

# A Sociology of Family Life



# A Sociology of Family Life

Change and Diversity in  
Intimate Relations

DEBORAH CHAMBERS

polity

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# Introduction

Recent scholarship on personal relationships and family life suggests that new kinds of love and commitment are being forged in contemporary societies. Relationships and living arrangements which are now commonplace include cohabiting couples, single-parent families, post divorce and 'blended' families, same-sex unions, 'friends as family', 'living apart but together' (LATS); and 'families of choice'. Family diversity has coincided with aspirations towards more 'democratic relationships'. The strong desire for more equal, more open and more egalitarian intimate relationships influences not only couples but also the way that parents relate to their children, with a new emphasis on childhood agency.

Rising divorce rates, teenage pregnancies, single parenthood, same-sex unions and cohabitation are often viewed as threats to the core of society. However, this book explains that these trends do not amount to evidence of a decline of commitment or responsibility for kin. The wide range of personal relationships and living arrangements in today's society is a sign that the concept of 'family' is becoming more fluid and changeable. The popularity of the term 'family', which is even being extended to describe close friendships and alternative kinds of intimacies, suggests a strong social desire to preserve principles of commitment and reciprocity that bind members of society together. This diversity in living arrangements thrives despite government attempts to *standardize* families through housing policies, tax breaks for married couples, divorce and post-divorce parenting laws, family planning, types of access to new reproductive technologies and so on. A principal objective of this book, then, is to document and analyse the growing variations in personal and family life and assess contemporary modes of commitment.

The increasing public recognition of family diversity has triggered

alarm among certain politicians, religious leaders, academics and journalists. The welfare of children and elderly relatives is viewed as a major issue in an era of high divorce rates and rising single parenthood. Complex forms of commitment and care are being experienced by parents and wider kin at a time when governments in many countries are reducing social welfare provisions. A great deal of public debate about 'good' and 'bad' parenting has been fuelled by anxieties about a collapse of moral standards caused by the deterioration of 'proper' family values. Moral panics about 'family decline' expressed by governments and the media are regularly accompanied by calls to return to the apparently superior values of a past golden age of family life. Thus, although it is just one of many diverse living arrangements, the nuclear family remains a powerful icon of tradition and stability, often still perceived as an antidote to today's social problems.

The increase in family diversity – and negative responses to this trend from governments, academics and public bodies who promote a nuclear family norm – therefore comprises a key theme of this book. A second major theme is the study of families through a global lens. A range of transnational topics are dealt with across the chapters and examined in depth within a group of three key chapters. These three chapters focus on family migration and the globalization of intimate relations (chapter 6); the impact of population policies on fertility patterns (chapter 7); and the use of new reproductive technologies to create the 'perfect' or 'proper' family (chapter 8). The global themes are approached with a particular emphasis on family structures and relations in developing and under-developed countries. They look at how family life has been influenced by global labour migration, state policies and cultural values affecting fertility, arranged marriages and marriage migration.

The case-study examples drawn on from non-western societies are chosen according to the accessibility of reliable research data. The aim is to illustrate family customs, structures and patterns of social change that contrast with or challenge western assumptions about 'the family'. Reflecting the availability and relevance of research from these regions, a particular focus on India and China provides consistent threads. This is particularly the case in the chapters that deal with transnational family processes at a macro-sociological level by assessing how families negotiate wider and large-scale social systems including the link between globalization and marriage strategies, the regulation of families through state policies on population and

fertility control, and transnational comparisons of the management and uses of reproductive technologies. All of these topics draw attention to the ways that state policies, religious and cultural customs and patriarchal structures regulate families and intimacies and are negotiated by individuals and families.

### Themes and issues

In addition to the foregrounding of diversity and global dimensions of changing intimacies and family life, this book is arranged around a sequence of interrelated issues. The following broad questions frame these issues:

1. Is there sufficient research evidence to support the influential idea of a 'democratization' of family and intimate relationships, or are gender inequalities persisting in this context?
2. Is a growing diversity in intimate relationships leading to a crisis of commitment and care in western societies?
3. Is research on same-sex intimacies forcing a reconsideration of the concept of 'family'?
4. Are sociological debates about family life ethnocentric?

These questions are introduced in turn, below, and form key threads through the following chapters. They represent some of the major challenges associated with discrepancies between abstract social *theories* and empirical research *evidence* about family life.

