

Unit Activities

~~Before You Begin 40 minutes~~

Read the following discussion of the terms “family” and “household.” Why do you think historians find it necessary to distinguish between the two terms?

Historians use the word “family” to mean shared kinship, whether by blood or adoption. They define the term “household” to mean shared residence, which is often an economic unit as well. These two definitions can overlap, depending on culture and language, but in general, “family” refers to relationship, and “household” refers to residence.

In the video you will see a number of different types of evidence to show the ways family and household structures varied across cultures and changed over time. Read the following discussion of the challenges historians face in reconstructing and analyzing the history of the family over time. What kinds of evidence do you predict you will see used in this unit?

To get an accurate picture of these arrangements across cultures and over time, historians face a unique challenge. The view of families and households from inside these units, and the view of them from outside—say from a political perspective—often don’t agree. So researchers must gather evidence from a wide range of sources. Standard public documents may not offer much detail about family life. Although reconstructing the history of families can be difficult, historians have learned to mine certain sources that richly document the ways families and households functioned in the past: These include oral testimonies, mythologies, genealogies, life histories, legal codes, archaeological excavations, languages, and literature. Historians have found that families and households are universal in world history, but that their specific forms are products of culture and historical change. Moreover, the historical record as represented by official documents such as codes of law merely reports the prescribed and/or dictated ideal behaviors. Frequently, actual historical practices differed greatly from ideals.

Today’s historians also draw on more personal, firsthand accounts. They look at artifacts, genealogies, literature, and letters. They have found that this type of evidence often paints a very different picture of life inside the family than the “official” versions put forth by church or state. And in recent years, historians have been able to use large-scale statistical databases and computer programs that compile information on families and households to gain yet another perspective.

~~Watch the Video for “Unit 13: Family and Household” 30 minutes~~

~~Activity 1: Relationship Between Family and Religion 110 minutes~~

~~In small groups, analyze the types of evidence used in the following case studies to explain the relationships between families/households and religions. What kind of evidence could a historian use to explain how religion or the state affected your family? How reliable are portraits or photographs in showing the roles in a family or household?~~

~~**Case Study 1:** Confucianism and family life in Imperial China, from the second century BCE into the sixteenth century.~~

~~For Confucius, the rituals that ordered society were also part of family life because family was the core of society. The principal way that social order was attained was through creating order in the family. Rituals were used to create such order, primarily rituals to venerate ancestors.~~