

## Recent Findings of Research in Economic & Social History

One of the most significant areas of recent historical research has been work on the family. In this article Professor Michael Anderson focusses on the fascinating new insights that have been obtained on the relationship of the 'modern' family to its historical counterpart, and on the working of the family as a socio-economic unit. The significant role that women played within the household economy is explored and so too is the way in which the family's behaviour has been gendered.

# *New insights into the history of the family in Britain*

The 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of the history of the family as a major research field. A solid basis of knowledge was quickly established. Certain durable structural characteristics of the family, marriage and household were identified. Since medieval times, at least, most households were small (fewer, on average, than five persons) and simple in their kinship composition (typically only around 10% contained any relatives of the head beyond the immediate 'conjugal' family of parents and their children). Over many centuries until the 1960s, the average ages at marriage of men and women had been quite old (around 27 for men and 25 for women) and around 10% of men and women had never married. Until the onset of the major fertility decline of the last quarter of the 19th century, on average (though there was wide variation between couples), a married women might expect to bear five or six children spread over some 15 years of marriage.

More controversially, some groups of scholars had used literary sources to suggest that major changes had occurred in attitudes to family life and that many of the ideals of the 'modern' family were relatively recent features. From the 18th century, they argued, the 'conjugal family' was increasingly seen as a separate unit with a life and a loyalty of its own. Within that family, family life became less dominated by deference to the husband-father. A greater sense of informality and a willingness to allow individuals to pursue their own aspirations and personal happiness occurred (for example a greater freedom in the choice of marriage partners). Relationships between spouses, and between parents and their children, became more affectionate, and children came to play a central role in family life.

Finally, and largely uncontroversially, changes were identified in the workings of the family as an economic and social unit. Developments in the economy and large-scale

urbanisation increasingly undermined an older family economy, where all members contributed labour to a common family-centred economic enterprise, and in turn were supported out of the proceeds of its activity. These economic developments meant that, among the rapidly growing working classes, family members left home each day to work, often in different organisations which paid them wages *as individuals* for the work that they did. Within working class culture itself, a strongly-rooted belief system emerged which distinguished between real work, which men were paid to do outside the home to earn income to support their families, and 'housework', feminised and concerned with child-rearing and domestic consumption. Among the middle classes, the physical separation of home and work was matched by a drive to differentiate the responsibilities of men and women, with women responsible for the maintenance of the home as a haven from the pressures of a hostile world in which men battled to maintain the household's economic viability.

In the 1980s, some of these issues have been taken much further, often on the basis of a broader range of sources. For the period before about 1830, local civil and church courts and parish poor law records have been exploited and often linked together, and to other parish records, to give a more rounded picture of family life. In Scotland, the ability to undertake the reconstitution of the family from the civil

Michael Anderson is Professor of Economic and Social History at the University of Edinburgh. He has worked closely with the Cambridge Group for the Study of Population and Social Structure, and has published extensively on demographic history.

registers is throwing light on many aspects of later 19th century family behaviour. Oral history has revealed more about attitudes and has helped to illuminate women's perspectives on family behaviour. The increasing availability of powerful computers, with more sophisticated database software, has allowed more subtle analysis of household composition.

This new work has suggested that many of the first attempts at generalisation were too simple. There was often substantial regional and occupational diversity - as for instance in the uses made of kin, in the factors which made women willing to risk an illegitimate pregnancy, or in the division of labour within marriage. The past at any one time saw at least as wide a range of attitudes and behaviours as today. Throughout the last 500 years, for example, some couples have been passionately affectionate, others viciously hostile. Frequently, if anything changed it was the balance or 'centre of gravity' across this range of behaviour rather than a sharp shift from one extreme to another. Moreover, some of the changes inferred from literary sources now seem more the result of shifts in literary style or proficiency than arising from dramatic shifts of behaviour. The danger of suggesting an absence of affection simply because there is no mention in the record (arguing 'from silence') is now clear.

