

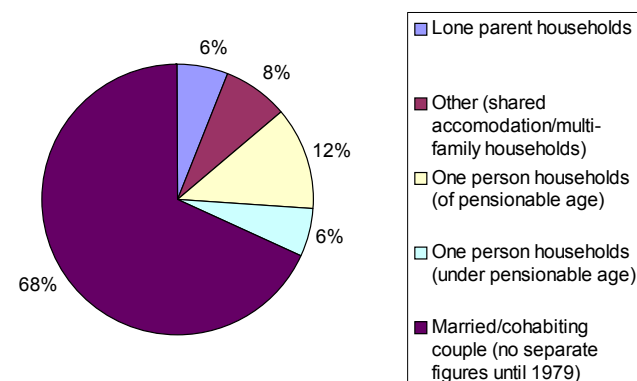
Introduction

A 1960 study in South Wales, UK found that, despite increasing geographical and occupational mobility, family members living in different households provided support for each other.¹

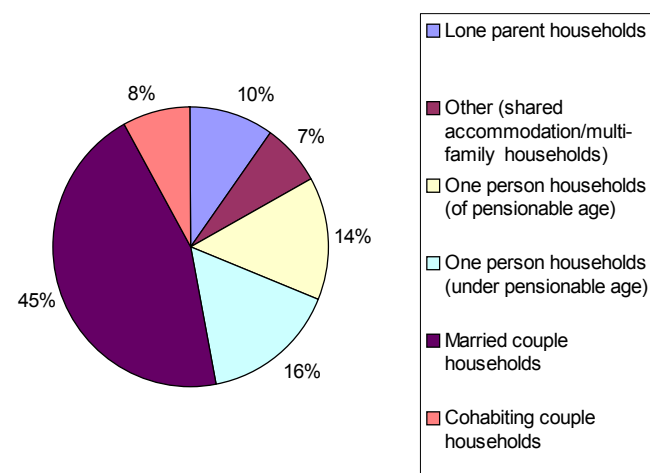
In the years since 1960 the context of support has changed:

- The proportion of single person households has increased
- The proportion of those partnering and parenting has decreased.

Household Composition Census 1971
England and Wales



Household Composition Census 2001
England and Wales



These changes have led some to claim that a characteristic of advanced industrial societies is that (i) family members are increasingly individualised and no longer care for each other in the ways that they used to and (ii) social capital, in the form of informal social networks at the local level, is in decline.

This re-study explores these claims.

Methods

- 1,000-household survey collecting data on the family and kinship networks of randomly sampled subjects (May to September 2002)
- Three ethnographic studies of distinct areas within Swansea (May 2001 to December 2003).
- Interviews with 102 women and 57 men aged between 18 and 92 years
- Observation in a range of different settings such as schools, local societies, religious organisations, carol services, St David's day celebrations and community centres.

Findings

A large part of the sample population has lived in Swansea and its environs all their lives, particularly those who are **working class**. This facilitates frequent contact between parents and their adult children, especially between **mothers** and **daughters**. Frequency of contact between parents and their adult children has only fallen slightly between 1960 and 2002.

Financial or practical support

Parents help children with setting up house either with money for a deposit on a mortgage or by buying household items such as fridges, washing machines and even kitchens for them. Practical support such as DIY is often provided by fathers.

Sons often drop by in the course of their work. One young man calls in to see his grandmother every day. He decorates her flat for her and she provides him with a meal when he visits. Her sons also call in on a regular basis.

Care

Parents to adult children

Contact between adult children and parents is higher for those who have children than for those who do not. Female relatives help out when a baby is born.

Because I had this baby now and like [sister] came down and was helping my mother-in-law clean and [other sister] was doing the ironing Everybody just rallied around me because I was like, I used to do for them and all of a sudden now, I suppose it was my turn. (P018)

Many grandmothers look after grandchildren while their adult children are at work. Sometimes care is provided on a daily basis and sometimes grandchildren stay with their grandparents at half term and for periods of time during the school holidays.

Adult children to parents

Care ranges from calling in on a daily basis to see if parents are alright to helping them with shopping and providing more intimate care if they are unable to look after themselves.

I take her for hospital appointments, do things on the phone for her, arrange for someone to come and repair things, I go to the library for her, I make sure that she's got enough food in the house... Occasionally, if I make a Sunday dinner, I put one on a plate for her and take that up. I used to be there when she had a bath, but she can't bath at the moment because her arm is in plaster. ... And if she falls over she calls me out to pick her up. (F034)

Even those who live a long way away return to be with parents in case of illness or hospitalisation.

Employment or labour

Family businesses support family members by providing them with employment and are also supported through the availability of family labour. In the Bangladeshi community it is usually the men who work in the family businesses but amongst the Chinese it is daughters as well as sons.

Family businesses are not confined to the minority ethnic population. A man in his early thirties works in the family business with his parents and his grandparents who are in their nineties. His grandmother provides lunch every day for all five of them. He sees his employment in the family business as part of the way his parents provide him with financial support.

Emotional support

This type of support is part of all the others and is difficult to give voice to.

But yes, if there is anything, if there's a problem, I would do anything for them [parents]. And I think they would do anything for me as well. ... I don't think of it as support, it's just something I do, and I wouldn't think of doing anything else. I mean if my mum was worried about anything, well we'll try and sort it out. (F024)

Conclusions

- Families provide support and care for one another in a variety of living arrangements.
- There are still expectations about the care and support that family members should provide, this marks them off from friends and neighbours.
- It is only in the absence of family, as a result of geographical mobility or not having had any children, that others step in to provide support
- Despite individualisation, support between households continues to be part of the fabric of family life.
- Social capital is maintained in informal, locally-based kinship networks.