individuals experiment as part of the conscious pursuit of arrangements which suit their particular needs and ambitions. Such ideas offer potentially powerful explanations of the increasing divergence from the traditional nuclear family, but some caution is necessary when evaluating them. To begin with, the ideas are somewhat speculative, as both Giddens and Beck acknowledge. The evidence on which they are based is quite limited and open to different interpretations. Jamieson (1998), for example, has noted how several commentators do not share Giddens’s optimism about the changes underway. This issue is linked to a second concern: the degree to which it is appropriate to generalise. However far the process of individualisation has gone, marked differences remain between individuals along lines of class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and gender, and these have a significant bearing on their ability to negotiate how their family lives are constructed (Smart and Neale 1999).

A third criticism of approaches giving analytical priority to individuals concerns the collective nature of much family life. Smart and Neale point out that these accounts are selective in their treatment of children and strangely muted about the significance of wider kin such as grandparents in family relationships, with the result that ‘The field of intimacy seems very empty of players’ (1999, p. 19). A rather different picture emerges once the individual is located more explicitly in her or his set of relationships, of which the partner relationship is only one (albeit often the most important). For example, research conducted by Jordan, Redley and James (1994) into middle-class couples with children highlights the importance of ‘family’ as a reference point in people’s accounts of who they are and what they are trying to achieve. What stands out in these accounts is how actions are framed in terms of prioritising family responsibilities in ways which place limits on what is reasonable for an individual to seek for her or himself. Jordan and his colleagues observe that when they were being interviewed, ‘men and women required themselves to show how they had put the family first’ (1994, p. 32). Put another way, the sense of self which an individual has is frequently hard to separate from their sense of the family unit to which they belong.

A good deal of attention has been devoted recently to the problem of how best to understand what is meant by ‘family’.
Jordan and his colleagues found that among their respondents ‘the definition of “the family” was usually one in which partnership and parenthood were given much greater priority than other kinship relationships’ (1994, p. 38), a finding consistent with other research (Finch, 1989; Finch and Mason, 1993). Family obligations extend to wider kin, but they are most significant where family members live in the same household. Within families, substantial differences exist between members’ perceptions of what ‘family’ means. The continued existence of gender differences in this respect has been well-documented; and perceptions also vary with age (Scott 1997). As a result, contributions to and expectations of family life remain gendered and age-specific to significant degrees, although precisely why is a matter of continuing dispute. It is possible to argue that men’s concentration on income-earning and women’s on home-making may benefit a family unit more than equal participation in these spheres would. In line with this, attempts have been made to use the concept of family strategies to explain differential involvement in work outside and inside the home. However, as Cheal (1991) notes, family interests and individual interests should not be presumed always to coincide; indeed where they are seen to diverge, the contested meaning of ‘family’ is thrown into sharpest relief.

Historical research, such as Hareven’s (1991), suggests that the synchronisation of individual and family interests is a perennial problem, but one which changes in different historical circumstances. In some periods, explanations framed in terms of economic necessity carry a great deal of force, while in others they are less convincing. Modern family relationships are in a state of flux as the balance of household members’ involvement in paid and unpaid work shifts, but attention has focused increasingly on the emotional as well as the economic dimensions of these changes. Hochschild (1990, 1996, 1997) has argued that the growth of women’s involvement in the labour market makes sense only once their dissatisfaction with the devalued status of housework and childcare is taken into account. For women, employment provides ‘a source of security, pride, and a powerful sense of being valued’; they are attracted by the sense that ‘the “male” world of work seems more honourable and valuable than the “female” world of home and children’ (1997, p. 247). The search for greater emotional satisfaction has contributed to women’s declin-
ing preparedness to accept the role of full-time housewife. However, efforts to restructure what Hochschild calls ‘the work-family balance’ (1996, p. 28) may in practice have the undesired effect of speeding up the pace of family life and intensifying tensions between household members. Daly’s suggestion that the increasing pace of life generates ‘centrifugal families’ (1996, p. 205) whose members are held together only with increasing difficulty conveys a similar notion.

