Family and household changes

Introduction

As I have just noted, the focus of this section is an examination of changes in family and household structure and their relationship to industrialisation and urbanisation. To understand the nature and extent of such changes we need to do two main things: firstly, we have to outline what we mean by:

- family and household structure
- industrialisation
- urbanisation.

Secondly, we need to examine how family and household structures have changed historically in our society and how such changes can be related to processes of industrialisation and urbanisation.

WARM UP: FAMILY GENOGRAMS

A genogram originally developed by **McGoldrick** and **Gerson** (*Genograms in Family Assessment*, 1985) is a way of describing family relationships and their structure. It is similar to a family tree, but a little more sophisticated in terms of the information it contains.

Draw a genogram for your family (using the examples of McGoldrick and Gerson's notation over leaf).

Start by identifying your immediate family and work outwards from there . . .

Males are indicated by squares, females by

circles. Marriage/cohabitation is shown by an unbroken line.

The person drawing the genogram is indicated by a double box. Put the birth date of each family member at the top left.

Links between living family members can be indicated as a broken line. Indicate the relationship (uncle, for example) beneath the line.

Marriage dates are recorded above the link line.

A separation is recorded by a slash (with date) along the line.

Divorce is recorded as above, except two lines are used.

Remarriage (or ex-marriage) is indicated to one side with a smaller shape.
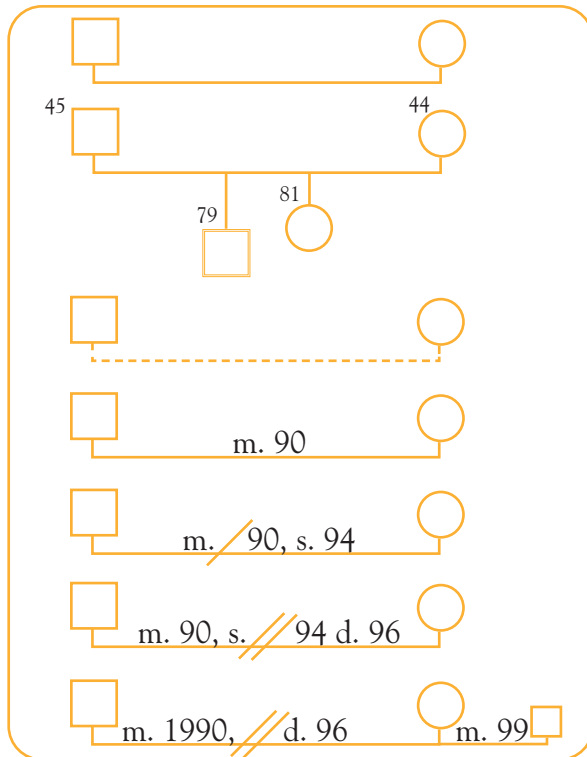
⚠ Preparing the ground

Family/household structure is based on the idea we can identify differences in the way people relate to each other; in other words (going back to the work we did on the concept of structure in Chapter 1) family and household structures are *differentiated* (or different) from each other on the basis of the different lifestyles, values and norms surrounding people's relationships. The following examples of different family and household structures make this a little more understandable:

- **Nuclear** families consist of two generations of family members (parents and children) living in the same household. Contacts with wider kin (aunts and cousins, for example) are usually infrequent and more likely to involve 'impersonal contacts' such as the telephone or email. For this reason, this family structure is sometimes called an *isolated nuclear* (reflecting its isolation from wider kin and it's 'economic isolation' from the rest of society) or *conjugal* family – a self-contained unit where family members are expected to support each other socially, economically and psychologically.

- **Extended** families, as the name suggests, involve additional family members. This structure comes in three basic flavours:
  - **Vertically extended** consists of three or more generations (grandparents, parents and children) living in the same household (or very close to each other). *Matrifocal* families are a

variation on this type of family structure in that they involve (or are focused on) women (a female grandparent, female parent and children). Conversely, *patrifocal* families (quite rare in our society) are focused on men.