With regard to the first question, the study of family life has recently been influenced by a refocus on the concept of 'intimacy', prompted by Anthony Giddens' book *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992). His approach has stimulated extensive sociological debate. Giddens claims that changes in intimacy and family relationships in late twentieth-century western societies have led to a *democratization* of interpersonal relationships. He argues that sex has been separated from reproduction in late modernity. This is part of a trend of more equal and evenly balanced intimate interaction between couples which is said to be part of a liberalization of attitudes in western societies. This pattern corresponds with a stronger emphasis on individual self-fulfilment in personal relationships which, in turn, is part of a process of *individualization*.

Couples no longer feel bound by duty to get married before they have sex. They can decide these steps between themselves, as active

agents, if and when they agree to. Giddens argues that this frees up the opportunity for a 'pure relationship' between the couple, a relationship in which men and women become equals. Individuals now expect much more from intimate relationships and are much more prepared to get divorced or move on to the next relationship if either party feels trapped or no longer feels fulfilled. Giddens argues that expectations of a life-long conjugal relationship involving having and bringing up children, with wife as homemaker and husband as breadwinner, have gone. Today, then, intimate relationships in western societies are more likely to be egalitarian and fluid, more temporary and short-lived and yet also more intense. He refers to this trend as a *detraditionalization* of intimacy.

These influential concepts of *individualization* and *detraditionalization* were advanced by 'late modern' social theory in the 1990s to explain changes in social and personal relationships. This perspective is also held by Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1995), as outlined in chapter 2. The current period of 'late modernity' is distinguished from an earlier period of 'modernity', up to around the mid twentieth century. Late modernity is viewed as a later phase of modernity rather than a break from it, in the sense of 'post-modern society'. These changes are important because they describe the changing condition of western societies in which tradition and social hierarchy are being questioned. Late modern social theorists argue that extended kinship ties and tight communities are being replaced by looser and more fragmented social ties. These wider social changes are said to have had dramatic effects on personal and family life.

More recent ways of approaching intimacy and sexuality in contemporary family relationships have been advanced by authors such as Lynn Jamieson (1998) and Neil Gross (2005). These authors represent a group of British and American academics who have engaged critically with the idea of *individualization*. Jamieson and Gross question the emphasis of the 'pure relationship' on self-obsessed individualism. The idea of the 'pure relationship' undermines the significance of everyday commitments and caring roles that make up family life, especially in parent-child relationships. A recurring theme of research findings outlined in the following chapters is the strength and durability of family and intimate ties. While personal relationships are clearly changing and adjusting to rising expectations of equality and intimacy in relationships, a compelling body of

evidence indicates that commitment and reciprocity remain remarkably buoyant in terms of care for children and older relatives.

Turning to the second question, Jamieson also queries the idea that today's intimate relationships are now more equal, in the context of parental care for children. Discussions about 'parenting' often obscure the highly gendered practice of caring for children. Most of the caring work in and beyond families is still placed on women's shoulders. This issue is explored in depth in chapter 3 on parenting. Jamieson emphasizes that intimate relationships between men and women, and between children and parents, tend to be *asymmetrical* relationships structured by gender and generational relations of power. Thus, while addressing contemporary changes in intimacy and family relations, authors such as Jamieson have drawn attention to inequalities of gender and age that remain in family relationships. A further key theme that characterizes this book is, then, the continuing reproduction of unequal gender relations that shape families despite assertions of a 'democratization' of intimate relationships. Changes in parenting values and practices have coincided with women's rising educational levels and employment, control of fertility, divorce, changing employment patterns for men, and the decline of the 'breadwinner' ideal of the husband as the sole earner (see chapter 3).

Debates about parenting practices and values indicate that mothers tend to take responsibility for the day-to-day caring for children, despite attempts by governments to encourage fathers to become more involved in family life (Gillies 2005). In countries such as the USA and UK, the continuing imbalance in gender relations in the home is exacerbated by lack of childcare facilities for working parents. Women are still expected to sacrifice employment prospects for children rather than sharing the responsibilities with male partners. The following chapters confirm that governments continue to have a substantial impact on the size and structure of families. Yet the decline of welfare support for families in many countries with ageing populations is placing increasing pressures on women with families.

