



## Civil Partnerships and Changing Family Relationships

### Introduction

During the 1960's there were many changes to UK laws, as this decade is often referred to as a time of great social change. Great social change is often a precursor to changes to the law. Laws were passed on abortion, divorce, drugs and sexuality. Consequently, social life has not been the same since the 1960's. The 1970's then saw changes in the law related to discrimination, mostly in relation to gender and race.

**Activity:** Do some research into the above law changes. Try to find out what was happening socially, culturally and politically to bring about the changes. Then write up your findings.

The information in this Factsheet would be relevant to exam questions on the topic of **Families and Households**.

Social changes over the past five to six decades have impacted significantly on the family structure and family relationships.

A family is a social institution, which consists of a group of people who are related by kinship ties – this can be blood relations, marriage or civil partnerships and adoption. Cohabiting couples are also regarded as a family, though not formally linked by kinship.

The family has undoubtedly changed over the decades – nuclear and extended families being the predominant types prior to the social changes of the 1960's. However, in contemporary society the family can take many forms including:

- Modified extended family
- Beanpole family
- Reconstituted family
- Lone parent family
- Gay or lesbian family

This is known as family diversity.

**Activity:** Write a definition for each of the family types above.



The Labour Party formed a government between 1997 to 2010, and though there were changes in policy and direction from the previous Conservative government, there continued to be concerns (emanating from New Right ideas) about dysfunctional families and a lack of male role models in large numbers of female-headed lone parent families. However, Tony Blair's government shaped social policy to take account of a growing diversity of family forms. It could be argued that this Labour government social policies were in some measure adapted as a consequence of feminist critiques of the family.

A raft of new social policies were introduced to support families such as:

- New Deals to support lone parents make the move from welfare to employment
- The introduction of Britain's first National Minimum Wage to help the poorly paid
- Child tax credits and measures to cut down on child poverty

All of these did not discriminate against certain types of family, but were set up for all family forms and types.

There was also an increase in free childcare and nursery education (with all 3 – 4-year-olds guaranteed five half days of nursery education weekly). This supported both two and lone parent families and enabled them to be in paid employment without high costs of child minding to encumber them.

In 2005 the Labour government passed The Civil Partnership Act which enabled gay and lesbian couples to form a relationship which led to the recognition of gay and lesbian couples as an acceptable family form for the first time.

The Civil Partnership Act was passed by the Parliament in November 2004, and came into effect on 5<sup>th</sup> December 2005. Under the Act, same-sex couples can register a civil partnership, which had almost the same legal effects, rights and obligations as a marriage for opposite-sex couples.

As the date loomed for this Act to take effect, hundreds of gay couples prepared to form civil partnerships, as there had previously been decades of campaigning. The first ceremonies under the Civil Partnerships Act could take place in Northern Ireland on 19<sup>th</sup> December, followed by Scotland the next day and England and Wales on 21<sup>st</sup> December. Councils in the UK had a surge of bookings for the days and weeks after these dates.

new Labour  
new Britain

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According to some BBC news research these are the figures recorded for provisional bookings:

Brighton & Hove	510	Westminster	140
Manchester	88	Newcastle	80
Birmingham	70	Leeds	60
Edinburgh	76	Sheffield	58
Nottingham	50	Glasgow	30
Cardiff	24	Belfast	20
Liverpool	20	Londonderry	6
Aberdeen	5		

**Activity:** Summarise these statistics. Do they tell us anything about specific areas? If so what?

The Labour Party lost the General Election in 2010, but the Conservative Party did not win an overall majority, so formed a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. Though tempered by the Liberal Democrats, the family policies took on some of the New Right agendas of the 1980's and 90's, with a renewed emphasis on the promotion of marriage, rather than cohabitation, in an attempt to lessen family breakdown.

The Conservative manifesto leading up to the 2010 General Election made a commitment to offering tax benefits for married people, in a bid to encourage people to get married.



The government also introduced austerity cuts which saw public spending on welfare services (including children's services) cut quite severely, in an attempt to reflect New Right thinking which sought to ensure the family was able to help themselves, not rely on the state.

Interestingly, against this backdrop, this same coalition government, made same-sex marriage legal in 2014 which made same-sex marriages legal on the same basis as opposite-sex couples.

Quite clearly, both of these changes – Civil Partnerships and same-sex marriage would impact on family life.

*We currently have a Conservative government. Do some research into what their policies are on families and family relationships. You can either go to the Conservative Party website ([www.conservatives.com](http://www.conservatives.com)), or the government website ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)), where you can access the different government departments, or look at some news stories in the newspapers.*

**Activity:** Summarise the key policies on families and family relationships.

According to [www.newfamilysocial.org.uk](http://www.newfamilysocial.org.uk) 1 in 10 adoptions in England in 2016 were same-sex couples. The official government estimate is that in the UK in 2013 there were around 20,000 dependent children living in same sex couple families. As of 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2017, there had been 2,347 reported adoptions by LGBT people in Great Britain since records began.

The table below shows a summary of the total number of adoptions by country to adopters either in same-sex relationships, civil partnerships or same-sex marriages:

Year	England	Scotland	Wales
2015/16	450	30	20
2014/15	450	22	30
2013/14	340	17	25
2012/13	230	14	20
2011/12	160	8	5
2010/11	100	1	5
2009/10	120	5	5
2008/09	120	0	0
2007/08	80	0	0
2006/07	90	0	0
<b>Totals:</b>	<b>2140</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>110</b>

Same-sex couples with children are becoming more common, however, still relatively rare. The majority, of same-sex couples with children are lesbian couples, though there are growing numbers of gay male couples either adopting or having children.

