

# Introduction

- Structures, Processes and Strategies
- Family or Families?
- Families in History
- The Families We Live With, the Families We Live By
- The Contents of the Book
- Summary
- Explore Further

**Keywords:** family structures, process, global strategies, history, idealizations, realities

Welcome to *Understanding Families: A Global Introduction*. Our subject matter is one all readers have experiences to draw upon and many will do so with a range of powerful and often conflicting emotions. All of us are, to a greater or lesser extent, saturated in the implications of families. Popular culture provides a seemingly endless stream of commentary and critique about families, such as that found on the pages of celebrity and human interest magazines and in online blogs. Soap opera storylines allow us to partake, voyeuristically, of other people's family dramas with only a faint whiff of the pain such misadventures would bring if we were actually caught up in the tugging emotions as flesh and blood participants.

'Zeitgeist' films and other manifestations of popular culture which chart the relational landscape of society have enduring appeal. The fact that we find films, plays, musicals and books that attend to the ordinariness of messy family life utterly compelling is evident in their box office successes, DVD sales and literary ratings. Similarly there has been a surge of interest in family lineage, a leisure activity which, according to the sociologist Carol Smart (2007), uses the past to make sense of the present. Also, for example, there has been a rash of television programmes where a range of celebrities go back to their roots.

A key aim for us is to address diversity by looking across the world at the range of challenges families face and how they are met. Given this global perspective, we ask the reader to note we use the terms *majority world* and *minority world*. These acknowledge that those living in more affluent societies, including those in North America, Europe, Australia, New Zealand and parts of Latin America are in the statistical minority. What has often been called the 'Third World' is the majority world with most of the global population and landmass (Punch, 2003). Using these terms promotes an appreciation of global inequalities

## 2 INTRODUCTION

and encourages us to scrutinize commonly held ways of reflecting on the world and turn these – quite literally – upside down.

### STRUCTURES, PROCESSES AND STRATEGIES

This book aims to employ all the mental and personal ‘hooks’ students will already have as they come to this subject. We do not assume familiarity with prior social science studies on families. Our guiding objective is to provide an accessible treatment of key trends, explanations, policies and ideas on and about families to our main audiences. Given that we are all instinctively drawn to and implicated in the subject matter of family studies, we want to make it accessible to students not just in mainstream social studies but also in subjects ranging across education, social work, business and nursing.

One important distinction we make at the outset and return to throughout the book is between family structure and family process. These are distinctive dimensions to the study of families and we offer definitions for both in Boxes I and II.

#### **Box I Families’ structures**

Family structure refers to family composition or how families are formed. A family might be an elderly grandmother and her orphaned grandchildren, the vast majority of whose other relatives have succumbed to acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS)-related deaths. Or it might be a same-sex couple who have adopted or conceived children through assisted reproductive technology (ART). Equally it might be a mother, a father and their biological children in what tends to be referred to (especially if the parents are married) as the traditional nuclear family.

Having defined how a family is formed or composed – the family structure – we turn to what happens day in day out. For example, who cares for whom in the grandmother and grandchild family? Which parent tends to administer first aid in the ‘traditional’ or in the same-sex family, and in whose diary do dental appointments tend to be entered? Are disagreements resolved through discussion or are members coerced into consensus by threats of, or actual violence? These are aspects of family processes.

#### **Box II Family processes**

Family processes refer to the functions carried out by family members, or the dynamics of the relationships in the family structure. The way families are composed and the processes that occur within a family vary enormously within and between societies. The student of family studies must appreciate how structures

and processes interweave, and how these impact on, and are affected by, wider contexts of paid work, education, health services and so on.

If family processes is the term used to describe the dynamics of what goes on in families then the term family 'practices' offers a way to identify and examine the 'little fragments of daily life which are part of the normal, taken for granted existence of the practitioners' (Morgan, 1996: 190). Not only do family practices shape and organize time and its use but they are also highly meaningful in personal or moral terms. At the same time what people do with and for their children or elderly dependants and why they do those things have huge ramifications for, among other things, the human resources policies of businesses, hospital admissions procedures and social work protocols.