## The family and demographic change

Over the last 10 years it has become clear how much of demographic change is highly socially determined, with the family acting as a key intermediary in the process. Changes in the age at marriage, and proportions marrying, were for long the most important influences on long-term population trends in England. They were responsible, for example, for almost three-fifths of the change in the population growth rate between the mid-17th and the early 19th centuries. Variation in the frequency of sexual intercourse within marriage and changes in breastfeeding customs - influenced by perceptions of the needs and aspirations of fathers, mothers and children - are certainly important in fertility differentials. Mortality at all ages was also socially influenced; situations where female mortality exceeded that of men, for example, seem largely to have arisen from some combination of differential allocation of food within the family and patterns of labour division within the home. We also now understand better the ways in which demographic changes affected the possibilities for certain kinds of family behaviour. Table I shows estimates of the numbers of relatives that a typical person would on average have had alive at particular ages. These figures are produced by a computer-based population simulation; another technique which has developed rapidly in the last few years. As Table 1 shows, on average in the 1980s, 65% of the population had their father alive by the time they were 44. By contrast, higher mortality meant that only 20% would have been in this position in the demographic regime of the period 1760-1810, and even fewer a century earlier. In spite of smaller family sizes, lower mortality meant that adults would have had roughly the same number of brothers and sisters alive in the 1980s than in the period 1660-1710, and not very different

numbers of children. These relatives would have been spread over a much wider span of ages. Keeping in contact with kin would have been more difficult because pre-20th century Britain was characterised by high levels of population mobility but without modern means of communication. As a result, the range of kin with whom effective relationships could be maintained must have been on average no larger in 1760 than it is today. Only in the 19th and early 20th centuries would this number have been somewhat higher. Even then, the marked variation in demographic experience between different individuals in the population must have left more people totally bereft of close kin than are today. In contrast, those on whom demographic fortune shone favourably had much larger kinship universes than almost anyone alive in Britain today.

Figure 1 uses a rather cruder population simulation exercise to look at long-term changes in the familial life courses of women. The data are based on the experience of women who were 'typical' in that they, and all members of their families, experienced a series of demographic events at the median age for their birth cohort (all the persons born at the same period). Between 1831 and 1946, the decline from the mid-19th century in family size, and the clustering of children in the early years of marriage, reduced by some 11 years, the age at which a typical woman bore her last child. Most of these changes occurred in the 20th century. More gradually over time, the typical woman's age at the death of her husband rose by about 12 years and her age at her own death by about 14. In the 1681 birth cohort such a woman's last child married in the year that her husband died and she herself died 13 years before the birth of her last grandchild. The 1861 birth cohort (the grandparents of the inter-war period) was the first where even a majority could have known all their grandchildren. But, today, a typical woman has some 22 years of life to expect after the marriage of her last child. This compares with just three years for a woman born in 1861 and six for those born in the early 1830s. Equally significantly, a modern woman has some 17 years between the birth of her last child and the birth of her first grandchild; this is the period in which most now seek to return to work. By contrast a woman born in the 1830s had a gap of just nine years; it is easy to see how this, combined with higher mortality, did nothing to discourage women from spending almost the whole of their adult lives in child- and grandchild-care, a pattern increasingly established in the later 19th century and which dominated the inter-war period.

Table I. Number of relatives that an average person could have expected to have alive at certain dates, by age.

Relatives	At age	Number of relatives alive at the following dates:		
		1660-1710	1760-1810	1980s
Father	11	0.86	0.80	0.97
	44	0.13	0.20	0.65
Mother	11	0.81	0.84	0.98
	44	0.12	0.20	0.73
Brothers & Sisters	22	1.94	2.81	1.33
	44	1.33	2.14	1.30
	66	0.61	1.13	1.03
Children	33	1.45	2.05	1.45
	66	2.09	2.60	1.86

Source: P. Laslett in *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 1988.