- **Horizontally extended** involves relations such as aunts, uncles, cousins, etc. (relations of the same generation as the parents). These 'extensions' to the basic family group branch out within generations – a wife's sister and her partner, for example, living with the family group. *Polygamous* families (where one man lives with many women or vice versa) sometimes take this form – the parents may, for example, be drawn from the same generation.

- **Modified-extended** refers, according to **Michael Gordon** (*The Nuclear Family in Crisis: The Search for an Alternative*, 1972) to the idea that wider family members keep in regular touch with each other. This may be both physically (in the sense of visiting or exchanging help and services) and emotionally (contacts by telephone, email and the like). Related to this idea is a distinction drawn by **Peter Wilmott** ('Urban Kinship Past and Present', 1988) when he talks about **local extended** families, involving 'two or three nuclear families in separate households' living close together and providing mutual help and assistance; **dispersed extended** families, involving less frequent personal contacts; and **attenuated extended** families involving, for example, 'young couples before they have children', gradually separating from their original families.

- **Single-parent** families involve a single adult plus their dependent children. Although this is more likely to be a female parent, a significant proportion involve a male parent. This type of family is sometimes called a *broken nuclear* family, because it often – but not always – arises from the break-up of a two-parent family.

- **Reconstituted** (or '*step*') families (usually nuclear in form) result from the break-up of one family (through things like death or divorce) and its reconstitution as a unique family by remarriage or cohabitation. It may, therefore, involve children from a previous family as well as the new family.
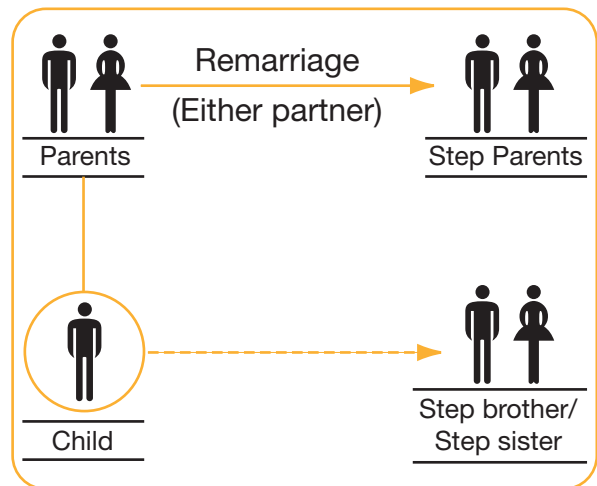
A reconstituted (step) family

- **Homosexual** families: Usually nuclear in form, this type of family involves adults of the same sex plus children (own or adopted). Homosexual couples cannot currently legally marry in the UK (a Labour Government Bill to recognise 'Civil Partnerships' – giving each partner legal rights similar to married heterosexual couples – was rejected by the House of Lords in June 2004). Gay couples can, however, legally cohabit.

Tony Barlow and Barrie Drewitt, who have lived together since 1988, paid an American surrogate mother to carry twins artificially conceived using one of the partner's sperm.

Household structures in our society, involve the following:

- **Single households** consist (as you might have guessed) of an adult living alone. Traditionally, death and relationship breakdown have been the main reasons for this type of household, although there is increasing evidence people are choosing to live this way (in 2003, for example, 13% of all households consisted of a single person).

- **Couple households** consist of two people living without children. In 2003, 25% of all households were of this type, making it the second most common household type after couples with dependent children (38% of all households).

- **Shared households** are not particularly common and involve, for whatever

reason, a group of people living together. This may be a temporary arrangement (such as students sharing a flat) or a permanent arrangement whereby families/individuals live together as a *commune*.

We can complete the first part of this section by briefly outlining what we mean by the concepts of:

- **Industrialisation** – a process whereby machines are extensively applied to the production of goods in society (*mechanisation*). One result of this process is the development of factories and the ability to mass produce consumer goods (clothes, cars, mobile phones). Related to this process is the concept of:

- **Urbanisation**, which involves the idea of population movement away from rural (village) living to larger communities based in towns and cities. This is sometimes called social migration from the countryside (rural areas) to towns – urban areas which developed as industrialisation and factory production developed.

