

Understanding society: Families



About this free course

This free course provides a sample of level 1 study in Education, Childhood & Youth

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Introduction

Family life is continuously changing in many ways. This course looks at the change, or lack of change, in the role of women and men in the home. The discussion of this topic will focus on the connectedness between women's work in the paid labour force and their work in the home. In addition, underlying this will be our recognition that family life today is characterised by diversity.

The main question we will be addressing is who does the work in the home? More specifically we want to look at how men and women in the UK share the shopping, cooking, cleaning, washing and ironing that happens regularly in all families. Of course other work takes place in the home, not least caring for children and other dependents and less regular and non routine house maintenance and DIY work. However, our focus here is a more limited one which will nevertheless introduce you to some of the key ideas and debates involved in studying family life.

We will begin with a summary of how work in the home has changed over the last fifty years or so, and look at the situation now, at the start of the twenty first century. You will also be given the opportunity to explore how different families may have different ideas about how work should be divided up.

The course concludes with an investigation into family diversity and note that any discussion of the division of labour has to recognise that families differ in terms of shape and size.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of level 1 study in [Education, Childhood & Youth](#)

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- demonstrate an awareness of some of the debates and key concepts involved in the study of family life;
- show the connectedness that has developed over time between the work men and women do inside the home and women's role in paid employment
- use numerical data to show the diversity of family life in the UK and to provide a first opportunity at 'reading' numbers.

1. Is work in the home shared today?

1.1 Changes in women's employment patterns

During the 1960s and 1970s there was a significant increase in the proportion of women who worked in paid employment outside the home. A pattern became established whereby married women would work in this way until the birth of their first child and then return to work part time when not occupied full time with childcare. There are a number of explanations for this. These include economic changes, bringing with them more, and different, employment opportunities; increases in educational opportunities for girls; and the re-emergence of feminism in the 1960s as, along with other disadvantaged or marginalised groups, women were becoming more powerful and gained a voice. All these factors are interrelated, though different social scientists emphasise one kind of explanation rather than another.

Feminism is a set of theories which in different ways analyse and explain gender divisions and inequalities. It is also a social movement which advocates and works for equal opportunities for men and women.

Feminism originated in the late eighteenth century.

During the latter part of the twentieth century the numbers of women working outside the home increased further. In 2002 female employment was at a record high of 12.9 million and the working age employment rate for women was at its highest level. Of all countries in the EU, the UK has the third highest female employment rate.



Figure 1 Women at work today in a range of occupations

1.2 How have these changes affected the division of labour within families?

What have been the implications of these changes for a woman's role as housewife? Has she continued to do most of the work in the home or has it become more shared between men and women?

For a while, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, there seemed to be some indications that families might be becoming more egalitarian, i.e. that as more women worked outside the home, men would increase the amount of domestic work they undertook. A particularly influential study at that time was Young and Willmott's *The Symmetrical Family* (1973) in which they argued that the middle classes in particular were leading a

trend towards a more egalitarian 'symmetrical' marriage relationship in which husband and wife shared tasks more equally.

However, evidence also emerged during the latter part of the twentieth century that perhaps changes had not been as great as was originally assumed. According to one review of the evidence 'none of the data seems to warrant any suggestion that the traditional female responsibility for household work has been substantially eroded, or that male participation has '*significantly* increased' (Morris, 1990 p. 120). Women it seemed had a dual role, juggling paid employment and work in the home.

So studies from the second half of the twentieth century told two different stories. On the one hand housework was becoming more equally shared. On the other, women still did most of it whilst at the same time working outside the home. Almost certainly some of you reading this will want to support the argument that change has occurred. Maybe it is part of your own experience than men today do a lot more in the home than their fathers' generation did.

Equally, some of you may feel that the argument that there has been no change better reflects your own experiences.



Figure 2 A man doing housework

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So how are we to make sense of these different conclusions? And what does the evidence tell us now in the twenty first century? The next extract provides us with more recent evidence. It also provides the tools for thinking about why our experiences might be different.

Activity 1

Read the extract 'Working up a sweat' by Ivor Gaber which is a summary of an extensive research document. Although it is short, the extract contains a lot of different ideas which can make it quite difficult to 'digest'. So when you have read it once, return to it and either draw a diagram summarising the factors which seem to influence the way housework is shared, or list these factors as a series of bullet points. (If you are not sure what these instructions mean have a quick look at [Figures 3](#) and [4](#) in the discussion before you start.)

[View document](#)

Compare your diagram or notes with [Figures 3](#) and [4](#), but remember notes can take different forms so don't worry if your versions are different.

