

# Discussion of changing family structures in the uk

[Family](#)



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Discuss changing family structures in the UK and give examples of sociological theories that provide explanations as to why and how families have changed. This essay will discuss the various family structures in society. It will give theoretical explanation as to why and how families have changed. The essay will also bring statistical, historical and political evidence to back up the reason for these changes. During the pre-industrial society the 'extended family' was the most common family structure.

This family structure involves three generations including the parents, children and either the grandparents (vertical-extended) or uncles and aunts (horizontally-extended). The extended family structure was essential for this society as families were a 'unit of production' so they needed as many workers as they could get. Michael Anderson (1971) argued that in 'critical life situations' there was a dependence on the extended family for help and support. Then Parsons (1949) said large families were economically beneficial, so the extended family was the most suited structure.

However, during in the industrial revolution family life changed. It was no longer seen as a 'unit of production' but now a 'unit of consumption'. The 'nuclear family' emerged and became the main family structure. However, the extended family may become popular again as in our current society people are living longer and state funding on residential care has decreased so this has shifted the care and responsibility onto the family. Also, there has been an increase in Multi-generational families. 'The earlier age of child-bearing reducing the age gap between generations' (Fulcher and Scott, 2011: 446)

The 'nuclear family' consisted of two generations, the mother, father and their children. Parsons (1949) argued that industrialisation resulted in a shift from the extended family to the nuclear family, as its characteristics are more typical for a capitalist society. Parsons (1956) believed that you must move where there is work and that you should only take your immediate family with you not everyone. This is why nuclear families were more beneficial as it was easier to move for work with just your immediate family. With the industrial revolution and the growth of capitalism, production was no longer carried out by family members, but by workers. Public policies were put in place during 1940-1970 such as the welfare state, which was designed to support family roles (breadwinner and caring mother). Since then there has been significant changes in public policies such as the divorce reform act (1967), the abortion act (1967), the equal pay act (1970), the sex discrimination act (1975) and maternity leave was introduced.

This gave women more freedom and more opportunities especially within employment and lifestyle choices. This led to social change; postponement of marriage and childbearing, the number of divorces in England and Wales increased from 6,000 in 1938 to more than 48,000 in 1968, and in 1960 the fertility rate was 2.72%, dropping to 1.93% in 1998. Due to these rapid increases in divorce cohabitation has become more preferable for couples as there are no legal ties, the couple can see how it goes before making any major decisions such as marriage.

Also couples may marry later as weddings are expensive and they don't have the money to afford one due to the recession, however living with each other saves money. This was the democratic and educational revolution and

the era of the nuclear family. However, with new policies in place and such major social change, from the 1970s onwards it became the 'post-industrial society' and the rise of post-modernism. This society brought new family structures, and units that were previously perceived as unacceptable became acceptable.

Since the divorce reform act (1967) divorces have rapidly increased resulting in many re-marriages, introducing the reconstituted family unit. This family includes children that live with one biological parent and a step-parent. These families may also include step/half brothers and sisters. Divorce has also meant there are many more single-parent families. This is a family structure where only one parent takes care of the children. This can be due to birth outside of marriage, divorce and death or imprisonment of a partner.

Murray (1990) would argue that the rise in single parent families is due to the underclass and fatherless families. Boys without fathers are inadequately socialised and don't have a male role model. When they have their own children they won't have an understanding of a 'dad' role, so this may result in them being absent in the child's life and separation from the wife/partner.

Marx (1848) would argue that the breakdown of marriage is due to the conflict that the capitalist society is creating and this is affecting relationships.

Feminist, Delphy (1977) argues that the exploitation of women's labour is rooted in 'the domestic mode of production' within the household, not in the capitalist mode of production. 'Men hold a superior position within the domestic mode of production and exploit women through marriage' (Fulcher and Scott, 2011: 435). This exploitation could create conflict and domestic

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violence may occur resulting in separation/divorce. Lastly, some individuals blame single-parent families on the permissiveness of the sexual revolution.

Jeffrey Weeks (1989) believes that post-war changes in capitalism has led to a new pleasure-seeking attitude in females, which resulted in sexual behaviour as a source of pleasure rather a means of producing children. This can relate to why there are so many single-parent families headed by women from births outside marriage. Finally the most recent type of family structure is ' same sex families'. This involves a homosexual couple (gay or lesbian) that take care of children. This is the newest family unit as the civil partnership law was only passed in 2004.

Since then 45, 000 have been formed up until 2010. Homosexual couples have been apparent for a long time however only recently have the attitudes towards them become more acceptable resulting in the civil partnership law. Beck (1992) says this is because of individualisation; people are designing their lives based on their own choice not expectations. Also, people have very different attitudes now to previously in history, so homosexuality is more widely accepted. In conclusion, family structures are constantly changing and there is never only one type.

Family structures tend to base around suiting the type of society there in. Policies can increase or decrease certain family structures. For example the divorce reform act (1967) increased single parent and reconstituted families and decreased the nuclear family. Also new family structures, same sex families have been introduced because of policies and change in attitudes. There may be new family structures in the future as society progresses.

References- Fulcher, J. and Scott, J. (2011) *Sociology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.