→ In Chapter 2 we discuss a range of explanations of family structures and processes. The idea of family practices offers insights to family processes and the work of David Morgan is discussed in more detail in Box 2.2 on page 59.

An important debate running through subsequent chapters is the extent to which families are shaped by what is external to them, most notably large-scale (or macro-) economic processes. Sociological accounts that emphasize how families take on distinct forms in particular economic systems such as capitalism (Fine, 1992) are examples of economic determinism. These are contrasted by Cheal (2002) with accounts that suggest that family life is less determined by large-scale economic shifts than might be supposed and he argues for paying closer attention to family processes and how these are evident in family strategies (see Box III).

### Box III Family strategies and household strategies

Families 'create and shape their responses to change, through adaptive *family strategies*' (Cheal, 2002: 14, emphasis in original). Wallace proposes the term *household strategies*. She describes how the idea of strategies has assumed relevance in studies in Latin America, Ireland, Italy, in developing countries where there is no state support and in post-communist countries in Eastern and Central Europe (such as Hungary, the Czech Republic and the Ukraine) (Wallace, 2002). Here we note that Cheal uses the term family and Wallace uses household. The former encourages us to consider members of families whether in the context of their relationships which may be through kin, cohabitation or the law, whereas the latter term is broader, including all those who live in the same dwelling regardless of their relationships.

→ In Chapter 1 we consider how the terms family and household differ. All key terms are also defined in the glossary at the end of the book.

Throughout the seven chapters that follow we return to family structures and strategies, processes and practices to aid understandings and explanations of families. We also note how differences and similarities in these aspects are evident when we look at families from a global perspective.

? Consider how ideas of family strategies and household strategies differ. Can you identify examples of how these ideas overlap and differ?

## FAMILY OR FAMILIES?

In almost every occupation in which it is possible to work, or any course we study, the implications of 'family' are hard to ignore, and essential to be aware of. This is why this book imparts tools for the building of an understanding of the family and an appreciation of all the richness of social experience implied in that term. By introducing readers to a wide range of transdisciplinary and international social science work, we hope to provide some conceptual starting points for constructing a framework of understanding about family relationships. How do these relationships affect what motivates people? To what extent are these their most pressing and personal concerns? What are the barriers thrown up in people's lives by the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage? What determines if these become insuperable or hurdles which, when crossed, lead to the transformation of life chances?

The people we relate to as teachers, students, clients, line managers, workers, patients, and friends are also caught up in the complex web of family membership. Their roles as mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, daughters and all other possible permutations impact on their occupational roles and are themselves affected by the demands of what might be termed the non-domestic sphere. Family dynamics often strongly determine how people engage with other aspects of life and we consider this in more detail in Box IV.

### Box IV The family as a reference point

Research by Jordan et al. (1994) into middle-class couples with children reveals the extent to which people's accounts of who they are and what they are trying to achieve use 'family' as a reference point. For example, actions are framed in terms of prioritizing family responsibilities in such a way that individuals

constantly and consciously place limits on what is reasonable for them to seek for themselves. One interpretation of their conclusions is that ‘the sense of self which an individual has is frequently hard to separate from their sense of the family unit to which they belong’ (Allan and Crow, 2001: 11). Yet this need not lead to the presumption that family and individual interests always coincide. The contested nature of family membership is most clearly seen when family interests and individual interests diverge (Allan and Crow, 2001).

It is important to consider how family dynamics play out in families in different cultures or groups. One example is in certain religious communities where gender roles may be more tightly ascribed as well as obligations to family and kin. However, what actually happens in the home and at family gatherings may be more relaxed and less ascribed.