Referring to the third question about same-sex intimacies, significant advances in new scholarship have allowed the fixed categories of 'family' and 'parenting' to be contested or altered to suit changing intimacies. Research on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual intimacies and queer theory have provided a critical reinterpretation of intimacy and personal life in recognition of the variability and

complexities of today's family practices and personal lives. Following Giddens, certain researchers argue that same-sex couples are more likely to achieve equality in their relationships. Since they are no longer dependent on traditional gender roles, same-sex couples have the opportunity to reinvent the ground rules in their daily lives in areas such as performing household tasks (Weeks et al. 1999a and 1999b; see chapter 2). Through the use of donor reproductive technologies and surrogacy, same-sex couples are able to have children and bring new approaches to parenting and household arrangements. Rather than advancing a narrow idea of families as only functions of the reproduction or socialization of children, contemporary sociology highlights these major changes in intimacy and their implications for changing family practices and conceptualizations of personal ties.

With regard to the final question, the lack of accurate historical sociological data about minority ethnic kinship relations in western societies is indicated in chapters that examine both macro- and micro-social dynamics of family life. Past sociological research on minority ethnic families has been characterized by an *ethnocentric* bias: the predisposition for western academics to interpret minority ethnic families from their own ethnic viewpoint. This bias has led to a privileging of white and typically middle-class family norms and a tendency to view that social unit as superior. Scholars, governments and popular cultural discourses have been inclined to reify or naturalize the white nuclear family, even though it has only ever existed as just one type of family among many others. The nuclear family is an abstract ideal often treated as if it were a real and tangible object. As an ideological construct it is elevated as a norm through a range of official and informal discourses. The chapters of this book address the ideological assumptions and misconceptions that contributed to earlier and more recent sociological theory and policy debates about 'the family'. These assertions are examined in relation to empirical research evidence of actual families and people's lives in order to identify and understand the richness and complexities of contemporary familial and intimate relations.

### **Organization of the book**

The book's chapters are organized in two broad ways. The first comprises an outline of major theoretical perspectives followed by critiques and reconsiderations generated by empirical studies. This

approach is used in chapters that deal with theories and debates about intimacy, parenting and childhood. For example, new scholarship on same-sex intimacies, parenting and household practices that contest apparently entrenched categories of 'family' and of parenting have redefined family practices. Examples of this body of research are then assessed to show how debates about family life and intimacy have been advanced. Likewise, scholarship on minority ethnic families and intimacies have either informed or challenged conventional thinking about family life, and are addressed to allow students to consider the discrepancies between standard and new ways of thinking about families. A second group of chapters are organized around a case-study approach. This approach is used in sections that address global themes including migration and marriage strategies, fertility and populations, and reproductive technologies. These sections draw on circumstances and events in specific countries through a comparative set of examples to illustrate key processes and changes in family forms and practices.

Chapter 1 traces the historical roots of key concepts of kinship and family in sociology. Foundational approaches to the family and kinship that developed in anthropology and sociology from the late nineteenth century to the 1980s are outlined. The way classical social theories defined family life and how their perspectives influenced modern thought are assessed. The roots of some of today's enduring ideas about 'the family' are uncovered by examining the perspectives of nineteenth-century thinkers such as Marx and Engels. The early twentieth-century structural-functionalist approach led by American sociologist Talcott Parsons proposed that the small, nuclear version of the family was perfectly adapted to the needs of modern society. He introduced new ideas about how the nuclear family's sex roles operate to reproduce the population and a stable workforce. The functionalist model has had a major impact on official discourses in the UK and USA about the ideal nuclear family. Chapter 1 also assesses the negative effects of functionalist approaches in studies of minority ethnic families in the USA and UK, in which extended and one-parent families were viewed as deviations from a nuclear family form.

Public and academic anxieties about loosening family ties in modern industrial societies proved to be unfounded, according to a range of empirical studies in the mid twentieth century. Informal relationships were shown to be highly significant at personal and structural levels. The principal feminist perspectives of the 1970s and

1980s on the family, sex, gender and patriarchy, which critiqued the functionalist perspective, are also addressed in chapter 1. Feminist models revealed the ways in which the institution of 'the family' reproduces patriarchal, heterosexual versions of masculinity and femininity. Feminist perspectives contributed to an understanding of how inequalities of gender, class and race are reproduced through family and wider social structures and relations.

Public concerns about the erosion of mutual responsibility and long-term commitment lie at the heart of arguments about a decline in family values. In chapter 2, theories and debates from the 1990s about changes in intimate relationships are examined. The use of the concept of 'individualization' to explain the rise of more egalitarian intimate relationships is assessed in depth. The chapter explains, in detail, changing ideas about love and commitment, the altering nature of the self and society and the rise of the 'pure relationship'. These explanations are queried through a range of empirical research which is addressed in the second half of the chapter. A series of recent and mainly qualitative research on intimacy has provoked a reassessment of late modern theory and fed into critiques of the individualization thesis.

