

## **Chapter 18: Families and Households**

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### **What is the family and household?**

A family is a network of individuals tied to each other by blood, marriage, adoption or fostering and comes in many forms and sizes. There is no singular or universal type of family. Some common family types or structures include a single parent and children, a ‘nuclear’ family comprising two parents and children, or extended families consisting of one or two parents, children and other relatives. However, a range of different family types exist within this spectrum!

A household is a commonly used term or unit of analysis to describe a group of people’s living arrangements and relationships to each other. There is no universal, standardised definition for a ‘household’ either. What comprises a household can vary across cultures, social contexts and even seasons. Most anthropological definitions of households have consisted of three key components: (1) families/kinship, (2) co-residence and (3) participation in domestic household functions (Bender, 1967; Yotebieng & Forcone, 2018), in line with the idea that a household is not a static unit of observation but an analytic category that has a different meaning in different contexts (Netting et al., 2022). While a household most obviously appears to be a physical structure where groups of people co-reside, in fact in many cultures the social definition of a household goes beyond physical boundaries. Research across the social sciences has shown that what researchers often define as a ‘household’ does not quite capture the social units in which people actually live (Cloke, 2007; Randall et al., 2011). For example, consider a family where the husband has

three wives who live in separate physical houses - common in many cultures (see polygyny in chapter xx). These three households might be economically co-dependent, yet many surveys would categorise them into separate 'households' due to conflation of household membership with co-residence. In this case, which of the three households is the husband a member of when he occasionally resides in all three? A household's composition can also vary over time with blended families where children's biological parents reside separately due to separation or divorce and children live between multiple households. These examples demonstrate some limitations of conventional definitions of the household. One approach taken to overcome these limitations is to allow individuals to have multiple kinds of household membership, allowing them to be members of more than one household and to even be non-resident members of a household (Hosegood & Timaeus, 2006).

Three terms often used in research on the family, or the household are 'size', 'structure' and 'composition'. By 'size', researchers usually mean the number of individuals who comprise a family or who are considered as members of a household. Often, family size refers to the number of children a parent/couple chooses to have. However, household size is defined by who belongs to the household, including kin and non-kin, and thus is more fluid and difficult to pin down. Family or household 'structure' can be defined by its generational configuration (is the household a two- or three-generational one?), its extent of nucleation (does anyone other than the focal parent(s) and their children live in the household?), the types of marriage taking place (how many spouses are present?) and post-marital residence systems (where does a couple live after marriage?), as well as the role played by extended kin within that system (do they contribute to household domestic functions?). 'Composition' refers to the individuals who comprise the structure of the family or household, and how they are related to each other (e.g., parents, children, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and even friends and other non-kin) (Madhavan et al., 2017).

While family and households are often conflated in the literature, in reality they are different. Families refer to specific kinship structures, whereas not all members of a household are

necessarily kin but instead are tied to each other through co-residence and roles and responsibilities around the production and consumption of food and labour (Bautista, 2011; Bender, 1967; Randall et al., 2011). To make matters more complicated, as seen above, some definitions of the household do not even count certain household tenants/residents as household members!

### **Application Box**

One real world phenomenon that is blurring the definitions of both families and households is global migration. Increasing rates of migration have led to what researchers have labelled 'trans-national' households. These households are made up of individuals (often family members) who live apart, across national borders. Trans-national households do not adhere to the classic definition of households where co-residence and domestic function (i.e. production and consumption of food and/or labour) is necessary. What do you think are some consequences of international migration on who people cooperate with on a daily basis?

For example, Brettell's work on gender-biased migration out of Portugal during the period 1850-1920 discusses the living arrangements of single, widowed and married women (whose husbands out-migrated) who were left behind (Brettell, 2003). While in theory these women's households remained independent, Brettel found that these women had together formed an extended household due to the high levels of men's out-migration.

Question: How can trans-migrants be included as household members by researchers?

### **Evolutionary perspectives on families and households**

One of the key reasons we see so much variation in families and households is because people usually tend to live with other people - although, of course, living alone is also a type of household! Thus, family and household size, structure and composition can vary for

multiple reasons across cultures including the number of children a parent/couple have (see chapter xx on fertility), child and adult survival rates (see chapter xx on mortality), the types of marriage which form the family (see chapter xx on marriage) and the post-marital residence systems which influence the generational configuration of households.