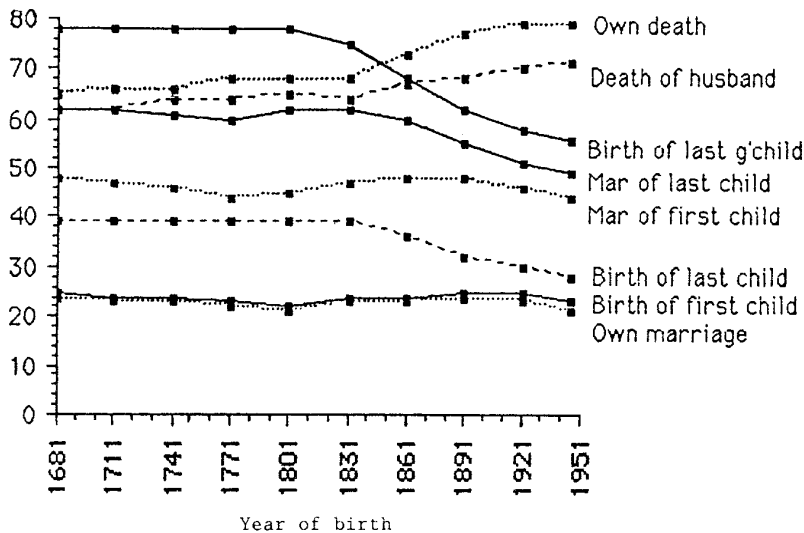


Fig.1 Life course of women, by birth cohort

## The Household Economy

Figure 2 shows the implications of falling mortality and rising divorce for the dissolution of marriages. On present trends, around a third of all marriages will not survive for 20 years, largely through high rates of divorce. Remarkably, the proportion of broken marriages of the 1820s was almost identical after 15 years - almost entirely due to high rates of adult mortality. Thus it is the marriages of the interwar period which are historically unique in their stability. However the implications of marriage dissolution through death, rather than divorce, merit more consideration from historians.

A second area of substantial historical investigation has involved attempts to improve our understanding of the workings of the household economies of both middle and working class groups. Of particular interest have been the varying 'coping strategies' employed by that section of the population who lived part or almost all their lives close to, or below, the margins of subsistence.

One important result has been an improved understanding of the ways in which families obtained the resources necessary for their activities. Particularly significant has been the realisation that in much of England it has been a very long time since the majority of parents and children worked together in a unitary household economy, based in or immediately around their own home. Because England ceased very early to be a predominantly peasant economy, large numbers of **agricultural** labourers have since medieval times left the home each day to work for someone else; their wives engaged in some quite different economic activity; and their children either worked with the mother or father or frequently undertook independent labour elsewhere, often leaving home at an early age to do so. Other substantial groups of workers (masons, sailors and packmen, for example) were similarly placed. What has recently become clear, however, is that a very large proportion of **urban** workers' wives were not engaged in the same trade as their husbands. In one recent study of London between 1695 and 1725 only about one economically active woman in 10 even worked in the same trade as her husband.

Secondly, it has become apparent that, in studying the ways in which households acquired resources, it is a major error just to look at 'occupations' and at cash income. In some areas, right up to the Second World War, a high proportion of working families acquired a substantial share of their resources through each of their members undertaking a range of activities outside of 'employment' as conventionally defined. In rural areas, 'foraging' or 'hunting and gathering' was important, though in the later 18th century some of the more traditional sources of foraging (such as gleaning and gathering wild fruits and animals), came under pressure with the elimination of many customary rights. In the towns, right through the 19th century, women

exploited sources of cheap food by picking up cheap perishables at the end of the market day, and children claimed the leftovers from eating, houses or charity meals at Sunday Schools. For clothing, being first in the queue at the jumble sale was crucial. There was also the widespread practice of exploiting fuel and other things that 'fell off the back of carts or vans' (whether by accident or otherwise), or were acquired as 'perquisites' (perks) of employment. The extensive practice of 'self-provisioning' was also significant; for example, knitting and sewing, growing vegetables on allotments, converting old clothes into blankets, or orange boxes into furniture. If we accept that both self-provisioning and domestic labour are 'work', equally vital with employment to the family's subsistence, then married women have always 'worked'; it is the balance between their different kinds of work activities that have changed.

Sometimes, moreover, a family's standard of life (though not its more conventionally cash-based standard of living) was markedly improved when the wife/mother was not in paid employment. As a result, even in areas of high female formal employment like Lancashire, it was often considered better for the household as a whole if the women did **not** work, in spite of the marked reduction in income involved because of the enormous burden of domestic labour needs to maintain and feed a household with no modern domestic technology or pre-processed foods. Also, a woman in full-time paid employment was significantly restricted in her self-provisioning and foraging activities.

Women also played a key role in the wider drive to keep the family solvent in a world of limited resources and of demographic and economic insecurity. Here loss of job, or death or sickness of the wage-earner, was a constant threat and incomes fluctuated substantially from week to week and year to year. In this context, we see the crucial importance in the 19th century of institutions like credit at the local corner shop or the Co-op dividend (the latter used to buy costly items like children's shoes). In the purchase of consumer durables and ornaments, keeping a careful eye on their potential 'pawnability' was important. (On a less formal level, the need to maintain standing and a reputation for reliability was crucial both for access to credit from local shopkeepers, and in order to benefit from community support in times of difficulty. Women played a key role in this system of support, which

