

Changes in Family Structure

The average family today doesn't have the same structure as the average family 250 years ago. Sociologists suggest various reasons for this, mostly to do with people moving to cities to work in factories.

Industrialisation Changed Family Structure

- 1) There are **two basic types of family structure** you need to know: **extended** and **nuclear** (see p.24).
- 2) There are **two basic types of society** you need to know:

Pre-industrial society: This means society before industrialisation. It is largely agricultural and work centres on home, farm, village and market.

Industrial society: This means society during and after industrialisation. Work centres on factories and production of goods in cities.

- 3) What you really, really need to know is **how these two affect each other.**

In **pre-industrial society** the **extended family** is most common. Families **live and work together** producing goods and crops to live from, taking the surplus to market. This is where the term **cottage industry** comes from.

In **industrial society** the **nuclear family** becomes dominant. There is a huge increase in individuals leaving the home to work for a wage. The key social change is that industrialisation **separates home and work.**

Industrialisation is the process by which production becomes more mechanical and based outside the home in factories. People travel outside the home to work and urban centres (cities) are formed. Industrialisation in the UK started in the 18th century.

Remember — industrialisation is historical fact but the nature of the social change it created is a **subject of sociological debate.**

Functionalists Say Industrialisation Changed the Function of the Family

American sociologist **Talcott Parsons** studied the **impact of industrialisation** on family structure in American and British society. Parsons thought that the dominant family structure changed from extended to nuclear because it was **more useful** for industrial society — i.e. the **nuclear family is the best fit for industrial society.**

- 1) Lots of **functions** of the family in **pre-industrial society** are **taken over by the state** in industrial society — e.g. policing, healthcare, education.
- 2) The nuclear family can focus on its function of **socialisation**. The family socialises children into the roles, values and norms of industrialised society.
- 3) Parsons said the industrial nuclear family is "**isolated**" — meaning it has **few ties** with local kinship and economic systems. This means the family can **up sticks and move easily** — ideal for moving to where the work is.

In short, **family structure adapts to the needs of society.**



Functionalists Say Industrialisation Changed Roles and Status in the Family

Status for an individual in **pre-industrial society** was **ascribed** — decided at birth by the family they were born into. Parsons reckoned that in industrial society an individual's status is **achieved** by their success in society **outside their family.**

The idea here is that the **nuclear family** is the **best** for allowing individuals to **achieve status** and position without **conflict**. It's OK for an individual to achieve higher or lower status than previous generations. This allows for greater **social mobility** in society. People can **better themselves.**

Parsons says that **specialised roles** for men and women develop within the family. He thought that men are **instrumental** (practical / planning) leaders and women are **expressive** (emotional) leaders in a family. As a **functionalist**, Parsons said these roles come about because they're **most effective** for society. **Feminists** and **conflict theorists** disagree — they say these roles come from **ideology** and **power.**

Other Sociologists say it's all More Complicated

Functionalists are **criticised** for seeing the modern nuclear family as **superior** — something that societies have to evolve into. They're also criticised for putting forward an **idealised** picture of history. **Historical evidence** suggests there was actually a **variety** of family forms in the past.

Sociologist **Peter Laslett (1972)** reckons that the **nuclear family** was the **most common** structure in Britain even before industrialisation. His evidence comes from **parish records**. Also, **Laslett and Anderson (1971)** say that the **extended family** actually was **significant** in industrial society. Anderson used the **1851 census** for evidence. He said that when people moved to the cities for industrial jobs, they lived with relatives from their extended family.

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Willmott and Young Said Families Have Developed Through Three Stages

British sociologists **Willmott and Young (1960, 1973)** did two important studies looking at family structures in British society from the 1950s to the 1970s. They mainly studied families in different parts of London and Essex. Their work tested the theory that the nuclear family is the dominant form in modern industrial society. You need to remember their conclusion, which was that **British families have developed through three stages.** Originally, they set out four stages, but there wasn't a lot of evidence for the last stage, so they dropped it.)

