

Family - Summary points

Source: Giddens, Anthony (2006): *Sociology*, 5th edition, Cambridge, pp. 247

Kinship comprises either genetic ties or ties initiated by marriage.

A **family** is a group of kin having responsibility for the upbringing of children.

Marriage is a bond between two people living together in a socially approved sexual relationship.

A **nuclear family** is a household in which a married couple (or single parent) lives together with their own or adopted children.

Where kin other than a married couple and children live in a same household, or are involved in close and continuous relationships, we speak of the existence of an extended family.

In Western societies, marriage, and therefore the family, is associated with **monogamy** (a culturally approved sexual relationship between one woman and one man). Many other cultures tolerate or encourage **polygamy**, in which an individual may be married to two or more spouses at the same time.

Divorce rates have been rising in the post-war years, and the number of first marriages has declined. As a result, a growing proportion of the population lives in lone-parent households.

Rates of remarriage are quite high. Remarriage can lead to the formation of a **reconstituted family** - a family in which at least one of the adults has children from a previous marriage or relationship. The term 'absent father' refers to fathers who have infrequent contact with their children. (or no contact at all) following a separation or divorce.

Marriage is no longer the defining basis for a union between two people. **Cohabitation** (where a couple lives together in a sexual relationship outside marriage) has become more widespread in many industrial countries. Gay men and lesbians are increasingly able to live together as couples as attitudes to homosexuality become more relaxed. In some instances, homosexual couples have gained the legal right to be defined as a family.

Family life is by no means always a picture of harmony and happiness; sexual abuse and domestic violence sometimes occur within it. Most sexual abuse of children and domestic violence is carried out by males, and seems to connect with other types of violent behaviour in which some men are involved.

Marriage has ceased to be the condition for regular sexual experience, for either sex; it is no longer the basis of economic activity. It seems certain that varying forms of social and sexual relationships will flourish still further. Marriage and the family remain firmly established institutions, yet are undergoing major stresses and strains.