Debates about changes in parenting values and practices are assessed in chapter 3. Changing notions and practices of motherhood, highlighted by feminist debates, have corresponded with women's improved education and entrance into the labour market. The identification of a 'new' parenthood that emerges out of separation and divorce has affected definitions and practice of both mothering and fathering (Smart 1999). The rise of lone parenting, teenage parents, post-divorce families and parenting within minority ethnic families are addressed. This is followed by a focus on current ideas about fatherhood. New models of fatherhood have been prompted by the erosion of the male breadwinner role, the rise in post-divorce families and families absent of fathers. Public discourses on a new kind of Dad based on the model of 'involved' or 'active fatherhood' are displacing the notion of the father as 'male breadwinner' and unemotional disciplinarian. Fatherhood is being reconstructed in law and social policy, a theme explored against the backdrop of changing modes of heterosexual masculinity and changing patterns of male employment (Smart and Neale 1999; Collier 1999; Collier and Sheldon 2008). The idea of 'involved fatherhood' being promoted by the state in the UK and USA is addressed. The chapter looks at research evidence about



how estranged couples cope with bringing up children after divorce. The parenting patterns of minority ethnic families are also examined as important factors in the construction of new parenting practices. In the final section, changing ideas about parenting advanced by gay, lesbian and bisexual parents are discussed, including the recent struggles that members of the gay and lesbian community have experienced in defending the right to parent.

Chapter 4 traces changes in the nature of childhood. It highlights the tensions between opposing accounts of childhood: a traditional romantic ideal which affirms the right of a child to be innocent and protected and the idea of the child as an active agent with rights. The practicalities of contemporary childrearing practices are set against this romantic ideal and can lead to confusion for both parents and children. Childrearing is now depicted as a negotiation between parent and child, within a process monitored by the state and other agencies such as schools. The impact of post-divorce families, lone parenting and poverty on childhood are examined. Contemporary approaches to childhood draw attention to children's accelerating contact with the media, commercialism and new technologies. This exposure has complicated the idealized and sentimental notion of childhood. The chapter also shows that in certain parts of the non-western world, childhood is being shaped by elements of privatized and individualized family life familiar to western societies. This suggests that a western trend of home-based, privatized childhoods may be a globalizing tendency. Changes taking place in contemporary urban China are outlined to offer an insight into the way these changes are impacting transnationally.

Chapter 5 on families and ageing societies identifies the key ways in which family relationships are being transformed within the life course. The term 'life course' is used in sociology to indicate an individual's passage through life and is generally studied as a sequence of significant life events that include birth, marriage, parenthood, divorce and retirement. It replaces the traditional term 'life-cycle' which contained too many normative implications about the 'correct' sequencing of the stages that people go through. Major changes in family responsibilities over the life course have been driven by increases in life expectancy, an extension of the age of reproduction and longer periods of 'post-parental' life, as well as rising divorce rates. Patterns of reciprocity between older and younger family members show that older relatives, particularly women, often take

on significant responsibilities as grandparents. The chapter looks at ageing and intergenerational ties and examines how families and households deal with the anxieties of caring for the elderly in western and in developing societies. Various configurations of social support, including friends, neighbours and extended kin, are now involved in caring in an ageing society. This is particularly the case among non-traditional family forms, such as gay, lesbian and bisexual couples. New research agendas prompted by the globalization of family life are being developed, in which the preservation of generational and network-based ties across different nation states are being documented and analysed (Levitt 2001; Phillipson et al. 2006). The chapter therefore also addresses the impact of migration on the care of the elderly.

Scholars have tended to study globalization in terms of capital, state and market mechanisms, and new technologies (Harvey 1989; Johnson et al. 2002). In chapter 6, globalization is approached in a different manner. The ways that families negotiate and are affected by international migration and other transnational connections are addressed. How patterns of marriage and global processes have strengthened, reshaped or destabilized families is analysed. Local family systems and relations interconnect with and support large-scale processes of economic globalization through local practices and customs of kinship and marriage. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section examines the growing mobility and global migration of families or family members, generated by the demand for care workers in the West. It raises important questions about the global political economy of formal and informal care. The second section examines transnational marriage strategies that form part of geographical and social mobility. Academic responses to transnational marriage are often influenced by western values of romance, such as the idea of the 'pure relationship'. These values imply that commercial imperatives in spouse selection undermine the authenticity of the marital relationship. Transnational marriage is often viewed as a business deal that transforms a kinship association into a form of human 'trafficking' (Palriwala and Uberoi 2008). The chapter examines the ways that marriage is exploited for social and economic mobility, including arranged marriages and commercially negotiated marriage, 'mail-order brides' and internet dating.