⚠️ Digging deeper

Having familiarised ourselves with some basic concepts about family and household structures, industrialisation and urbanisation, we need to explore the relationship between these ideas. To do this, we need to frame debates about possible changes in this relationship within a sociological context, one that involves thinking about the relationship between *social change* and *social behaviour* in a historical context – and to explore possible historical changes within both society and family structures, we need

to do two things: firstly, establish a framework for our analysis of social change and secondly examine historical changes in society and how they link to economic changes over time. Since we want to look at the effects of industrialisation, we can organise the framework in terms of the characteristics of three 'historical types' of society, namely:

- **pre-industrial** (or *pre-modern*)
- **industrial** (or *modern*) and
- **post-industrial** (or *postmodern*).

The table below identifies a range of significant social and economic features of each of these basic types. When referring to this table, keep the following in mind:

- **Types of society**: These are not 'hard-and-fast' categories – pre-modern society didn't end abruptly, to be replaced by modern society. The table simply helps you identify some possible differences between different types of society.

- **Post-modernity**: There are arguments within sociology about whether we now

live in a postmodern/post-industrial society. I have included it as a type here mainly because it's easy to make the mistake of thinking 'industrialisation' is something that happened a long time ago. Whatever we want to call present day society (postmodern or *late modern*, for example) the important thing is to relate family and household change to both an understanding of the past *and* the present.
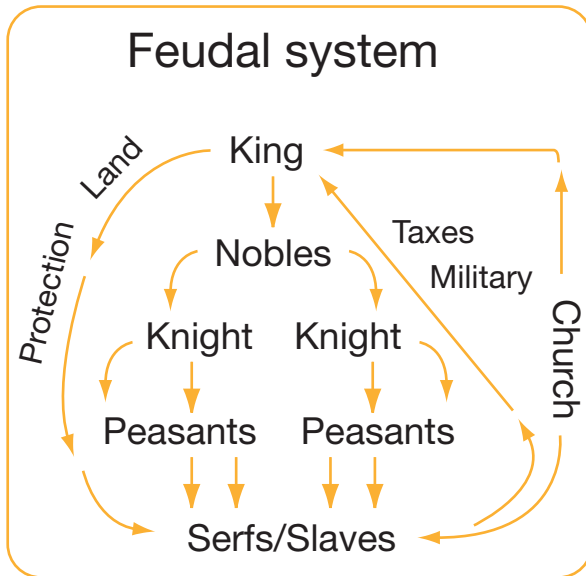
- **Mass production** refers to the idea that machines were used to produce goods to a standard design, cheaply enough to make them available to large numbers of people.

- **Service production** refers to the idea that providing services to people (either physically – as in McDonald's – or through things like banking, insurance and knowledge-based systems) is the dominant form of economic activity in postmodern society.

- **Feudal** refers to a political system involving a major social distinction between the Nobility (large

	Pre-modern	Modern	Post-modern
Time	Pre-18th century	18th-late 20th century	Late-20th century to present
Features of economic production	Pre-industrial Agriculture Tools	Industrial Mass production Mechanisation	Post-industrial Service production Automation
Scale	Local	National	Global
Political system	Feudal	Capitalist	Late capitalist

Table 2.2 Selected characteristics of types of society in Britain

landowners) and the Peasantry (largely landless).

Feudal system

King

Land

Protection

Nobles

Taxes

Military

Knight   Knight

Church

Peasants   Peasants

Serfs/Slaves

- **Capitalist** refers to a political system based on a class distinction between owners (employers) and workers (employees).

In the table I have suggested significant historical changes in our society based on the idea of economic changes to the way goods are made and services provided. There is, in this respect, little doubt Britain today is a very different place to Britain 500 years ago and it would not be difficult to establish changes in, for example, personal relationships (family or otherwise) between these two periods. However, the crucial question we need to explore next is the extent to which the social changes created by industrialisation and urbanisation produced changes in family and household structures.