British Household Survey – Ramos

- On average women do almost 4 times as much housework as men
- However variations linked to
 - employment
 - age
 - beliefs/gender ideologies:
 - traditional
 - egalitarian
 - different beliefs held by each partner
- Conclusion
 - differences are narrowing
 - inequalities not seen as unfair

Figure 3 The division of housework today presented as bullet points

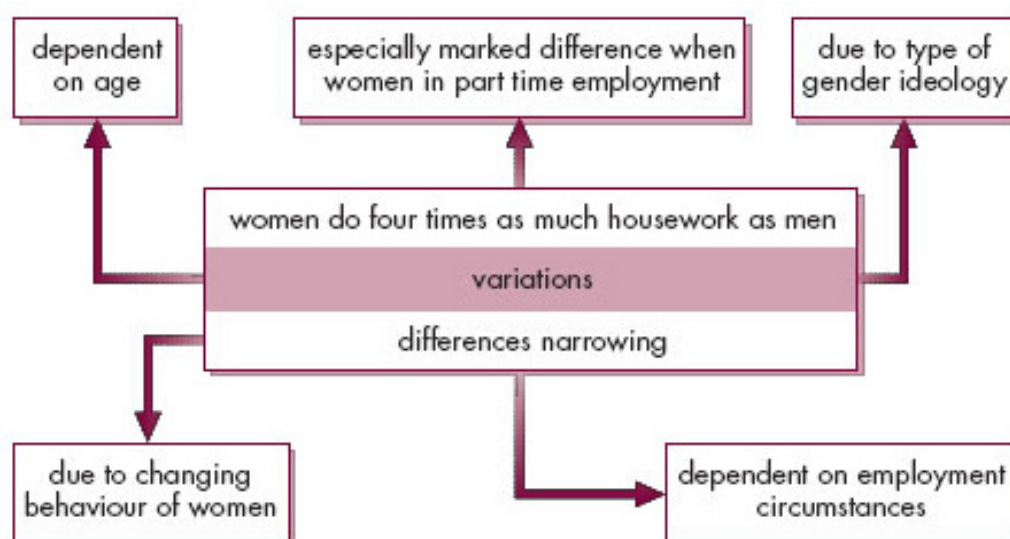


Figure 4 The division of housework today presented as a diagram

So according to this research, women's continued high levels of employment outside the home have not been accompanied by dramatic changes in who does the work in the home although there have been some changes. However there are differences between families according to age (though discussion of this factor is not developed in the extract from Ivor Gaber), the amount of work that women do outside the home, and the beliefs (gender ideologies) of the couple. It is to this third factor that we want to turn finally in looking at the division of labour today.

Reflection

We cannot give a short simple answer to the question of who does the work in the home. However we know that changes, varying in extent, speed and direction, have occurred to women's role during the past two hundred or so years. We know that they are at least partly explained by the connectedness between women's role outside the home and their role in the home. We also know from the Ramos research that families differ in how work is divided. This diversity, which is explored further in the rest of this course, makes it even more difficult to produce one simple answer to the question in this section's title.

1.3 How work is divided in different families

The extract stated that the way the chores are divided depends partly on 'the beliefs the partners have about the role each should play' that is, what we call their 'gender ideology'. In other words people have ideas about what is the appropriate and 'normal' way to divide work between men and women. These ideas may be traditional; which in this case means believing that men and women have different roles to play and that it is women's role to take most responsibility for what happens in the home. Or they may be egalitarian; which in this case means believing that men and women should share the work in the home and that there should be equal opportunities to enter and succeed in the paid work force. Whichever are held, these ideas or beliefs can be very strongly rooted. They may be ideas about gender which people grew up with, which are supported by families close to them, or ideas they share with work mates or colleagues. They are part of a way of looking at and making sense of the world and, most importantly, they result in quite significant differences in how families divide up the work. We cannot ignore the inequalities that may be a product of the traditional ideologies, but being aware of gender ideologies does help us to understand why change might be slow moving or resistant to change.

Gender refers to the expectations of a particular society or group in relation to the attributes and behaviour of men and women.

Gender is different from sex, which refers to the biological differences between men and women.

Recognising that people from different groups in society (whether these relate to age, social background, ethnicity, occupation or even geographical location) may have different ways of thinking and consequently behave differently, takes us to one of the most important social science concepts of all; that of culture. But first there is another reason for being careful about making generalisations about family life and the way work is divided.