The theme of families and fertility is examined in chapter 7 through a series of historical and contemporary case studies that have gained currency in global debates about population and fertility

control. National population issues including birth control, family planning, infant mortality and unsafe abortions are investigated. How religious and cultural customs, state policies and global agencies have addressed fertility and influenced family structures and values transnationally is explored. A dramatic shift in the field of population and development was prompted in 1994 by the International Conference on Population and Development. The ICPD produced a programme of action which recognized that reproductive health and rights, women's empowerment and gender equality should underpin all population and development programmes. This was triggered by several issues including revelations about the extent of misery inflicted on families by the population policies of Romania under the brutal dictatorship of Ceausescu between 1966 and 1989. The state and traditional customs in western and non-western cultures coalesced in regulating fertility and family practices. The aggressive family and demographic policies of the Ceausescu regime are described as a case study to demonstrate how women were coerced by the state into bearing children (Kligman 1998).

The second and third case studies addressed in this chapter involve the impact of son preference and modern population policies on families, in particular on the lives of women and children. Son preference is a deep-rooted cultural norm in Third World countries. How this custom has been defended and negotiated in relation to government attempts at fertility control and the availability of sex-selective abortion technologies is described in the context of India's family planning policies and China's 'one-child' policy. The cases are chosen because they occur in two of the most highly populated countries of the world with some of the most highly controversial and problematic sets of practices and customs. As such, they raise a number of key issues about the relationship between state policy and cultural traditions in the formation of family life.

Son preference and family sex composition are powerful customs that place pressure on women to make fertility decisions which conform to a deeply held tradition about the composition of the 'proper family'. Sex-selective abortions in India have skewed the ratio of boys to girls. The impact of this practice on the lives of women and girls, and government attempts to curtail the practice, are examined. How China's family planning programme, known as the 'one-child' policy, has changed fertility preferences forms the third case study. The effectiveness of this dramatic population policy is linked to its

unique system of government control. The strong tradition of son preference in existence in China for more than 2,000 years continues to be a factor discouraging compliance with the policy. 'Demographic transition' in developed regions such as Europe and Japan, where the birth rates are lower than the death rate, is also addressed in this chapter to illustrate the ways governments attempt to increase family size and address ageing societies.

By exploring another way in which government policies impact on families' fertility decisions, chapter 8 addresses the effects of new reproductive technologies in a number of societies and among particular ethnic groups. The chapter summarizes controversies about the moral dilemmas surrounding in-vitro fertilization (IVF), assisted reproduction and surrogate motherhood. The legal regulation and restrictions imposed on the use of these technologies highlight the complexities involved in definitions of parenthood and often expose the ideology that binds ideas about kin. Issues of legitimacy are called into question by reproductive technologies. Where motherhood and fatherhood were once inevitable and given, they now require definition by law. Ethnic and religious differences, migration and the effects of globalization are examined. Discrepancies between government policy and family fertility practices in the Middle East and India are addressed. Feminist debates are drawn on and assessed to illustrate the role they play in understanding these past and present practices.

The final chapter addresses three key themes that characterize the book as a whole, to demonstrate the major challenges that have faced sociological developments in the study of family and intimate life. The first is the prominence of sociological theories that perceive a decline in commitment and trust in family and intimate relations. Traditional family values are evoked by governments to identify and defend the moral standards of the nation (Stacey 1999). This family values discourse is regularly expressed in the political speeches of heads of state. Politicians are aware that a discourse of family crisis and the promotion of a nuclear family form is a vote catcher. This ideology is addressed in the final chapter since it sets the parameters of public debate and has serious implications for policy formation and scholarship on family and personal life.