### ***Post-marital residence systems***

The post-marital residence system is interwoven with kinship organisation, descent and inheritance. It is who you co-reside with post marriage that forms the extended families which structure daily life (Shenk, 2024), and has implications for the spread of cultural traits in a population (Carrignon et al., 2024). After marriage, spouses have several choices about where to set up their home. They can do so with the husband's family, which is called 'patrilocal' residence (meaning father's place), with the wife's family - referred to as 'matrilocal' residence (mother's place), make a new household separate from kin (neolocal, or 'new place'). Or, the direct opposite, which is 'natalocal' (birth place) where couples stay with their 'birth' community and *do not* form a household. Finally, an 'ambilocal' post-marital residence system ('ambi' meaning both places) is where spouses choose to reside with *either* the husbands' or wives' kin (Shenk, 2024). When spouses change where they live during the course of the marriage, this is referred to as 'bilocal' (bi meaning 'two' places). These final systems are common in mobile hunter-gatherers because they are flexible – hunter-gatherers live in unpredictable and often marginal environments which necessitate moving to locations with better or seasonally varying resources (Blurton Jones et al., 2005; Marlowe, 2003).

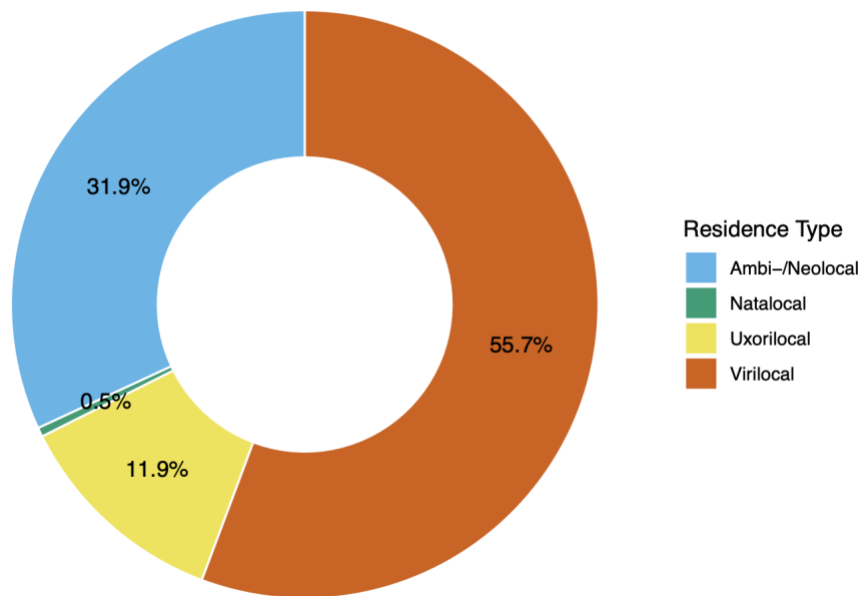
Cross-culturally, patrilocality is the most common, present in 55.7% of societies in the SCCS (the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample) regardless of subsistence type (Shenk, 2024, Figure 1). It has been associated with the need for men to cooperate in terms of food production (intensive farming), resource defence as well as internal warfare (M. Ember & Ember, 1971; Shenk et al., 2010). Matrilocal systems are found in 11.9% of societies, and are associated with economic cooperation between women (Mattison, 2010; Shenk, 2024).

This can occur when there are high levels of external warfare or long-distance trade resulting in absent men (M. Ember & Ember, 1971) as well as high levels of involvement of women in subsistence systems, like in horticulture (Aberle, 1961). An interesting example of matrilocality is among Khoe-San descendent populations in South Africa. During the European (Dutch/British) colonial expansion into South Africa, indigenous pastoralist Khoe-San communities and their descendants, who historically preferred matrilocality, became part of a sedentary colonial society with strong patrilocality norms (Reynolds et al., 2023). Interestingly, while many Khoe-San descendent populations have adopted some cultural traits of the colonial groups (e.g., Afrikaans language, Christianity, farmwork and wage labour), they still practice a diversity of locality patterns, and matrilocality has persisted despite hundreds of years of colonial rule. Today, patrilocality remains the least practiced postmarital residence system among these communities (Reynolds et al., 2023). However, the contemporary persistence of this historic Khoe-San cultural trait (i.e., diversity in non-patrilocality postmarital residence systems) has occurred on a geographic gradient: with a stronger persistence farther away from the economic and cultural hub of Cape Town where there may have been higher levels of cultural assimilation and acculturation between different groups.