Today there is general acceptance of the diverse nature of families. Debates and research have emphasized the need to rethink how we define and consider families. One example is parenting and ethnicity. Phoenix and Husain (2007) note how in Britain, Black and Asian parents have come under scrutiny. Differences in culture and in approaches to parenting can be viewed as unacceptable or even deviant. They argue that how we construct and understand ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ has a bearing on family policies and services. Race is a term used to describe ‘people who belong to the same human stock’ (Phoenix and Husain, 2007: 5) and ethnicity refers to a community or grouping which shares common cultural practices and history. Not fully appreciating what goes to make up a family’s ethnicity can and does impact on the relationships between families and service providers such as teachers, nurses and social workers, and neighbours. As we discuss across the book, social class, gender, religion, sexuality and impairment will also differentiate experiences of race and ethnicity. Nevertheless, it remains the case that race and ethnicity can result in stereotyped views and assumptions about parenting, caring and familial relationships. Sometimes these assumptions are contradictory. For example, South Asian families can be considered too narrow and traditional in their parenting styles, especially in their upbringing of girls, and yet can be supportive and proud of education and training, resulting in notable attainments in qualifications for children of both sexes.

A constant theme running through the literature is the extent to which, in recent decades, families and the way people live their lives in households and relationships have become more varied. In response to this variation, core concepts in social science literature, such as that of ‘family cycle’ with its implication that discrete, easily discernible family units pass through routine stages, ‘each one tidily following the last’ (Allan and Crow, 2001: 3), have undergone revision. Adopting instead the term ‘family course’ (Finch, 1987) permits the exploration of diversity in how individuals’ family lives and commitments develop over time. Even those people who seem to be following fairly ‘conventional’ pathways are caught up in the more complex family lives of their friends, children, siblings and colleagues. Relationship formation patterns such as living apart together (LAT), cohabitation, and remarriage go alongside the parenting of ‘his’, ‘her’ and ‘our’ children, the possibility of several different pairs of grandparents, and parenting alone for some or all of a child’s lifecourse.

Yet in spite of this growing complexity, the term ‘family’ continues to have a meaning that is recognizable across the globe. Moreover, we all tend to hold assumptions about family life whether they relate to typical structures or forms or to what individuals can expect or demand from other family members and relatives, in other words about the typical processes that go on inside families.

? What are the differences between the terms family and families? Why do these matter?

## FAMILIES IN HISTORY

One unsubstantiated impression is that before the industrial revolution many or most people lived in extended, multigenerational families, which could accommodate those unable to work, including the younger, weaker members and older members. Peter Laslett studied the size and shape of families over the centuries by gathering large amounts of statistical evidence and was obliged to demolish what he regarded as a romantic myth: ‘the wish to believe in the large, kin-enfolding, multigenerational, welfare- and support-providing household in the world we have lost’ (2005: 92).

The ‘lost world’ he refers to is typically considered to belong to the pre-industrialization phase in socioeconomic development. Yet, considering how common early death was prior to industrialization, the image of a three-generational family typically cooperating and caring for each other is flawed, not least by the fact that very few people lived long enough to become grandparents. Allan (1985) also makes the point that most families were materially ill-equipped to meet extensive health and welfare needs effectively and usually had scant medical information.

Following a review of historical evidence in the UK, Thane (2010) concluded that those who speak of a golden age for families are ignoring the large bodies of evidence demonstrating that conception outside marriage, extramarital sex and violence in families are not recent phenomena. But although trends from the past continue, the causes of these differ. For example, divorce has replaced death as the major reason for the premature ending of a marriage. Sons growing up without resident male ‘role models’ and complex stepfamilies were not uncommon for centuries, but this was caused largely by early death, especially among younger men. High death rates, driven by diseases, accidents and wars, resulted in high rates of lone motherhood in the past.

Poor families have always struggled and inequality is a key factor in how families manage and cope with stresses and tensions. In summary, Thane’s position is that politicians, policy makers and people who reminisce about a golden era when most of the population lived in stable two-parent nuclear families without extramarital sex and family violence are misinformed (Thane, 2010). Probert and Callan (2011) offer a critique of Thane’s review of historical evidence on families and family life. They argue that marriage remains a dominant type of relationship although there are diverse forms of families

today. As the process of ending of a marriage is different now, having shifted from being caused by death to being initiated through divorce law, so too is the nature of suffering. Cohabitation has increased as a family type and the legal standing of these relationships varies between countries. Probert and Callan (2011) note that contemporary changes in families reflect longevity, new family law, changes in social and gender norms and economic transformations. To look back is not the best approach as we are not comparing like with like. We can, however, note and assess the trends and how changes come about.