Family and household changes

Preparing the ground

In terms of the question just posed, there are two basic positions we need to examine. The first argument suggests **industrialisation** and **urbanisation** were important factors in the promotion of family and household change. These processes, as they developed over a couple of hundred years between the late seventeenth and late nineteenth centuries, radically changed the nature of work and economic production as Britain gradually moved from an *agrarian* (agricultural) to an *industrial* (factory-based) society. This change in the nature and organisation of work – from the land-based, rural, agricultural, family-centred, organisation of pre-industrial society to the capital-intensive, urban, industrial, factory-centred, organisation of industrial society – produced, from this viewpoint, radical **family and household changes**. The basic argument here is that family structures changed from the predominantly extended-family organisation of pre-industrial society to the predominantly nuclear family organisation of industrial society. The main reason for this was that industrialisation saw the development of factories and, in turn, the rapid growth of large urban centres (towns and cities) to support and supply labour for factory-based production.

To accommodate such changes, the old extended families of pre-industrial society

(ideally suited to the demands of a family-based, subsistence form of farming) were broken down into nuclear families that fitted the economic requirements of:

- **geographic mobility** – the need for families to move to towns and factories
- **labour flexibility** – the need to move to where jobs were located.

Industrialisation, therefore, was seen as the motor for family change – people were forced to change the way they lived to accommodate new forms of economic production.

If we trace this idea into the late twentieth/early twenty-first century, a similar pattern emerges, but this time the emphasis is on family **fragmentation and diversity**. The nuclear family structures created by industrialisation and urbanisation are disrupted by the needs of global economic systems and work processes, processes of de-industrialisation (a decline in the economic importance of manufacturing) and of de-urbanisation (a move away from towns and cities to the countryside).

The second, alternative, argument also involves thinking, initially, about **industrialisation and urbanisation**. The argument here is that these occurred in Britain (the first country to industrialise) *because* pre-industrial family structures were mainly nuclear and thus ideally positioned to take advantage of new economic opportunities requiring family mobility and flexibility; in other words, pre-industrial family structures – with few unbreakable physical or emotional ties with extended kin – are seen as the motor for subsequent industrial development.

In addition, the relatively large number of extended households in pre-industrial times (which included, for example, servants who had few, if any, emotional or economic ties with their employers) also represented flexible structures that could adapt relatively easily to the changed economic world. This idea of flexibility translates relatively easily to **post-modern society**, which, so this argument goes, requires highly flexible family and household structures if new economic opportunities are to be grasped and exploited. Our society, it is suggested, has already evolved fragmentary family and household structures (through industrialisation and changes to legal relationships – the easy availability of divorce, the growth of single-parent families and single-person households etc.) that are well-suited to taking on board globalised forms of work (living and working in different countries, working at home using computer technology and so forth).

Having identified two opposing sides to the debate, therefore, we need to examine the historical evidence to help us decide which, if any, of these two arguments best describes the relationship between changes in family and household structures, industrialisation and urbanisation.

⚠️ Digging deeper

Evidence for the first argument (generally known as the 'Fit Thesis' because it proposed a close fit between changes in family structures, industrialisation and urbanisation) has been put forward by Functionalist writers such as **Parsons** ('The Social Structure of the Family', 1959) and **Goode** (*World Revolution and Family Patterns*, 1963) as well as, in a slightly different way,

the social action theorist **Max Weber** (*The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism*, 1904).

In basic terms, extended family structures were seen as the norm for pre-industrial society because they were:

- **Multi-functional**: A wide family network performed a range of different functions related to the economic and social well-being of family members.

- **Kinship-based**: Members of the extended family group shared not only a household, but a common economic position that involved working together as a social group (mainly as subsistence farmers but also in various craft trades – brewing and baking, for example – within the home).

- **Economically productive**: People lived and worked within a family group that provided the only viable means for their physical survival.

This situation arose, according to this argument, for three main reasons.

- **Agriculture**: Labour-intensive farm work

required as many people as possible to work the land.

- **Geographic mobility**: The ability to move away from the family group was severely limited by poor communications (no railways or cars, basic road systems and so forth). This meant, in effect, family members – even if they had wanted to – were physically unable to move far from the family home.

- **Society**: In pre-industrial society there was no well-developed welfare system (few hospitals existed, for example) which meant family members relied on their own resources when it came to looking after and caring for the sick, the elderly and so forth.