Ambilocal, bilocal and neolocal systems make up 31.9% of marriage systems and happen in a diverse range of contexts, from urban centres to rural hunter-gatherers. Neolocality is most commonly associated with large-scale market economies in the West as well as rapidly developing and urbanising areas worldwide (Stone, 2009), and is deeply embedded into Western concepts of the 'traditional' nuclear family (Sear, 2021). Natalocal is particularly rare, representing only 0.5% of marriage systems cross-culturally. It is often connected with matrilineal descent and inheritance (so fathers do not invest in children, instead the mothers' kin does) and male absence (Shenk, 2024). A particular example of natalocal residence is found in the matrilineal Mosuo from China, known as 'walking marriages'. In the Mosuo, both spouses remain in their natal households and paternal care is not required, but maternal uncles are responsible for raising the children in large extended

matrilineal households (Mattison, 2010). Here, men are absent because of long distance trading, and alternative systems of allomothering (See Box 1) have developed to ensure mothers have the required support, which is formalised within the residence, marriage and inheritance systems.

Living apart together (LAT) unions or relationships, or non-residential partnerships, have been a growing form of residence system since the mid 2000s, particularly in high-income settings. Here, couples choose to maintain separate residences while being involved in serious relationships which are at times also formalised through law. This type of residence is common among young people who are in early relationship stages or in transitional life stages (e.g., between study and work, between financial dependence and independence); and middle- to older-aged adults often after the dissolution of their previous marriage or union when both have significant wealth to live independently (Mauritz & Wagner, 2021; Régnier-Loilier et al., 2009; Strohm et al., 2009). Among the latter group, these types of residence patterns are frequently documented if either partner has children from a previous partnership. Problematically, these types of partnerships can be overlooked in high-income settings due to the use of conventional measures of union status in surveys. A study in the USA found that one third of individuals who would have been classified as 'single' in these surveys were in fact in LAT relationships (Strohm et al., 2009). Similarly, in France in 2009, 11% of 18-79 year old women with partners and 10% of 18-79 year old men with partners were living in non-cohabiting relationships (Régnier-Loilier et al., 2009). More recently, LAT unions have been documented amongst the oldest old population (80+) in Germany, where 13.3% of old-age partnerships were LAT unions (Mauritz & Wagner, 2021).



**Figure 1:** Prevalence of post-marital residence systems from the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample. From Kirby et al. 2016 as presented in Shenk (2024).

The last two systems (which are similar enough that they are often used interchangeably) – ambilocal and bilocal residence – are particularly common in mobile and egalitarian hunter-gatherers (often referred to in the literature as immediate-return – see chapter xx). Research across multiple such hunter-gatherer populations such as the Hadza, Aché, Hiwi, Agta, BaYaka, Pumé and Aka, alongside computational modelling, has demonstrated that because either the men or the women can co-reside with their family, often brothers and sisters are co-resident in a camp, as well as lots of unrelated people (Dyble et al., 2015; Hill et al., 2011). This makes an interesting situation where individuals co-reside and cooperate on a daily basis with both close kin and non-kin, which has implications for the societal structure (i.e. multiple level cooperation – (Dyble et al., 2016). Such systems have arisen in hunter-gatherer populations because hunter-gatherers are flexible in terms of their residence – they live in unpredictable and often marginal environments and require the ability to move to locations with more resources as needed (Blurton Jones et al., 2005;

Marlowe, 2005). To do so requires kin connections, so by recognising both maternal and paternal lineages (i.e., bilineal descent – bi meaning ‘two’) households can move from one location to the next without hindrance, and maximise returns as required (Kramer & Greaves, 2011).