Numerous competing meanings of the term ‘family’ and the wide range of actual social arrangements it entails has led sociologists to speak of ‘families’ in the plural rather than privileging one particular set of arrangements as ‘the family’ (Bernardes 1997). Morgan’s observation that ‘notions of “family” are rarely static but are constantly subjected to processes of negotiation and re-definition’ (1999, p. 18) echoes this view, but also suggests that it is useful to ask whose definitions are being deployed. While definitions of ‘family’ may vary both within and between different family groups, the definitions with which people operate are not freely chosen. The role of state agencies in the promotion of particular understandings of family life and the discouragement of others has been the subject of increasing interest to researchers in recent years, not least because of growing awareness that there is considerable variation in the family policies pursued in different countries. Duncan and Edwards (1997a) have shown the existence of important international differences in how state bodies relate to single mothers, for example, while Brannen (1999) has made the same point in relation to policies concerned with children. Such policies do not determine the content of family relationships in a straightforwardly causal fashion but they do operate as a framework which makes certain outcomes more likely than others.

The identification of social policies which exert pressure on people to conform to particular conceptions of family relationships makes the existence of diversity in family arrangements all the harder to explain. The declining significance of nuclear families and the growth of what Simpson (1994; 1998) terms ‘unclear’ families cannot be treated as the direct effect of social policies which have a bearing on family life, since these retain strong associations with conventional family patterns (Silva and Smart 1999). Nevertheless, many of the most important policy developments which have been are concerned with
financial flows into and out of households, and Simpson has this point in mind when he argues that ‘Consideration of the arrangements which couples themselves devise or otherwise have imposed upon them requires that we re-think the way that kinship articulates with economy’ (1998, p. 49). Major changes have occurred in the relationship between families and the wider economy since the 1950s (the period in which the nuclear family is widely believed to have been the dominant family form), and the influences have been in both directions.

It is, of course, impossible for the state or any other political agencies to recreate so-called ‘traditional’ forms of family life in contemporary society. Family relationships are too embedded within the wider social and cultural formation for this to be realisable. At this level, change within society cannot be engineered. Yet the state is not powerless to influence the character of family life and the nature of the relationships that develop between people who are linked by kinship. If it is to be successful in this though, it needs to do so in ways which are sympathetic to the global changes occurring which influence the understandings individuals have about the character and possibilities of family life. Thus, for example, it would simply not now be feasible to attempt to impose a family form which reaffirmed or strengthened men’s traditional domination of women. Nor would it be possible to return to notions of childhood in which parents could hold absolute power over dependent children. As Giddens (1998) rightly emphasises, the shifts there have been in cultural understandings of moral and appropriate family relationships have been ones which emphasise democracy allied to individual rights and collective responsibility. There is no prospect of imposing a family system in which male or any other form of autocracy rules.

Precisely because of the increased democratisation of family relationships, there is little prospect of the state being effective in changing family life through ‘strengthening’ marriage, if by this is meant a wider acceptance of the sanctity of marriage as a lifelong relationship. The dominant view that unhappy marriages should be ended is now too powerful an element within the ideology of family life for this to be altered. However, if the contingent character of marriage is now widely recognised, this is not so for relationships between parents and their children. These are not seen as contingent or matters of choice in the same way. Thus the state
is able to emphasise the rights that children have to a continuing parental relationship and the obligations of biological parents to care for and support their children, irrespective of the parents’ own relationship.

Given the cultural understandings that now exist of marriage and partnership – a term whose rise itself indicates the change in understanding there has been in these matters – and of childhood as a phase of development, it is no coincidence that the focus of much political debate around family matters is concerned with developing policies that endorse the responsibilities of both parents towards their biological children. There are, of course, tensions within this concerning the rights of adults to avoid conflict with previous partners and to engage in new relationships (Neale and Smart, 1997). Yet we have seen in efforts to develop divorce mediation and conciliation services, to generate standard policies of financial responsibility towards children following separation, and to foster co-parenting, how the state, in Britain and elsewhere, is attempting to promote specific notions of family responsibility in the light of changed circumstances. However, the state is likely to be effective in this only to the degree that these policies are broadly in tune with the character of family practices generated by emergent socio-economic conditions.

With the level of change occurring in families and households, it is not surprising that numerous explanatory frameworks have been developed. Family sociology has come a long way since the era when functionalist approaches were dominant. The proliferation of different perspectives has opened up all sorts of new ways of looking at family relationships. At the same time, choosing between these different theoretical approaches highlights the difficulties inherent in trying to make sense of patterns of domestic life. As well as problems of definition, there is little consensus between different theorists about what constitutes appropriate evidence in support of one position or another. Facts and figures cannot alone resolve disputed questions, since these tell us only that ‘there is both continuity and diversity in family life at the end of the twentieth century’ (Silva and Smart, 1999, p. 4). It is also important to recognise that debates over the relative significance of continuity and change necessarily involve comparisons between the present and the past, about which we know less than we might think (Harris, 1994). In this sense any statements about
families, households and social change are bound to be provisional and open to different interpretations.