The development of industrial society produced, according to this view, a structural family change – nuclear families became dominant because of the demands of factory forms of production and the opportunities this system created.

- **Geographic mobility**: People had to be mobile to find and keep work in the new industrial processes. There was a huge – if gradual – movement away from rural areas to the developing towns and, in such a situation, the extended family of pre-industrial society gradually broke down.

- **Social mobility**: New opportunities arose for social mobility and economic advancement as different types of work developed – people were no longer simply subsistence farmers. However, to seize these new opportunities, families had to be ready and willing to move to those areas where the chances of economic advancement were greatest.

- **Nepotism** (favouring your relations over others) was no longer a significant social asset (as it was in extended families), since the new industries demanded the demonstration of skills and knowledge rather than family connections.

If we extend this argument to post-industrial society we can identify significant changes to both family and household structures.

- **Family structures**: One feature of post-industrial society is the increasing *diversity* and *fragmentation* of family life – notwithstanding **Chester**'s observation (*The Rise of the Neo-conventional Family*, 1985) that the majority of people in Britain still live at least part of their life within some form of nuclear family structure. Just as, in the industrial period, family structures changed to accommodate new forms of economic organisation, so too, in the post-industrial period, further changes have occurred.

  New forms of working (especially through computer technology and networking) open up opportunities for homeworking which, in turn, means single-parent families are, potentially, no longer excluded from the workforce. The relatively small size of nuclear families and improved communications (such as the ability to stay in close contact with extended family members relatively easy) makes this family group increasingly mobile – both in terms of national and international movement.

- **Households**: One of the features of post-industrial society is the increase in the number of single-person households, indicative, according to this argument, of the way economic changes have impacted

on people's behaviour. The single-person household is, of course, potentially the most geographically mobile of all family/household structures and reflects the changing (increasingly global) nature of work.

Having outlined the evidence for the first argument, we can turn to an alternative interpretation of the relationship between family and household structures and industrialisation.

Pre-industrial society

Carlin ('Family, Society and Popular Culture in Western Europe c. 1500–1700', 2002) argues, 'most households in early modern Western Europe were nuclear family households, i.e. all the blood relations they contained were one couple and their children'. Although extended families existed, the main reasons for this type of family not being more common seem to be:

- **Life expectancy**: Average life expectancy was low (around 35–40 years) and, consequently, parents didn't always live long enough to become grandparents. Although this may have been a reason for many families remaining nuclear, we should note calculations of *average* life expectancies in pre-modern societies may be biased by high rates of infant and child mortality (large numbers of children dying drags the average down).

- **Choice**: **Carlin** (2002) notes that some parts of Western Europe, with similar birth and death rates to Britain, contained more vertically extended (sometimes called *stem*) families. This suggests, at least in part, people in Britain were choosing not to live in extended family structures.

- **Retirement**: Demographic evidence (information about how people live) from areas where people did survive into old age suggests they were expected to retire into households separated from their children.

- **Extended households**: **Peter Laslett** (*The World We Have Lost*, 1965 and *Household and Family in Past Time*, 1972) notes that upper-class households frequently included both wider kin and servants (mainly because there was sufficient room for them to live within the household). Lower-class households, although frequently nuclear because of high mortality rates among the elderly, probably contained 'lodgers' (who are likely to have been kin) staying temporarily within the family group. Laslett, however, estimates only 10% of pre-industrial households contained more than two generations of kin.

- **Modified extended structures**: **Michael Gordon** (1972) suggests arguments that the extended family was dominant in pre-industrial society confuse *temporary extensions* to a family (such as a relative living within a nuclear family for a short period) with the idea of a *permanent extended family* structure which, he argues, 'is seldom actually encountered in any society, pre-industrial or industrial'.

According to this argument, therefore, the mainly nuclear pre-industrial family was actually necessary for industrialisation.

