KEY CONCEPT: FAMILY

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Concept origins

From the Latin *familia*—family servants, domestics collectively, the servants in a household. The word family first referred to 'the household' and later to the descendents and servants of a common ancestor. The original Latin meaning is rarely used explicitly in its present usage which most often describes parents and their children. In the English language, in the 15th century, it related to a collective body of people living under the protection of one head of a household. This might have included parents, children and servants and, additionally, any lodgers or boarders. From the 17th century, its usage shifted towards the more recent notion of family, wherein it came to represent people closely related by blood or marriage, including aunts, uncles, cousins, etc. (Slee, 2002).

Current status and usage

The term 'family' is one with which everyone is familiar, yet it can be surprisingly difficult to define as it means different things to different people and in different **culture**s (Allan and Crow, 2001; Wharton, 2012). Two traditional western views of the family centre around (1) the 'nuclear family', which includes two married people, one male and one female, and their biological children and (2) the 'extended family', which includes the wider networks such as aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, etc. The 20th century brought an acknowledgement of an increasing number and **diversity** in **family** types, such as: same-sex **relationships**, single-parent families, kinship networks, post-divorce reconfiguration of families (Chambers, 2012), cohabitation, living apart, adoptive families, fostering families and surrogacy. This diversity is further complicated with new reproductive technologies, such as sperm or egg donation and in vitro fertilisation (IVF) by

donor. Families are usually formed in one of three ways: (1) biologically, through having a blood connection; (2) legally, through marriage and related forms of State recognition such as adoption or the formalisation of fostering; or (3) socially, with neighbours, godparents, and friends (Hutchison, 2012).

The family is often portrayed as the 'fundamental unit of **society**' (Loveless and Holman, 2007; Newman, 2009), with parents seen as the child's 'first and most enduring educator' (DCFS, 2007). Particularly since Victorian times, there has been an idealised notion of the family, usually involving a heterosexual married couple and their offspring, all living in the same household (Erera, 2002). This idealisation culminated in the 1950s' and 1960s' fictional portrayals in film, television and print of harmonious family lives that reflected and reinforced this model. Changes in this perceived 'norm' are often viewed as having a detrimental impact on society, including on educational attainment (Carolan and Wasserman, 2015). However, in reality, families have always come in various forms. Death, divorce and separation have meant the loss of one or more partner from the household, with the resultant joining of two or more families if new **relationships** are established. In England and Wales, by 2013, 47% of children were born into non-traditional nuclear families, albeit 84% were born to cohabiting couples (ONS, 2014). There are also an increasing number of families with three or more generations living in the same household due to cultural or economic decisions (ONS, 2015). All of these factors indicate a shifting of normative family frameworks (Silva and Bennett, 2004; Ingoldsby and Smith, 2006).

While the family is regarded as one of the basic building blocks of **society**, it also exists in tension with the State, the traditional privacy of the former conflicting to varying degrees with monitoring and managerial tendencies of the latter. Comparing life outcomes for children brought up in families with those raised in **institutional** settings, average families clearly confer important educational and other life advantages on their members (Li and Mumford, 2009; McLanahan and Garfinkel, 2012). Taking just one example to illustrate a mechanism underlying this, Newson (1978) argued that it is the infant's experience of 'unreasonable **care**', the sense the infant has that her parent considers her especially valuable, that is important for the child's development of

a positive sense of self. Newson thus argued that 'partiality' is a necessary characteristic of the care-giving role for the child and contrasts with the **ethics** of impartiality that can undermine **institutional** care. Recognition of such developmental, pro-social and educational benefits has traditionally encouraged varying degrees of State support for families and at the same time inhibited State interference. While, ideologically, such a stance can prop up patriarchy and dominant or hegemonic **discourses** that preserve **power** structures (Gramsci, 1971; Foucault, 1980, 1995), they may also obscure genuine risks within families, such as of abuse and neglect. **School**s can act as a check on these more serious risks, as well as serving to mitigate family shortcomings more generally, and offer children a bridge beyond the family towards independence. Of course, such roles are problematic. Positioning the child in relation to the family, the school and the wider community has been important within education and the other human sciences (Meltzer, 1976; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). There are various approaches to conceptualising this. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) work is the most influential here, with its depiction of the nested layers of influence on the child and the family helping to promote multi-disciplinary and multi-agency thinking, as well as representing the complexity of forces on them.

As with other concepts, the notion of family is a site of contest. It is disputed territory. Historically, the rise of urban living—particularly in Westernised countries—has often been accompanied by a shift from extended families and allied patterns of kinship towards nuclear family units. Economically and ideologically driven, such shifts, Althusser (1971) and other Marxists argue, situate families as instruments of social control, with **instrumental** shaping of the thinking and **behaviour** of their members into line with 'authority' and reproducing the status quo. **School** is a further extension of this and the degree of co-operation and alignment of aims between the school and family extend the grip of a potentially false consciousness further. **Psychoanalyis** has approaches to the family which share in this deconstructive critique, seeing the family not so much as a harmonious setting, but as the site in which desire is activated initially within the mother–infant dyad, and then its satisfaction restricted to the parental couple. This essential Oedipal situation optimally facilitates a promise of future fulfilment for the child beyond the family, while fantasies act as a patch to cover the conflict (Lacan 2003). These unresolved tensions are thus brought directly to the school, where again both the **cognitive** and affective dimensions of educational work are catalysed and challenged (Dowling and Osborne, 2003). Both Marxist and psychoanalytic arguments have

influenced feminist critiques of the family, within which women and children are figured as relatively disempowered, oppressed and economically unrecognised (Wharton, 2012; Brown, 2012, 2014). Foucault's work on the family depicts it as a continually contested fiction (Taylor, 2012). Here, biopolitics, sexualisation, and family dynamics may be seen as existing at the crossroads between kinship, **sexuality** and the state, with other factors—such as **ethnicity**—inevitably complicating this. The challenge, here as elsewhere, is to both recognise the very real benefits of families for educational outcomes and at the same time consider the various problematics of this dynamic evolving institution.

Questions to consider

1. What 'families' on TV, film, print or other media stand out in your mind and why?
2. Why are some families more fragile than others?
3. Should **school**s **teach** relationship and sex/**sexuality** education to include matters of the family?
4. To what extent are (and should) schools be *in loco parentis*?
5. What do you think of **power** dynamics and **voice** in family life?

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