The second section foregrounds key ways in which the biological idea of family relations is being challenged and reconfigured. It addresses concepts which are inclusive and flexible enough to address newer relationships beyond conventional nuclear or het-

erosexual family forms, such as same-sex relationships, cohabitation, friendships, single-parent families, post-divorce unions and reconfigured kinship networks. For example, Carol Smart advances the term 'personal life' to explain the significance of personal connectedness and the embeddedness of relations. The third section also highlights major ways in which non-kin relations are taking on family-like meanings and being included in the study of intimacy and family life. Other kinds of intimacy such as friendship are also drawn on to describe 'family' or 'family-like' relationships. 'Friend-like relationships' and the voluntary nature of relationships are now increasingly being privileged over compulsory relationships bound by duty. Yet these friend-like relationship types are enhancing kin ties rather than replacing them. Spencer and Pahl (2006) develop the concept of 'personal communities' to describe new kinds of relationships evolving in late modernity. They contradict public and political fears that social bonds are being weakened and leading to a breakdown of family and social cohesion. The fourth section details the lead taken by queer theory in addressing and celebrating the new kinds of intimacies and household arrangements that draw on the concept of friendship and community to authenticate relationships that were once stigmatized and rendered marginal.

The final section highlights the importance of examining the interconnection between intimacy and global processes. The section addresses sociological reassessments of the traditional, false separation of 'public' and 'private' spheres of society by drawing attention to the relationship between economic and intimate spheres of life. It calls for a fusion of macro- and micro-sociological methods and debates to advance our understanding of the ways in which public and private realms of politics and work correspond with intimacy and family. The chapter illustrates this by addressing the affective economic analyses of Arlie Hochschild (2003b) and Viviana Zelizer (2005) to highlight the ways that family and intimate life are shaped by and influence economic exchanges. This is obvious in cases such as commercial marriage transactions and commercial surrogacy but less so in emotional and caring practices. This body of work highlights the connection between economic, emotional and caring practices in family relationships.

# 1 Traditional Approaches to the Family

Sociological accounts of family and personal relationships in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were characterized by anxieties about the decline of traditional family values. This perception of 'family decline' has persisted to the present day, forming part of a broader set of concerns about the break-up of community ties. Rising *individualism* and *privatization* were identified among the causes. It was argued that neighbours no longer supported or knew one another; families became more insular; traditional forms of respect and deference were weakening; and individuals were becoming more self-absorbed and materialistic. By the mid twentieth century, these fears of moral decline coincided with anxieties about the break-up of the nuclear family. It was feared that rising individualism would lead to an abandonment of marriage, particularly by women. The idea of the 'companionate marriage' was introduced to address the dilemma.

This chapter outlines key approaches to family and kinship studies from the late nineteenth to the twentieth century that prompted these kinds of anxieties about family decline. The first sections look at late nineteenth-century perspectives that aimed to prove or disprove the universality of a particular kind of family. These sections outline late nineteenth-century anthropological influences on early sociological debates in America and Britain, and address the contrasting socialist study of the family by Frederick Engels which highlighted women's status in relation to production, reproduction and capitalism. The second part of the chapter addresses moral anxieties about a decline of family values associated with the dominant approaches to the family in the early and mid twentieth century. Most twentieth-century theories about the family examined the effects of the process of industrialization and urbanization on family structures. For example, the influential structural-functionalist perspective

represented by American sociologist Talcott Parsons approached the modern nuclear family as a unit shaped by the needs of capitalism. The family transformed from a producing to a consuming unit.

The third section addresses studies that contradicted views of moral decline associated with a weakening of family ties. The classic British urban community studies of kinship of the 1950s and early 1960s show some of the ways that empirical research refuted sociological anxieties about family and community decline. In the fourth section, feminist debates of the 1970s and 1980s are outlined to introduce new critiques of certain assumptions in earlier sociological work. Feminist scholars drew attention to gendered relations of power in both the domestic and public spheres of society. They exposed the ideological nature of gendered power relations and how they placed structural constraints on women in the family and in other areas of society, including restricted and low-paid employment for women. Chapter 2 builds on these themes and issues by assessing more recent social theories from the 1990s that have come to dominate contemporary sociological debates about changes in gender relations, sexual identities and family structures and meanings. In this chapter, we move from the nineteenth- to the mid- twentieth-century themes and issues.