Industrialisation

Harris ('The Family and Industrial Society', 1983) argues nuclear family structures dominated pre-industrial society because industrialisation required:

- An **inheritance system** that concentrated wealth, making capital (investment money) available to relatively small numbers of people. A close-knit, nuclear structure allied to a system of *primogeniture* (inheritance, by the first-born son, of a family's total wealth) made this possible. In addition, it forced those who didn't inherit to move away from the family home. **Wegge's** (really quite fascinating) research into peasant population movements in Germany ('To Part or Not to Part', 1999) supports this idea when she notes, 'it is the primogeniture institution which better promotes emigration'.

- **Population growth**: According to the Office for National Statistics, the population of England and Wales trebled between 1700 (6 million) and 1851 (18 million), indicating the existence of a large, landless, potential workforce. This is significant because it suggests geographic mobility wasn't a requirement for the development of industrialisation since what we see here is a population explosion in urban areas, rather than migration from the countryside to towns.

- **Migration**: If ideas about population growth are valid, it suggests urbanisation didn't result from the break-up and migration of extended rural families; rather, it occurred as the result of the population growing rapidly during the early industrial period.

Rosemary O'Day (*Women in Early Modern Britain*, 2000), for example, notes that a large rural class of agricultural labourers existed in the seventeenth century. They

owned no land and lived by selling their labour outside the family group.

In terms of this argument, therefore, **Michael Anderson** (*Approaches to the History of the Western Family*, 1995) points out there were 'many continuities' of family structure during the change from agricultural to industrial forms of production, during which no single family or household structure was wholly dominant. Thus, although we have focused on extended/nuclear family and household structures, this doesn't mean other types (with the possible exception of gay families) were not in evidence. Both reconstituted and single-parent family structures, for example, existed in pre-industrial societies, mainly because of high adult death rates, especially among the lower classes.

However, the historical evidence does suggest that, at least during some part of the industrialisation/urbanisation process, changes to family and household structures did occur, especially in relation to social class and the increasing diversity of family and household structures. **Anderson** (1995), for example, notes the working classes, during the process of industrialisation, developed a broadly extended family structure which resulted from:

- **Urbanisation**: As towns rapidly developed around factories, pressure on living space (and the relative underdevelopment of communications) resulted in extended family living arrangements.
- **Mutual aid:** The lack of state welfare provision meant working class families relied on a strong kinship network for their survival. During periods of sickness and unemployment, for example, family members could provide for each other.

- **Employment**: Where the vast majority could barely read or write, an 'unofficial' kinship network played a vital part in securing employment for family members through the process of 'speaking out' (suggesting to an employer) for relatives when employers needed to recruit more workers.
- **Child care**: Where both parents worked, for example, relatives played a vital part in child care. In addition, high death rates meant the children of dead relatives could be brought into the family structure. In an age of what we would now call child labour, young relatives could be used to supplement family income.

Middle-class family structures tended to be nuclear, mainly because of:

- **Education**: The increasing importance of education (for male children) and its cost meant middle class families were relatively smaller than their working class counterparts.
- **Geographic mobility** among the class from which the managers of the new industrial enterprises were recruited weakened extended family ties.

Upper-class family structures, according to **Roger Gomm** (*The Uses of Kinship*, 1989) have historically been a mixture of nuclear and extended types, although extended family networks, even up to the present day, are used to maintain property relations and for mutual economic aid amongst kin.

In addition, wealth meant extended kin (such as elderly grandparents) could be relatively easily accommodated within the family home and the evidence suggests it was – and still is to some degree – relatively

common for the vertically-extended family to exist among the upper classes.

Post-industrial society

Family and households structures in the late twentieth/early twenty-first centuries are, arguably, more complex, fragmented and diverse than at any time in our history, ideas we can briefly examine in the following terms.

- **Diversity**: As we have seen earlier, our society is characterised by a wide range of different family and household structures (nuclear, reconstituted, single-parent, gay and extended) apparently co-existing. It is, however, difficult to disentangle this diverse range of family structures, for two reasons.

  - Nuclear family structures seem to be the dominant family form, although they clearly involve a range of different family relationships; a single-parent family contains a different set of relationships to those in a reconstituted family, for example. The question here, therefore, is the extent to which either or both these family structures can be characterised as nuclear families.