2 Changing family forms

2.1 The diversity of family life today

Before concluding our discussion of the division of labour it is very important that we recognise that families today come in many different forms and shapes. During the past fifty years, in particular, family life has become increasingly diverse. Today family life may mean a household consisting of a married mother, father and their children; or unmarried mother and father with their children. It may mean a family with just one parent, a family made up of a couple and their children from previous relationships, or a same sex couple with children (either from a previous relationship, adopted or by sperm donation). This is a significant change from the 1950s when the majority (though not all) families consisted of two parents and their offspring. Not everyone welcomes this change. If you continue with further studies in the social sciences you will become aware of the range of views that exist on family life. But here we would like you to think of this diversity in terms of the greater choice it gives people; and most importantly the very positive consequences for those who have had unhappy experiences of the 1950s type of family life.



Figure 5 Twenty first century families: lesbian parents, a step family, older parents and a single father

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2.2 The diversity of family life today: activities

The following three activities give you an opportunity to look at data which supports some of these conclusions about diversity in family life. We have chosen three sets of data, the first relates to the increase in lone parents, the second to the increase in births outside marriage and the third to marriage, divorce and remarriage figures. As well as building up your understanding of why family life is more diverse today, these activities will give you a taste of 'reading' numerical data.

Activity 2

Look at [Table 1](#), which shows families with lone parents and dependent children as a percentage of all families with dependent children, and answer the following questions.

Table 1 Families in Great Britain with dependent children headed by lone parents

	Percentages				
	1971	1981	1991	1999	2001
Lone mothers					
Single	1	2	6	8	9
Widowed	2	2	1	1	1
Divorced	2	4	6	6	6
Separated	2	2	4	4	4
All lone mothers	7	11	18	20	20
Lone fathers	1	2	1	2	2
All lone parents	8	13	19	22	22

(Source: National Statistics, 2002, p. 48)

1. According to this table the percentage of families headed by lone mothers increased from 7 per cent in 1971 to 20 per cent in 2001. Which category of lone mothers increased the most?
2. In 2001 the percentage of families headed by lone mothers was 20 per cent. What was the percentage of families headed by lone fathers?
3. In 1971 8 per cent of families were headed by lone parents. What was the percentage in 2001?

Note: if you have not come across percentage (written as %) before, it is useful to think of it as 'out of a hundred'.

Answer

Here are the answers:

1. Single mothers increased the most, from 1 per cent to 9 per cent (that is a change from one in every hundred families in 1971 to nine in every hundred families in 2001).
2. 2 per cent of families were headed by lone fathers.
3. The percentage in 2001 was 22 per cent.

So, to summarise, this table provides evidence of an increase in lone parents generally but an increase in single mothers particularly.

Some of you may have found this activity easy. But for some of you this may have been the first time you had to read numerical data in this way. It gets much easier with practice. So don't worry if you did not get the right answers this time. But go over the correct answers now to make sure you know how they were arrived at. The key to success is to take it slowly.

Activity 3

Now look at [Figure 6](#) a graph showing births outside marriage as a percentage of all live births. Again, take each question slowly.

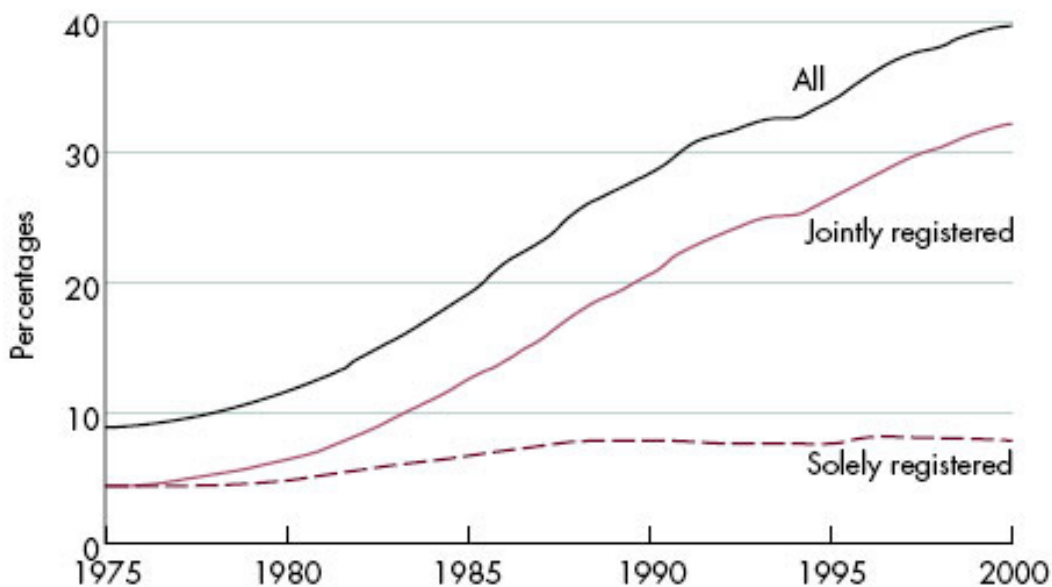


Figure 6 Births outside marriage as a percentage of all live births in Great Britain