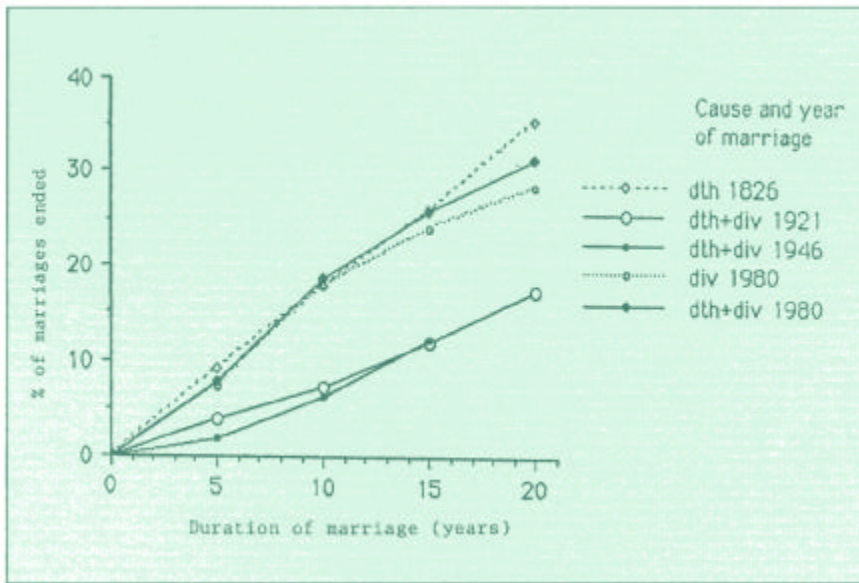


Figure 2. Percent of marriages ending, by duration, by cause and year of marriage.

The middle classes also had to organise their household economies to keep their finances solvent and to guard against demographic or economic catastrophes. Particularly significant were the ways in which - especially between c. 1750 and the later 19th century - the expanding bourgeoisie and the professional classes organised marriages and the financial affairs of their female relatives to harbour their business capital (through cousin marriage and marriage to the daughters of partners), and if possible to increase it (through marriage to women of property). These same groups also developed trusts and other property arrangements to provide for their dependents, producing a life-cycle patterning in the acquisition, use and disposal of wealth. At the same time, kinship ties were widely exploited for contacts to advance the firm or acquire business information, or to ensure that only reliable employees were incorporated in key managerial positions.

### *The shaping of familial behaviour*

A third area of recent historical research in which significant advances have been made involves study of the processes which shape and define 'appropriate' familial behaviour. The boundaries which define the categories within which many aspects of demographic and familial behaviour have been explored are much less clear than was once imagined or assumed. For example, it was only very gradually that the Church was able to defeat a widespread view that entry into marriage was a lengthy and gradual process in which the public rites were just the symbolic endpoint. Well into the 19th century many couples 'lived tally', having entered into a conditional partnership through an informal ceremony which might involve jumping together over a broomstick or exchanging rings. To break the partnership the partners then returned the rings or jumped backwards over the broomstick. One important pressure undermining these practices was the insistence of the more bureaucratic New Poor Law on clearly defined categories as a basis for support after 1834. To take another illustration, even the historical

categories of 'kin' and 'non-kin' often turn out to be elusive, with quite close relatives being entered in listings as 'servants' and apparently being treated as such. On the other hand, until the later 18th century servants were regularly counted as part of the 'family' of their masters, though they were probably seldom treated on a par with the master's children of the same age.

We also now know much more about the ways in which familial roles were shaped, about how family behaviour has been 'gendered', and about how class ideologies have influenced what came to be seen as morally-valued behaviour. Thus, 19th century legislation on the employment of women and children in factories reflected both a growing middle-class concern to separate male and female spheres, and also a desire to bolster among the working-class a more middle-class 'domestic ideology'. State elementary education from the 1870s provided girls, but not boys, with an education

which emphasised the virtues of good housewifery and domestic management. The rules of the poor law, social security system, and income tax similarly reinforced and propagated middle-class views of appropriately gendered family behaviour. More generally, domestic Organisation and conventional behaviour patterns, right across the social spectrum, reinforced gender divisions. In middle and upper-class homes, the gendered segregation of space, with different decorative styles (dark colours or panelled walls in the masculine study and billiard room, light flowery fabrics and wallpapers in the morning room), were a constant reminder of a segregated world. From earliest childhood, girls were dressed in ways which inhibited boisterous behaviour. Family ceremonial (from religious observance led by the male head to who cut the Sunday joint of meat) supported these divisions. These were bolstered by material differences (for example, special food for the males in the household) and psychological expectations (girls would help with domestic duties from an early age while boys were usually exempt).

### *Further reading*

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