

3 The Family

Family and marriage: types and patterns

Family types

How many people are there in your family? Whatever answer you have just given, the chances are that the people you counted were your parents, yourself, and any *siblings* (brothers or sisters) you may have. This type of family unit, consisting of an adult couple and their children, is called a *nuclear family*.

Another type of family occurs where the basic nuclear unit has been *extended*, either 'backwards' to include grandparents and even great-grandparents, or 'sideways', to include relatives, such as aunts, uncles and cousins. Of course, we are all part of an extended family in the sense that we all have grandparents, and most of us have some aunts, uncles and cousins as well. What distinguishes an extended family from a nuclear one, however, is that the members of the extended family either live together under the same roof, or live very close to each other and have a great deal of contact with one another. Do you think that you live in an extended family?



generations of a family to be alive at the same time

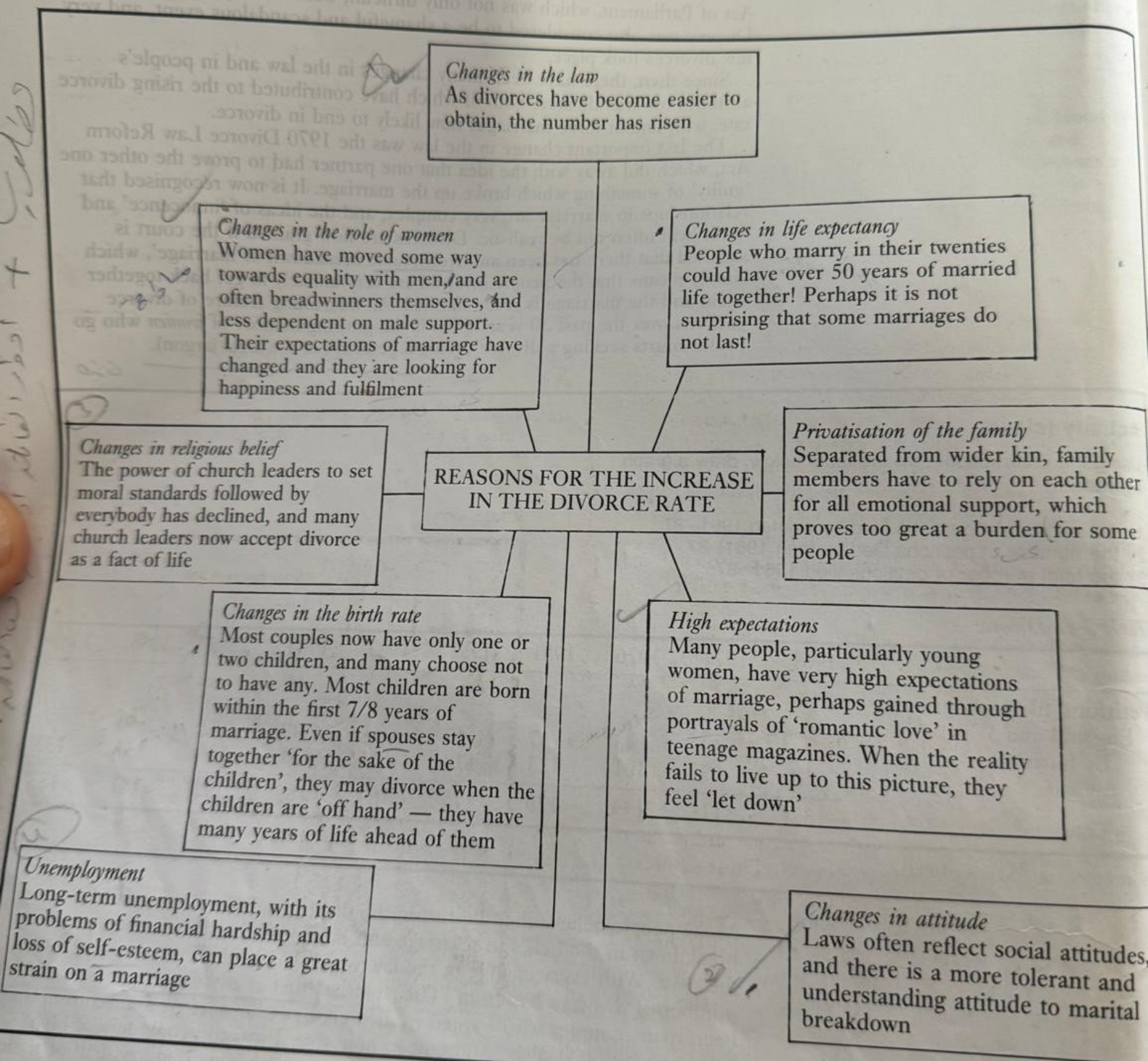
The pattern of divorce and remarriage which has become quite common in Britain has led sociologists to identify another kind of family group, the '*reconstituted*' family. This contains a married couple, at least one of whom has been married before, and children from a previous marriage as well as the present one, i.e. step-brothers and step-sisters. Sociologists Michael Young and Peter Willmott introduced the idea of a *symmetrical* family, which they believed was a modern stage in the development of family relationships. A symmetrical family is a small, nuclear unit with both parents as breadwinners and sharing many household tasks and responsibilities. However, feminists in particular point out that evidence shows that relatively few modern families fit this pattern, and that although many families have two breadwinners, women still bear the major responsibility for domestic work and childcare. *Yes*

About one in seven families in Britain are *single* or *lone-parent* families. This is because of the high divorce rate and the high rate of children born to non-married parents.

Reasons for the rise in divorce

There is no one single reason for the increase in divorce rates. As with other social institutions, the family and marriage are influenced by other changes taking place in society, some of which are shown in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1



Changes in the family

The 'extended/nuclear' family issue discussed above is quite complicated. The following two changes in the family — in size and functions — are clearer and just as important in their consequences.

Family size

The average number of children born to a couple fell from about six in the early nineteenth century to just one or two by the 1980s. The reasons for this are discussed more fully in Chapter Sixteen. This was a *very* important change.

Family functions

The 'functions' of a family refer to the support and contribution it makes to its members and the society as a whole. Some people have argued that the rise of the welfare state and better standards of living and technology have 'stripped' the family of many of its functions. It is certainly true that some services, which used to be found within the family, are now provided by the state, but the family is far from unimportant — think of all the benefits your family has provided for you!