(Source: National Statistics, 2002, p. 47)

1. In 1975 just fewer than 10 per cent of all live births were outside marriage. What was the approximate percentage in 2000? (We have asked for the approximate number because although a graph like this gives us a good picture of the changes it is difficult to be precise.)
2. In 1975, of the 10 per cent of births outside marriage, half were jointly registered (i.e. by both parents) and half were solely registered. Which has increased more since then, jointly or singly registered births?

Answer

Here are the answers:

1. The percentage in 2000 was approximately 40.
2. The greatest increase was in jointly registered births.

So, to summarise, this graph provides evidence of the increasing proportion of births to couples rather than to single mothers; but to couples who are not married.

Again many of you will have found this quite an unfamiliar exercise. If you did not get the right answers go back to the graph and follow each curve from the bottom left hand corner.

Activity 4

Finally look at [Figure 7](#) which shows numbers of marriages, divorces and remarriages (in thousands) between 1961 and 1999. This is another way of presenting data in the form of a graph. Answer the questions below.

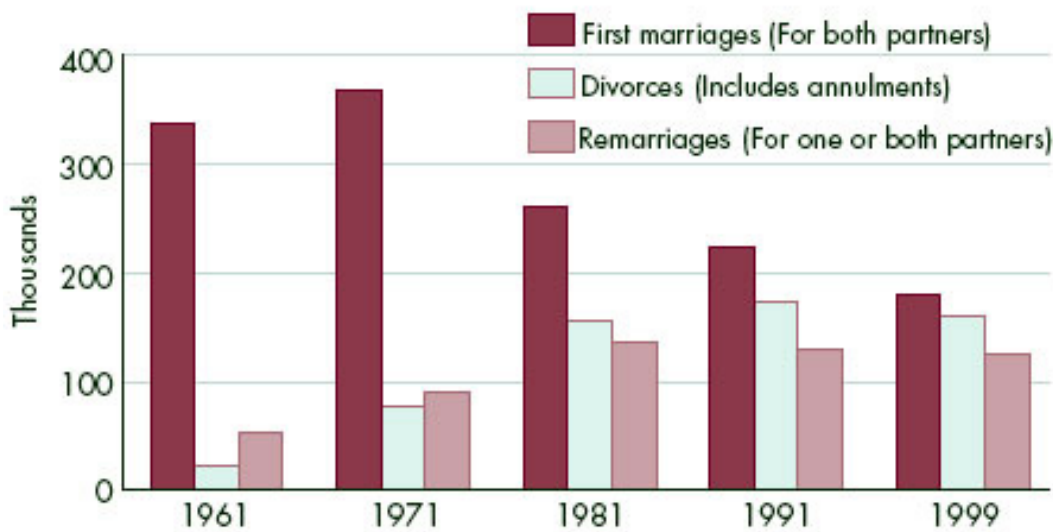


Figure 7 Marriages and divorces in the UK 1961–1999

(Source: National Statistics, 2002, p. 43)

1. The number of first marriages is shown in the left hand block for each year. Approximately how many first marriages were there in 1961?
2. What has happened to the number of first marriages since then?
3. The number of divorces is shown in the middle block. Has the number of divorces increased or decreased since 1961?
4. Approximately how many remarriages were there in 1999?

Answer

Here are the answers:

1. Approximately 330 thousand.
2. After a slight increase in the next decade, it has declined to approximately 180,000 in 1999.
3. It has increased.
4. Approximately 110 thousand.

So, to summarise, we have evidence of an increasing divorce rate, although this seems to have levelled off since 1991. More marriages have been remarriages (for one or both partners) and there have been fewer first time marriages.

We hope that these three activities have given you an idea of how tables and graphs can tell you a lot of information quite quickly. In this case they provide evidence of some of the changes in family life during the latter part of the twentieth century. These changes can explain the increased diversity of family life today.

Conclusion

This free course provided an introduction to studying Education, Childhood & Youth. It took you through a series of exercises designed to develop your approach to study and learning at a distance, and helped to improve your confidence as an independent learner.

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