Stage One: Pre-Industrial	Family works together as economic production unit . Work and home are combined.
Stage Two: Early Industrial	Extended family is broken up as individuals (mostly men) leave home to work. Women at home have strong extended kinship networks .
Stage Three: Privatised Nuclear	Family based on consumption, not production — buying things, not making things. Nuclear family is focused on its personal relationships and lifestyle . Called " the symmetrical family " — husband and wife have joint roles.
Stage Four: Asymmetrical	Husband and wife roles become asymmetrical as men spend more leisure time away from the home — in the pub for example. this stage got dropped

Husband and wife roles are called "**conjugal roles**" by sociologists.

Other Sociologists have Criticised Willmott and Young

- 1) Willmott and Young (and other functionalists) have been criticised for **assuming** that family life has got **better and better** as structure adapts to modern society. They're described as "**march of progress**" theorists.
- 2) Willmott and Young **ignore** the **negative** aspects of the modern nuclear family. Domestic violence, child abuse and lack of care for the elderly and vulnerable are all problems in society today.
- 3) **Feminist** research (see p.26) suggests **equal roles** in the "symmetrical family" don't really exist.

Different Classes Might Have Different Family Structures

Willmott and Young's work in the 1960s and 1970s supported the theory that working class families had **closer extended kinship networks** than middle class families.

To get up to date, the British Social Attitude Surveys of 1986 and 1995 showed that working class families have **more frequent contact** and ties outside of their nuclear family.

Recent work by **Willmott (1988)** suggests that **extended family ties** are still important to the modern nuclear family but they're **held in reserve** for times of **crisis** rather than being part of everyday life.

For example, if your house floods, you might go and stay with your sister, even if you don't usually spend loads of time with her. In Parsons' terminology this makes the modern family "**partially isolated nuclear**".

Practice Questions

- Q1 Give an example of social change caused by industrialisation.
- Q2 What roles did Parsons believe men and women had within the nuclear family?
- Q3 What is meant by the term "symmetrical family"?
- Q4 Outline one criticism of Willmott and Young's "march of progress" theory.

Exam Questions

- Q1 Examine the ways in which industrialisation changed the function of the family. (24 marks)
- Q2 Examine the view that the extended family remains an important aspect of modern industrial society. (24 marks)

My mum works at Sellafield — we're a real nuclear family...

OK — here's something where it helps to have a vague idea about history, and about what this "industrialisation" business was. The idea is that when people went to live in cities and work in factories, society changed. Of course, it'd be far too much to expect sociologists to agree about it. Oh no. So you have another couple of pages of sociological debate...

Changes in Family Structure

Politicians sometimes try to promote certain family structures through their policies.

Governments try to Influence Family Structure through Social Policy

- 1) The UK government often makes **laws** that are designed to influence family life or family structure. These laws are part of **social policy**.
- 2) Social policy laws cover areas such as **divorce**, changes to the **benefit system** which affect family income, reforms to the **education system**, **adoption/fostering** and **employment**.

Social Policy has Changed Over Time

- 1) The way that governments tackle social policy has **changed** quite a lot in the period since the Second World War.
- 2) In the 1945–1979 period, the state's social policy was quite **interventionist**.
- 3) **The Welfare State** (see p.52), which was set up by a Labour government in 1948, supported families through benefits, public housing, family allowances and free health care.
- 4) People paid into a **national insurance** scheme to pay for the welfare state. It was **universal** — everyone had the same benefits and services.



The NHS even covered floating baby syndrome.

The 1979 Conservative Government Believed in Reduced State Intervention

The Conservative Party was elected in 1979 with **Margaret Thatcher** as their leader. Reacting to several years of political instability, they set about **reforming** the relationship between society and the state.

- 1) The Conservatives were influenced by **New Right** ideology. They believed that nuclear families were the **cornerstone of society**, but also thought that society as a whole should be **freed from interference** by the state as much as possible. They thought the UK had become a “**nanny state**” with too much government control over individual lives.