  - Definitions of nuclear and extended family structures determine, to some degree, your view of their relationship. For example, **Willmott**'s (1988) concept of a dispersed extended family appears to plausibly characterise many types of family relationship in our society – what we have here, therefore, is a basic nuclear family structure surrounded and supported by extended family networks (and whether or not you count this structure as nuclear or

extended depends, as I have suggested, on how you define such things).

- **Social changes**: Relatively easy access to divorce (resulting from legal changes over the past 50 years) has led to greater numbers of reconstituted/single-parent families and single-person households.

- **Social attitudes**: Whatever the origins of such changes, it is clear lifestyle factors, in terms of greater social acceptance of single-parent and homosexual family structures, has played some part in creating family structural diversity. The Office for National Statistics (2000), for example, recorded 26% of all families with dependent children as containing a single adult parent.

- **Life expectancy**: Increased life expectancy, a more active lifestyle and changes to the welfare system (which in recent years has encouraged the de-institutionalisation of the elderly) has created changes within family structures, giving rise to the concept of a *new grandparenting* (grandparents play a greater role in the care of grandchildren, for example, than in the recent past). These trends have led to what **Julia Brannen** ('The age of beanpole families', 2003) calls the *beanpole family structure* – a form of inter-generational (different generations of family members), vertically-extended family structure with very weak intra-generational (people of the same generation – brothers and sisters, for example) links.

Similarly, **Bengston** ('Beyond the nuclear family', 2001) speculates about the extent to which the phenomenon of increasing bonds between different generations of family members (as represented, for

example, by the new grandparenting) represents 'a valuable new resource for families in the 21st century'.

- **Ambivalence**: **Luscher**, ('Ambivalence: A key concept for the study of intergenerational relations', 2000) on the other hand, suggests that people are becoming increasingly uncertain (ambivalent) about family structures and relationships in the light of family changes. Increases in divorce, for example, have led to the widespread creation of single-parent and reconstituted families. These may have resulted in a weakening of family relationships as family members seek to create new social spaces for themselves and their (new) families away from the relationships that previously existed in their lives. One result of these changes, perhaps, is families seeking 'to put geographical distance between different family generations'.
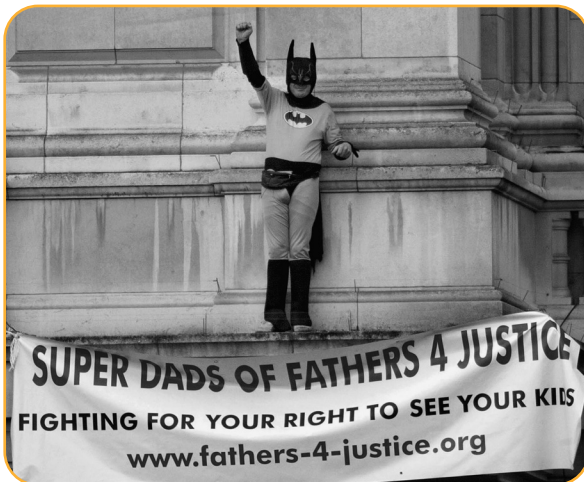
- **Households**: Finally, one of the most striking features of our society is the growth of lone person households. In

2003, for example, this household type was the single most common family or household structure in our society – according to the Office for National Statistics (Social Trends 34, 2004), 29% of families and households in the UK now involve a single person, marginally outstripping 'couples with no children' (28% of all family and household structures).

In turn, on current projections ('Complicated Lives II – the Price of Complexity', Abbey, 2002), the 'Couple with no children' household will soon be more common in our society than the 'Couple with children' family – at present, according to the Office for National Statistics (Social Trends 34, 2004), each of these types constitutes 28% of all family and household structures.

⚠ Growing it yourself

Having looked at the two arguments about the relationship between family and household structures, industrialisation and urbanisation:

1. Create a list (based on the following table) of what you think are the **three** most important strengths and weaknesses of each argument.

Argument 1		Argument 2	
Strengths	Weaknesses	Strengths	Weaknesses
1.			
2.			
3.			

2. Based on the strengths and weaknesses you've identified, write a brief (500–600 words) comparison of the two arguments.