There has been a particular research focus on the post-marital residence systems of hunter-gatherers as understanding the relationship between social systems (e.g., residence systems) and subsistence behaviours together offers insights into the evolution of these traits. Of course, all ‘hunter-gatherers’ are not a uniform group; within this group, there is variability on multiple fronts including subsistence, marriage, residence and wider social systems (Page et al., 2024; Page & French, 2020; Singh & Glowacki, 2021). Some populations favour patrilocal residence, others matrilocal. This complicates inferences given a) there is no modal hunter-gatherer group and b) this variability among hunter-gatherers at the group level is not a meaningful proxy for subsistence behaviour within the population (Page et al., 2024). Patrilocality appears to be more common among hunter-gatherers in the Human Relation Area Files (HRAF - dynamic and expertly indexed databases developed from a collection of cultural materials that are classified by subject) leading some to argue that this is the ‘ancestral’ state of humans (C. R. Ember, 1975). However, such ‘snap-shot’ ethnographic data (ethnographers record the current norm at any given point in time) hides the fact that families change residence during their life course, driven by social, economic and ecological reasons (facilitated by bilocality and bilateral descent systems), but also due to differences in normative versus observed preference (what people say they do compared to what they actually do). Frequently, individuals may report a preference to reside partilocally, but in reality they reside based on ever changing requirements. Beyond these nuances, the picture is further complicated by the fact that early ethnographers (often White Christian men) may have been biased towards patrilocal residence and thus labelled behaviour as ‘the’ system even in cases when matrilocality was

occurring (Alvarez, 2004; Brewer, 2016; Marlowe, 2004). It is these labels which make up the categories in the HRAF and other cross-cultural samples, complicating inferences about post-residence systems in human evolution. A large review of the cross-cultural literature and isotope studies found that at best there is evidence of *a preference* towards matrilineal tendencies in prehistoric hunter-gatherers, but there are large uncertainties given the above issues (Brewer, 2016). Most importantly, post-marital marriage patterns are extremely easy to change, particularly when wider systems necessitate it. Human systems are flexible for this reason, and this is why it's difficult to extrapolate from modern day hunter-gatherers to the past.

### ***What about same sex marriage and families?***

Same-sex sexual behaviour has been reported in over 1500 animal species, for males and females, and in wild conditions as well as in captivity. It is prevalent among invertebrates (insects, spiders, echinoderms, nematodes) and vertebrates (fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds, mammals), and is especially common among nonhuman primates. Behavioural ecologists and evolutionary biologists have only recently begun to conduct extensive research on same-sex sexual behaviour in mammals and as such the prevalence of this behaviour among mammals is considered to be underestimated (Gómez et al., 2023).

For humans, same-sex sexual behaviour has existed throughout our history and in many societies and cultures, and it is important to recognise same-sex marriage as one cause of diversity within different family types. While it has not received much attention in the evolutionary human sciences there is a large and ever-growing literature on same-sex marriage in the social sciences. Historically, and still currently, in many populations, marriage and parenthood has not been an easy route for the LGBTQ+ population, when it is possible at all, due to cultural and legal restrictions and taboos (Adamczyk & Liao, 2019; Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013; Trandafir, 2015). Even today, the most representative research on sexual minorities focuses on coresident couples of the same sex or gender at a

certain point in time, disallowing a life course perspective of union formation and parenthood among sexual minorities (Ophir et al., 2023). Inclusion of questions about sexual identity in large-scale nationally representative surveys is also quite recent, for example, the UK census first introduced a question on the respondent's sexual orientation in 2021.

While a lot of the research on same-sex couples and sexual minorities is set in Europe and/or the USA, there is documentation of same-sex marriage in anthropological studies in Africa from before and during periods of colonization (Andrikopoulos & Spronk, 2023; Cadigan, 1998; Evans-Pritchard, 1970; Herskovits, 1937). While this literature sheds more light on the kinship systems of same-sex couples rather than on their living arrangements, it demonstrates that same sex marriage has existed for a long time and has taken many different forms. For example, in Kenya, Igbo women were able to take on the social role of men, gain honorific titles and increase their wealth by marrying wives (Amadiume, 1987); in gold mines in southern Africa, young men would initially take on the role of wives but as they grew older they would eventually become husbands and take on their own younger wives (Moodie et al., 1988); and some Azande (an ethnic group in Central Africa) parents let their sons marry senior male warriors in exchange for bridewealth, eventually replacing their son with a daughter within this marriage if they were satisfied with the union (Evans-Pritchard, 1970). While same sex marriages (i.e., state-sanctioned unions) have recently become more common, informal and unsanctioned same sex unions have a long and culturally diverse history documented in ancient Rome, Greece and Mesopotamia, as well as the Zhou and Ming dynasties in China.