**Plan of the book**

In the next chapter, we are going to explore some of the major changes recently occurring in family and household life and, in particular, in family and household formation and dissolution. These changes, far more radical than was ever predicted, can be read simply as modifications in demographic patterns. Yet they represent much more than this; they reflect a change in family practices, in Morgan's (1996) sense: that is, underlying them are changes in the understandings people have about the character of familial commitment and the appropriate ways in which household and family relationships should be ordered. In this chapter, we will compare the changes occurring in Britain with those happening elsewhere in the western world. Internationally, there are certainly marked similarities in the ways in which family life is altering. Yet alongside such globalising trends, each society carries the influence of its own economic, social and legal heritage which colours the ways contemporary patterns develop. For this reason, in the chapters that follow the principal concern will be with understanding the changes currently shaping British family life. However, many of the shifts in practice and ideology analysed are mirrored to differing extents elsewhere.

In Chapter 3 we focus on young people becoming independent and leaving the parental home. From one perspective this represents the formation of a new household, albeit sometimes a temporary one. But equally it marks a new stage in the course of an existing family/household. It involves the growing independence of the younger generation from the older, and the consequent need for their relationships to adjust accordingly. Commonly, this process is viewed as a relatively straightforward one: the young person moves from the parental home to set up their own household, often for reasons to do with higher education, occupational mobility or marriage plans. In reality, as the chapter explores, the processes are more varied and complex than this: for example, surprisingly often – from a conventional viewpoint – young people move back into
the parental home after a period of living away. Such diverse patterns raise questions about the meaning of independence as children become adult.

Chapters 4 and 5 are concerned with aspects of partnership and marriage. Chapter 4 concentrates on the earlier phases of partnership, focusing in particular on the personal and cultural significance of romantic love, the growth of cohabitation and the early years of marriage. It highlights the ways in which couple/family formation has altered in recent years, but also points to some of the continuities there are, especially in the ways in which responsibilities are assigned. This point is developed further in Chapter 5 which is concerned with later phases of marriage, in particular, when there are dependent children present. It examines how gender inequalities in the labour market and elsewhere pattern the decisions which couples (in theory) come to about how their domestic economy and marital relationship are best organised, and analyses the consequences of these patterns for resource distribution within households and the exercise of power, including the use of force, within marriage.

Chapter 6 examines the significant growth in lone-parent families. It begins by looking at the impact that rising levels of divorce have had on family and household relationships. Drawing on recent research, it emphasises that divorce needs to be seen as a process rather than an event and that the ‘history’ of a divorce is important in explaining its consequences. The chapter then turns to consider the social and economic circumstances of lone-parent families more generally. It highlights the argument that while there are many differences in the experiences of lone-parent households, there is also much in common between them. In particular, the great majority are female-headed and many are materially deprived in comparison to two-parent households. The chapter explores the consequences of these patterns for the lives of those involved.

The topic of Chapter 7 follows quite directly from the changes explored in Chapter 6. The chapter examines how stepfamilies – or reconstituted families, as they are sometimes called – differ from ‘natural’ or ‘first-time’ families. Although people in stepfamilies often portray themselves as being just ‘ordinary families’, the relationship dynamics in these families are frequently more complex than those occurring in ‘natural’ families. Of course,
there are important differences between stepfamilies as well, reflecting their different histories. While fully recognising this, the chapter will focus on the implications for family relationships of the complex patterns of solidarity stepfamilies encompass.

Chapter 8 is concerned with the familial and household relationships of older people. As well as providing details of the material circumstances and household composition of older people in contemporary Britain, it considers their involvement with their families and, in particular, their (adult) children. The chapter assesses arguments about the decline of family solidarity and the neglect of older people by their kin. It argues that such views misrepresent the significance of independence for older people and overestimate the degree to which support is needed by the majority of people over retirement age. The final section of the chapter focuses on the minority of older people with significant disability, and examines the extent to which they routinely do receive family support and who the kin are who provide it.

As well as summarising the arguments of the previous chapters, in the concluding chapter we also seek to build on the earlier analyses by highlighting the processes which work to unite and differentiate families and households. The chapter traces how recent developments have seen important continuities in certain aspects of domestic life alongside fundamental changes in others, with different pictures emerging depending upon which models of family and household relationships are privileged. The active part played by individuals in shaping their domestic lives through negotiating roles within their families and contributing to household strategies has to be set against awareness of structural factors, including social policies, which are beyond the control of individuals but which shape the contours of domestic life.
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