Smart (2007) describes the need to understand the 'iconic' nature of the family and the cultural impact of that right across society. In spite of most people's proximity to, and intimacy with, the subject of family, there are many idealizations and myths illuminated in family studies and the related literature. The social historian John Gillis (2004), for example, draws a distinction between the two family systems he argues that we now have in contemporary Europe and North America: the families we live 'with' and those we live 'by'. We can, he says, access much information about the former from statistics describing what types of families people are living in, the entry and exit rates into and from various relationship statuses and future projections of trends. However, in order to understand the families we live 'by', we need the output of a different kind of research, associated with social anthropology and a school of thought in sociology based upon the idea that people act based upon their definitions of situations (known as symbolic interactionism). The mental images, rituals and stories around family are the subject matter of these disciplines in their exploitation of the family's iconic character, and to what we aspire to, even against personal and social odds.

## THE FAMILIES WE LIVE WITH, THE FAMILIES WE LIVE BY

Divorce rates are high and marriage rates have fallen by two-thirds in countries such as the UK and New Zealand. However, an analysis of surveys such as the British Household Panel Study found that when asked about their future intentions, three-quarters of men and women reported that they were either planning, or expected, to get married. In Sweden, the data reveal similar attitudes, which might be surprising given its perceived progressiveness illustrated through familial and gender policies that claim to promote equality (Bernhardt, 2004). Nevertheless, an analysis of couples' attitudes to marriage led the sociologist Eva Bernhardt to conclude that 'an overwhelming majority of young cohabiting couples in Sweden expect to get married' (2004: 8). Given the high rates of relationship breakdown, mental health difficulties and the negative effect of poverty on family functioning, Gillis (2004) concludes that the families we live *with* may encounter multiple difficulties. The idealizations we hold and the high hopes we have for these same families, however, mean that the families we live *by* seem to be flourishing through what Smart describes as 'an investment in the cultural imaginary' (2007: 34). The kind of research that provides insights into how people experience family life and how they *feel* about it, adopts a sentiments approach. Chapter 3 compares and contrasts this with demographic and economic approaches to the study of family.

? Consider the distinction Gillis makes above. Can you think of examples of family ideals that people might subscribe to regardless of the experiences of those around them and the 'track record' of their own family?

It is not just shared biology or romantic possibilities that exert a pull on our heart-strings: many adoptive parents agonize over the children they are raising as profoundly as if those children carried their genes; same-sex and opposite-sex friendships can engage our emotions as powerfully as relationships with those normatively considered to be part of the family. Indeed a large body of sociological work is building up around the concept of 'families of choice', which are contrasted with 'families of fate'. This literature, which we discuss more extensively in Chapter 5, examines differences between those relationships that are *chosen* and which can include both kin and non-kin, and those relationships that are *given* primarily, but not necessarily exclusively, through kinship ties.

Other writers instead draw attention to the blurring of boundaries between friendship and family relationships (McKie and Cunningham-Burley, 2005). They problematize other distinctions, hitherto considered to be clear-cut, such as notions of the public and the private where the realm of family is treated as part of the latter. Citing theorists like Bourdieu (1996: 25), who stated that

the public vision ... is deeply involved in our vision of domestic things, and our most private behaviours themselves depend on public actions, such as housing policy or, more directly, family policy

McKie and Cunningham-Burley emphasize that public and private spheres are not isolated but are rather separated by a permeable boundary 'which shapes and is shaped by our personal lives' (2005: 8).

Morgan (1996) draws attention to a trend in sociology that ended in the 1960s, which conjoined family and community studies and to think about family relationships in the wider frame of overlapping ties of family, kin, friends and neighbours. This recognized the continuities between work and non-work, domestic and occupational spheres and, again, the public and the private. However, more recently the study of family relationships has become separate from other sets of relationships, concentrating on marital or couple relationships, on parenting and socialization and, in short, on treating family relationships more systematically. Morgan (1996) goes on to describe how feminist studies moved the field of family relationships to a new level of integration with other sociological sites of interest. This was, he said, achieved by replacing the link between family and community with a link between family and gender, where gender acted as something of a code word for women, their lives, their work and ultimately their long-neglected significance in sociological analysis. In Chapter 2 we look in depth at the contribution made by feminist theory and site it in the context of other

major strands of social theory that have had a particularly strong influence on the study of families.