### **Research Focus Box: Allomothering – cooperative childrearing beyond the Mother**

Allomothering refers to the investment provided to offspring by individuals other than the biological mother, often this can be close relatives - including the father - but can be friends or paid professionals (Bentley & Mace, 2009; Helfrecht et al., 2020). This behaviour is observed across all human societies as no mother raises her children alone (Emmott & Page, 2019). Allomothering includes a diverse range of investments - from direct childcare (feeding, holding and playing with children), to providing resources (money, food) as well as completing all the domestic tasks which are required to raise children (cleaning, cooking (Emmott & Page, 2019)). Who does what varies cross-culturally, but given women's need to raise multiple highly dependent children concurrently (human interbirth intervals are often very short, especially from a comparative perspective to other great apes) requires investment from allomothers across several, if not all, of these domains (Hrdy, 2005b; Kramer, 2010). From this perspective, it cannot be assumed that fathers are *required* to provide paternal care as there are other allomothers available to support mothers. One key allomother often pointed to is the maternal grandmother, who has the close biological relationship with her grandchildren *and* pre-existing knowledge and skill set to ensure high quality care (Hrdy, 2005a). Grandmaternal care has been demonstrated to replace maternal care in a range of contexts (Meehan et al., 2013; Page et al., 2021; Scelza, 2009), and most commonly associated with improved outcomes (Sear & Mace, 2008). However, who provides care and the outcomes associated with this investment vary significantly (Hassan et al., 2021; Page et al., 2022; Valeggia, 2009), and we still have little research on why we witness such diversity, but future studies are directed at this very question (Hassan et al., 2024). Importantly, allomothering requirements influence who is co-resident and included within the family or included in trans-national households when support is offered at a distance.

### **Conclusions: Assumptions, change and temporality in families**

This chapter has underlined how flexible and context-specific human family systems are, and how the vast diversity present in humans leads to endless types of families and households. This flexibility in human family systems is at odds with an often-unstated assumption that there is a linear shift from extended or joint family systems to more nuclear family systems (1) over time and (2) as societies shift from rural to urban. Evidence shows that these shifts are not one directional. For example, in India, the deeply ingrained idea that family systems in India moved from extended to nuclear over time is dispelled, by showing that a variety of family types have always co-existed in India, including joint, nuclear, single parent, dual earner and adoptive (D'Cruz & Bharat, 2001). Similarly, in Ghana urbanisation is associated with *more* extended families, not less (Ackah et al., 2025). This shows us that changes in families and households are not always linear and we cannot assume that families and households in all cultures will become more westernised over time (Thornton, 2001). As demonstrated in this chapter, families and households are composed of multiple components which meet different needs and are dependent on many different factors. Thus, change over time will look different in different contexts. Evolutionary perspectives help us to understand this change because it asks both the *why* (what are the fitness returns in a given environment) and *how* (what is the context specific path or mechanism) which make no such assumptions of linear progression.

### **Teaching Box**

#### **Evolutionary perspectives on post-marital residence systems**

We discuss six different types of post-marital residence in this chapter. Your task is to identify (i) how different populations may have come to adopt different residence systems (i.e., what paths or mechanisms may have facilitated the adoption of a particular residence system) and (ii) why different populations may have adopted different residence systems (i.e., could there be differing fitness returns for different residence systems?)

#### **Points for students to highlight:**

1. Changes in subsistence and socioeconomic ecologies, e.g., transition from hunting gathering to agriculture, from agriculture to market integration and wage labour / cash economies – current influence of globalisation
2. Experience of warfare can lead to cultural shifts
3. Cultural traits can change and at times even be lost post interactions between different group and intercultural contact. This can be due to power dynamics, with adoption of cultural traits of the more powerful group (e.g., to attain more social or economic benefits or forced in cases of colonialism)
4. Should give examples, and mention the outlying example of the Khoe-San where historical cultural traits persisted

#### **Self-assessment questions**

1. Name and define the three common terms used in research on households and families?
2. Define the term allomothering. Discuss briefly how differences in household composition can impact the receipt of allomaternal care for a particular child?

3. Why do you think urbanisation is not necessarily associated with the nuclearization of households?
4. What is one difference and one similarity between households and families?
5. What are trans-national households and families? How does membership of these households differ from membership of classically defined households?
6. What are the six different types of post-marital residence systems identified in this chapter? Provide a brief description of each type.
7. What are some reasons same-sex marriage may be underreported among humans today?
8. Are changes in family and household types over time linear?

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