According to [www.newfamilysocial.org.uk](http://www.newfamilysocial.org.uk):

In England between 01/04/2013 and 31/03/2014 - 935 people who identify as a lesbian, gay or bi-sexual were approved to adopt, of these:

- 365 identify as lesbian
- 560 identify as gay
- 10 identify as bi-sexual



There is clearly evidence of an increased social acceptance of same-sex relationships in recent times. Certainly, opinion polls show more tolerance of homosexuality. Jeffrey Weeks (1999) asserts that the increased social acceptance may explain a trend in more recent times towards same-sex cohabitation and stable relationships that are, similar to those found among opposite sex couples. He describes these as *chosen families* and argues that they offer the same security and stability as opposite sex families.

Allan and Crow (2001) suggest that because of the absence of a legal framework until 2005, same-sex partners have had to negotiate their commitments and responsibilities more than married heterosexual couples. They argue that this may have made same-sex relationships more flexible and possibly less stable than opposite sex relationships.

David Cheal (2002) suggests that while many gay and lesbian people welcome the opportunity to have their partnerships legally recognised, some feel that it can limit flexibility and negotiability of relationships. They prefer to retain the status of 'difference' rather than adopt heterosexual relationship norms.

Gay and lesbian households can contain children, from either a previous opposite-sex relationship or the possible result of new reproductive technologies, as well as adoption. Surrogacy is an example of a new reproductive technology. Biology no longer restricts the possibilities for forming and enlarging families by having children e.g. for gay and lesbian people.

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Callahan (1997) argues that gay and lesbian households should, be seen as families because their relationships are not necessarily different from those in opposite-sex/heterosexual households.

Edmund Leach (1967) suggests that the happily married couple – male breadwinner/female housewife and carer with two children is called the *cereal packet image* of the family. He saw this image as prominent in advertising.

Is this still the case today within the changing family structure?

**Activity:** Do a search on YouTube to see if you can find British advertisements of same-sex families/households advertising products, similar to those that a traditional nuclear family would advertise e.g. breakfast cereals or gravy. Leach was writing in 1967, so try to find evidence that his arguments are out of date. Assuming that you are able to find examples, analyse them to see if the same-sex family is represented the same as the traditional nuclear family or differently.

### Children in same sex families

In an article in the Independent entitled 'In families with same-sex parents, the kids are alright,' by Jennifer Power 4<sup>th</sup> June 2015 – she argues that Children raised by same-sex parents do better when they are living in a city or country that is more socially progressive and accepting of homosexuality.



She continues: 'A central argument made against same-sex marriage is that children born into those marriages will be disadvantaged, they will grow up with inappropriate gender role modelling, be bullied at school and suffer poorer emotional well-being than their peers.' The research that she looks at (Jennifer Power is a Research Fellow at Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society at La Trobe University) confirms that even if people do not agree with gay marriage on moral or religious grounds, the argument that it harms children do not stack up against current evidence.

In 2010, American researchers published results from a meta-analysis of 33 studies comparing the well-being of children raised by opposite-sex couples with children raised by same-sex couples. This study found no evidence that children raised by same-sex parents fared any worse than other children on a range of behavioural, educational, emotional or social outcomes.

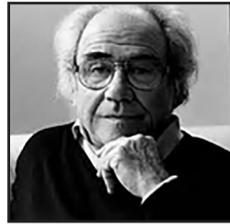
**Exam Hint:** It is important to show some evidence in your answers and it is good to use current research.

### Postmodernists

Possibly the most relevant theory to apply to contemporary society, and the state of flux within family relationships is postmodernism. Theorists such as Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) and Jean Baudrillard (2001) suggest that contemporary society is changing rapidly, people are uncertain and question a range of traditionally accepted norms, values and morals. Society is much more fragmented, with a pick n' mix culture, whereby people are making their own choices about what to believe in and how to live their lives.

There has been a disintegration of the traditional family, this is being replaced by a wide diversity of relationships in which people are choosing to live, Gernsheim (2002) argues. There is no longer the burden of traditional ideas and expectations about marriage, parenthood and family life and traditional sexual identities. This lack of constraints in a sense facilitates the growing number of same-sex families.

### Jean Baudrillard



For postmodernists, people now mix and match relationships to suit them and these get changed over time, just like buying goods at the shops, and shopping around to get the right goods at the right prices. It can be argued that the traditional family as a social institution is redundant, replaced by a range of ever changing personal relationships and household arrangements which people are choosing to live.

Postmodern theorists do not believe a single family type is either dominant or the norm in modern society. For Judith Stacey (1993) arrangements in the postmodern family are *diverse, fluid and unresolved*.

**Activity:** Think about the quote above 'diverse, fluid and unresolved' and apply it to same-sex families by writing a paragraph. Conduct some research within your Sociology group as to family make-up, to ascertain whether the theories above can be supported or not supported.

**Exam Hint:** It would be perfectly legitimate in the exam to use any research you conduct personally to illustrate and help evaluate any theories that you use.

### Feminists

Feminists highlight differences in the variety of domestic arrangements, and the different effects family life can have. They can be linked to postmodernist theories of family. Cheshire Calhoun (1997) for example, looks predominantly at lesbian families and argues that modern family life is characterised by choice. Lesbian and gay families are *chosen families*. She believes that gay and lesbian relationships are just as much family relationships as heterosexual couples. Feminists and postmodernists reject the notion that there is a single type of family that perform particular functions. With increasing diversity of family life, they argue that some family types e.g. gay and lesbian families may be radical forces in society.

**Exam Hint:** You might not get a question specifically on Civil partnerships, but you might get a more general question such as – Discuss sociological explanations for increasing family diversity.

With a question such as this, it would be important to include:

- The increasing diversity and new family forms in our culture
- Variety of family types including same-sex couples
- Legal changes altering expectations of family life

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