### **Late nineteenth-century sociological perspectives**

Many early sociological ideas about marriage, the family and kinship in the late nineteenth century were influenced by the related discipline of anthropology. During this period, anthropology was preoccupied with *biological* discourses of relatedness. The institution of marriage was traditionally viewed as biologically determined to address three needs: procreation and the rearing of children; the lengthy period of dependence of children on their parents; and the need for prolonged parental care and training. Through biological relatedness, individuals recognized as kin were divided into those related by blood (consanguines) and those related by marriage (affines). Clearly, *biological* blood ties dominate the ordering of social relations in societies where procreation is a defining characteristic of relatedness (Beattie 1964). However, contemporary studies of kinship now acknowledge that forms of family relatedness are also *socially* constructed, as in cases of adoption, same-sex unions including those with children, single-parent households, step-relations and also donor-assisted

conception (see chapter 8). Nevertheless, even though biology is not the only basis of kinship, biological relatedness continues to have a powerful impact on ideas about the structuring of kin.

The social significance given to biological 'blood ties' as the defining features of 'family' can be illustrated in a variety of ways. Examples include DNA testing to prove biological parentage; the attempt made by adopted children to find their biological parents; and the current public fascination with family history. Television programmes and the publicity devoted to following adopted individuals who try to trace their 'real mother' show that genetic connection remains a paramount element of identity (Stanworth 1987). These practices indicate the fascination in western societies for discovering the 'self' through biological heritage. DNA testing has reunited slave descendants of Afro-Caribbean origin with populations in Africa and Equatorial Guinea, for example. Such attempts reveal the social, legal and symbolic significance of blood relations, at both societal and individual levels (Taylor 2005). How this family connection through blood is both promoted and complicated will be considered further in the context of new reproductive technologies in chapter 8.

Much traditional anthropological work on kinship and marriage in the nineteenth century was concerned not only with biological relatedness but also with classifying kin relationships in other cultures. Versions of these ties would then be selected to validate contemporary western family structures as universal, to confirm their naturalness. A bewildering variety of marriage types across the world were documented by anthropologists, including monogamy (having only one spouse), polygamy (having more than one wife or husband at a time) and polyandry (having more than one husband at a time); matriarchal (woman as ruler of the family) and patriarchal (man as ruler of the family) unions; households with matrilineal residence (move to the wife's home) and patrilineal residence (move to the husband's home). The aim of early sociological studies of the family was to navigate a path through these variations to create hypothetical constructions about 'original' or 'prior' forms of marriage. The aim was to *prove* that the acceptable version of monogamous marriage is the final, correct and highest stage of social evolution.

Given that kin relations in western societies were thought to have their roots in nature, analogies with the animal kingdom were often made by referring to the mating behaviour of higher primates. This allowed sociologists to bypass the awkward diversity of kinship types



uncovered by early anthropology. Despite the lack of any existing representative examples, evolutionary schemes were devised from selected aspects of existing 'simple societies' to prove a natural earlier stage of marriage organization. For instance, the nineteenth-century evolutionary anthropologist Lewis Morgan constructed an evolutionary scheme in *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity in the Human Family* (1870) in which he interpreted matriliney (descent through the female line) as preceding patriliney (descent through the male line) and monogamy as the final evolutionary stage.

Morgan's position was refuted by Edward Westermarck in his *History of Human Marriage* (1921), first published in 1891. He contested the hypothesis that primitive societies were promiscuous, believing that humans were originally monogamous. For proof, Westermarck used a biological discourse influenced by the ideas of Charles Darwin. He relied on selected examples of monogamy both among anthropoid apes and among hunter-gatherer peoples who were considered by social evolutionists as the most primitive societies. In this way, Westermarck argued that the nuclear family was prefigured among the anthropoids and was therefore the primary and universal unit from which contemporary society evolved. The child's need for parental protection generates the need for a family as a unit for the continued existence of certain species. The male remains with the female and child to *protect* them, and this is governed by instincts achieved through natural selection. These kinds of anthropological attempts at explaining kinship and marriage were no more than elaborate hypotheses. Yet they were accepted among the academic and wider communities because biological determinism supported a particular ideology to identify and reaffirm a 'proper' kind of family.

However, by the early twentieth century it became increasingly clear that bonds of family require *social recognition* rather than relying simply on the issue of *biological procreation*. Anthropologists were finding that, especially in societies beyond the so-called 'West', kinship is defined by *social* as well as *blood* ties. Societies were being discovered in which the physiological role of the male in reproduction was not recognized. In certain non-western societies, little or no significance is attached to the relationship between sexual union and the arrival of a baby nine months later. The husband regarded a child born to his wife as his own simply because she was his wife. In parts of Melanesia, for instance, it was found that the family to which