It is worth noting that coming to the fore at present is a concern with the new and multiple ways in which people feel that they can belong. As well as wanting freedom and mobility, people also need a sense of tradition (perhaps better expressed as a connection with the past, as we said earlier) and belonging (Eagleton, 2003). There is also a growing interest in the morality of family life, with writers such as Williams (2004) exploring how commitment and care might be changing in shape rather than in quality. More prosaically, there is a discernible movement back towards seeing the primacy of economics, raising one of sociology's key issues of the extent to which people are free actors or are unduly constrained by external, 'structural' forces beyond their control.

There is also a strong link between most governments' social policies and their economic policies, reflected in a concern with how paid work articulates with family life across the income spectrum. Supranational organizations, including the United Nations (UN), the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the European Union (EU), address the role of families, recognizing the work of nurturing the next generation, caring for those who cannot be in paid work, and enabling others to participate in education, training and employment.

→ The interweaving of families and economy may be taken for granted but is important and we devote much attention to such issues in Chapters 4 (on policy) and 6 (on work and families).

## THE CONTENTS OF THE BOOK

As we noted in the section 'How to Use this Book', throughout the book we have used the signposting mechanisms of an arrow to note a connection between topics or issues across chapters, a question mark for reflective and think points, and boxes to draw out definitions and highlight relevant pieces of research. The intention in using this structure and approach is to provide as many connecting and reflective points as possible in the hope that this enhances the reader's ability to be engaged. As the sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2003b: 6) has noted

The self is an instrument of enquiry. Every time we see we compare ... so our subjectivity, with the wealth of comparisons it implants in us transplants us into tourists of ourselves, visitors of the odd sights of everyday life. It removes the dull sense that anything is at all obvious.

The signposts appear in all seven chapters of the book and below we outline the contents of each of these.

In Chapter 1 we pose the question ‘What is the family?’ by looking at what is considered mainstream and what is marginal, and the shifting nature of that distinction in many societies. The overarching aim of this chapter is to provide factual information in ways that illustrate and illuminate trends. We also consider how families ‘mesh’ with wider kinship networks in terms of how individuals identify themselves, and in terms of the nature of obligations, responsibilities and expectations towards and regarding kin. In the second half of the chapter we present two case studies of welfare policies on families in France, Russia, former East and West Germany, and subsequently Asia, noting trends in China, Japan, Singapore and South Korea.

Chapter 2 outlines how key theoretical perspectives aim to explain families. Without attempting to address theoretical frameworks in depth, we concentrate on exploring why we have theories by treating them under a limited number of broad headings (economic systems and perspectives; gender and identities and political).

Chapter 3 shows how we research families by presenting for consideration some of the dilemmas, data and debates tackled by seminal, earlier studies. It also contrasts quantitative data available in national and international surveys, which provide information on broad trends over time but offer few insights to the everyday workings of families and relationships. Qualitative methods are often used to explore the ‘practices’ of families, but in order to chart and mesh trends and practices there would seem to be a notable shift to multimethod projects. This trend brings a range of challenges and opportunities to family research.

This review of how we might best address the complexities of familial and human relationships provides a framework for Chapter 4, which considers politics, policies and practices, the evidence base on which politicians, policy makers and practitioners draw or ignore and how the relationship between these three groups of agents plays out differently according to context.

In Chapter 5 we chart and address the dynamic nature of relationships and of family formation, dissolution and re-formation. Most of us will marry or cohabit at some points during our lifetime. We are likely to forge a range of relationships in and around our family. These may focus on the creation of children and become blood ties, or include step-parenting and thus a growth in immediate family membership. Intimate and sexual relationships, care roles and interdependencies underpin family life. Insufficient access to material and emotional resources poses significant challenges for families and relationships, often leading to tensions, abuse and violence. Friends, neighbours, churches, charities and welfare services also engage with families to offer support in general and at critical points.