- 2) They set out to make individuals more **responsible** for their own lives and decisions — the state would **intervene much less** in private matters. So benefits were cut and **taxes lowered**. **Means testing** was introduced for some benefits with the aim of helping only those in **genuine need**. (Means testing is when you only get a benefit if your household income is below a set level.)

- 3) Mothers were encouraged to **stay at home** through preferential tax allowances. Families were pushed to take on more responsibility for **the elderly** through benefit cuts.

Mrs Thatcher's Conservatives echoed the concerns of Charles Murray, who first coined the phrase 'culture of dependency' (see page 27).

The Conservatives Legislated to Protect People in a Traditional Family

The Conservatives valued **traditional, nuclear families**. In 1988, Thatcher described the family as “the building block of society. It's a nursery, a school, a hospital, a leisure place, a place of refuge and a place of rest.”

The Conservatives created several laws that enforced the **rights** and **responsibilities** of individuals in families.

- 1) The **Child Support Agency** was established in 1993 to force absent fathers and mothers to **pay** a fair amount towards the upkeep of their children.
- 2) The **Children Act 1989** outlined for the first time the rights of the child.
- 3) The Conservatives also considered a law to make **divorce more difficult** — a compulsory **cooling off** period of one year was proposed before a couple could divorce. In the end they abandoned this idea because they couldn't find a way to make it work in practice.

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New Labour Promised a **Compromise** between the Old Ideologies

New Labour came to power in 1997 led by Tony Blair.

- 1) They based their ideology on 'The Third Way' — a middle ground between left-wing and right-wing politics. Their policies were designed to be more pragmatic and less ideological than either the 1979 Conservative government or previous Labour governments.
- 2) In their 1998 consultation paper 'Supporting Families', they made it clear that marriage is their preferred basis for family life.
- 3) However they have shown an awareness of, and concern for, diversity of family life.
- 4) In 2005 they introduced civil partnerships, a union a lot like marriage that is available to gay couples.
- 5) They've also introduced laws allowing any type of cohabiting couple to **adopt** children.
- 6) They have adopted some New Right ideas when it comes to family policy — e.g. they've cut lone parent family benefits, supported means-tested benefits and are opposed to universal benefits.

Feminists Believe that Social Policy is Designed to **Protect Patriarchy**

- 1) **Feminists** believe that the **New Right** want to reinforce a **sexist and exploitative** model of the family by keeping women in the home and making them the main support for their children.
- 2) They also think that social policies continue to support a **patriarchal** society even under New Labour — for example the differences in maternity and paternity leave reinforce the idea that the mother is the **primary carer** and the father is the **earner and provider**.

Marxists Argue that Social Policy is Designed to **Protect Capitalism**

- 1) Marxists also **oppose** the policies of the **New Right**. They argue that reducing benefits to the poor only **makes them poorer**, and that **means testing** for benefits is **degrading** for the claimant and likely to dissuade worthy applicants.
- 2) They believe that social policies tend to be designed to **maintain the capitalist system**. By reinforcing traditional gender roles, **social policy** moulds women into a **reserve army of labour** which can be drawn on in times of crisis.

Practice Questions

- Q1 What is social policy?
- Q2 Give two examples of Conservative policies in the 1980s that affected family life.
- Q3 What has been New Labour's attitude towards family diversity?
- Q4 Give two criticisms of the New Right's attitude towards social policy.

Exam Questions

- Q1 Suggest two ways that social policy has influenced family life in the UK since 1997. (4 marks)
- Q2 Examine the view that social policies in the UK have sustained inequality both inside and outside the family. (24 marks)

My social policy — **Thursday is the new Friday...**

Politicians usually want to support the traditional nuclear family, but since 1979 they've generally also wanted to reduce state intervention in people's private lives. Marxists think that New Right ideas about the family prop up capitalism while feminists think they help exploit women. Think of a way to remember that if you can.