Chapter 6 explores the interweaving of employment, work and care, as families strive to achieve a balance between economic necessities and social and emotional needs. Although changes in care facilities and services, backed by policies, have improved the potential for parents (especially mothers) to enter or increase their participation in the workforce, these developments mask a connection between women and caring that enduringly underpins policy-oriented notions of ‘the family’ and what women and men are expected to do.

The themes of marriage and cohabitation, solo living, friendships, social networks and communities recur throughout the book, and in the final chapter, Chapter 7, we draw these threads together. We not only revisit differing ways of explaining and researching families in the global context but also explore the future of families. The wider policy agendas and the significant role many states have assumed in areas formerly considered to fall outside their purview are examined. Global economic and demographic trends continue to impact on families and relationships to varying degrees in what continues to be a world of inequalities and challenges.

At the end of each chapter we offer suggestions for further reading and a list of websites of relevance. The glossary at the back of the book offers brief definitions of key terms and concepts.

## SUMMARY

Debates about families are lively and achieve a high profile in media, policy and politics. Relevant social issues include parenting, longevity, solo living, crime, religion and how family life plays out in developing societies. Politicians utilize (at best) and manipulate (at worst) meanings and understandings about 'the family' for the purposes of making policy, often in ways that are advantageous to public institutions rather than to private individuals. For example, particular family structures may be assumed such as the male breadwinner and female home-based carer, even in societies where it is not uncommon for one parent to raise a child on their own. Or, when assessing how adult individuals' health and social care needs are to be met, assumptions are often made about the level of provision families are capable of and willing to deliver: in other words about ideal family processes. Family issues are not just of universal *personal* relevance. The study of families draws attention to profound changes as well as to continuities in contemporary societies across the globe. It also illuminates the relevance of families for all aspects of social life.

Physically or mentally, directly or indirectly, our families influence almost every waking moment of our lives. Our aim within this book is to take the reader beyond that truism and to anatomize the ways in which family relationships, past, present and anticipated, shape and may even ultimately determine the meanings of other aspects of our existence. We do this by drawing on the organizing themes of family structure and family process, how families form and how they function. We look across the world, adopting a global perspective rather than restricting the subject matter to what would be immediately familiar to readers in the minority world. Given the introductory nature of this text, the aim was to build incrementally on the basic foundation of commonly held understandings of the family, to provide something akin to a mezzanine floor from where the reader could explore unfamiliar concepts. It is our hope that such a text will encourage many to move further up the family studies building, and that those not tempted will still have come away with a much improved framework for understanding their own and others' family lives.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Graham Allan and Graham Crow's *Families, Households and Society* (2001) is well-respected in the area of family studies. These authors have addressed most of the areas essential to the field. The content is largely minority world and mostly UK based.

Jon Bernardes' *Family Studies. An Introduction* (1997) remains an excellent introduction and, before the publication of *Understanding Families: A Global Introduction*, the only real resource book aimed specifically at students new to family studies.

David Cheal's *Sociology of Family Life* (2002) provides a more introductory tone to material. The book has a useful glossary and each chapter begins with a signpost paragraph of chapter content and ends with a summarizing discussion.

Jane Ribbens McCarthy and Rosalind Edwards' *Key Concepts in Family Studies* (2010) comprises 48 short essays on major themes significant to the study of families. It is a reference book as well as offering insights to the analysis of families.

David Morgan's *Family Connections: An Introduction to Family Studies* (1996) remains an influential book in which he introduces the notion of family practices.

## USEFUL WEBSITES

Centre for Research on Families, Life Course and Generations, University of Leeds: [www.sociology.leeds.ac.uk/flag/about](http://www.sociology.leeds.ac.uk/flag/about)

Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, University of Edinburgh: [www.crfr.ac.uk](http://www.crfr.ac.uk).

Clearing House on International Developments in Child, Youth and Family Policies at Columbia University in New York City: [www.childpolicyintl.org](http://www.childpolicyintl.org).

The Morgan Centre for the Study of Relationships and Personal Life. Available at [www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/morgancentre](http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/morgancentre).

The Weeks Centre, South Bank University, London: [www.lsbu.ac.uk/ahs/research/weeks.shtml](http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/ahs/research/weeks.shtml).