

Is the family in decline

[Family](#)



The purpose of this paper is to investigate the decline of the family.

Specifically, this paper discusses various sociological debates, which have looked at or identified a possible decline in the family. Obviously there is a vast diversity of family types in today's society, which begs the question is family ultimately based on blood? Although there is the belief that rising divorce rates indicate the dissolution of the family--and hence of society the family is as strong as ever before.

Family types

There are two basic types of family: - (who are socially related to each other)

The nuclear family, is made up of one adult man, an adult woman and their dependant children as well as extended families that contains one adult man, one adult woman, their dependant children and then other relatives such as grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles. There are also other types of family to take into account such as lone parents, usually the result of separation or divorce, who have decided to bring their children up, alone.

Another type of family that is referred to is the reconstituted family where a new family is created after a divorce. In other words, one or both parents remarry or cohabite, and thus, form a new family structure. Cohabitation is also a family, which consists of the natural birth parents living together but are not married. In addition homosexual relationships that bring up children, whether they're own or adopted, are also classed as a family.

Emerging Family Definition

Historically, functionalist sociologist George Peter Murdock (" Social Structure", 1949) states this: " The family is a social group characterised by common residence, economic co-operation and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially-approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults."

Obviously, this definition of a family is based on an ancient social structure of what constitutes a family. In fact if, Murdock were to quote this in today's society, society would not accept him socially as this is not a true representation of a 21st Century family structure. In other words this is not a true definition of a family because of the many family types that are presently socially accepted, Murdock would be criticised for this comment as he pinpoints only one type of family that is accepted as a family.

In fact, in today's society, the functions of the family are being preformed by a many different family structures, aforementioned. However the feminists say that the nuclear family is designed to suit men's needs as married men get a servant and sex slave. Both men and women learn what to expect from marriage during socialization, so one solution may be to change the way in which children are raised. Feminists also argue that the decline in marriage is down to women realising that they are being exploited in the nuclear family home and that they are just not willing to tie themselves down.

In fact the decline of the family has been linked to the changing social attitudes in society when compared to that of the past. As mentioned above the conventional nuclear family is considered the only " real" or to be the

best family. Functionalists (Murdock) (Parsons) have argued that the families decline is ideally situated to modern life.

Specifically, according to these theorists, the decline of the family is said to be down to the direct result of many factors, such as the ease and quickness of divorce (more divorce is taking place than ever before), more families' cohabitating, easier abortion, the rise of lone parents, illegitimate births and women going out to work in greater numbers. Thus, from this vein of thought, these factors contribute to the vision that people's morals are collapsing and that the family is in crisis.

Emerging female roles

Now days we take for granted that every woman can have a career if she applies herself and that women can choose whether or not to marry, and whether or not to have children, and how many. However, though, this has not always been true. At the turn of Industrialisation many families' had to relocate in order to move to the cities where the jobs were. Some theorists (Durkheim) argue that this geographical mobility caused a breakdown in family life because they became isolated and separated. When the families' became isolated a great strain was put on the relationship as they had no kinship and no family network close enough to support them in everyday life. This could be said to cause a decline in the family, as it may have been a key factor that resulted in separation and divorce.

Interestingly, the women started to work because they were near the cities after they had relocated. The number of women that have entered into the world of work and the labour market has risen dramatically. As a result, the <https://assignbuster.com/is-the-family-in-decline/>

egalitarian roles have emerged in the family structure, because both parents have other responsibilities. However women are seen in a different light when it comes to employment as they are paid less and don't seem to be offered high status jobs.

This may be due in part to the fragmented career, as they tend to leave work short term in order to have children. This is why they are classed as the reserve army of labour for part time positions as it fits in with childcare. Along this line of thought, women going into the world of work have supposedly caused a great strain to be put on the relationship. In other words, a lack of time spent with her partner and the family may result in a breakdown of respect and common pass times, which may result in separation or divorce.

Cohabitation has become widespread today and separation in these relationships is more likely than it is in marriage as it is so much easier. Yet we know little about why couples cohabit, the role of cohabiting men as fathers and women as the mothers and what happens to them when a relationship dissolves. I'm a cohabitating parent myself and feel that there is no need for my partner and myself to marry as we hold the same norms and values and respect for one another as if married and we also experience conjugal roles which means there are few divisions between male and female roles.

When we first got together and had our daughter we did experience segregated conjugal roles as there was a clear division and separation between our roles, as being the woman of the house it was expected of me

to run the home, work part time and also look after our child, while he worked and then came home to a clean house and tea on the table. This soon changed and we now both play a big part in the running and day-to-day responsibilities of the house and also share the care of our daughter. Many families tend to live in egalitarian roles as its convenient and no longer considered to be immoral which has a direct impact on the marriage statistics, showing that the family is statistically in decline. With so many couples choosing cohabitating lives it looks as though the family is in decline as figures show a natural decrease in marriage ceremonies but this is not correct.

In fact, other family types, including the lone parent families are as much of a family as the conventional nuclear family and should not be used as evidence for the decline of the family. Further many lone parent seem families seem to aspire to the traditional ideology of the nuclear family. In fact many single parent households can still effectively fulfil the functions of the traditional nuclear. (i. e. Primary Socialization, Norms and values). Others argue that the lone parent family put a strain on the Government. It is somewhat true, though, because when the marriage or cohabitation dissolves more women are through into the welfare system, unfortunately, but true) and labelled as poor low income homes where children are forced into poverty or crime.

This is often cited as a direct result of the breakdown of the traditional nuclear family. However, divorces, which are one of the factors reported as resulting in the decline of the family, do result in lone parent families and often-reconstituted families. However, many of these new emerging family

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types function much like the conventional nuclear family. Often, though, the exceptions to the rule (i. e., the negative aspects, like increased crime, etc.) are the main the focus of study and, thus, do not give a true picture of the family in the 21st century.

The number of first marriages (i. e. they have not been married before) has fallen dramatically, as in 1996 there were 185, 000 first marriages - less than half the number in 1971. (National Statistics 2003) This can only suggest that the trend to get married is not much of a trend any longer, and thus, can no longer be considered as the norm when looking at whether or not the family is in decline. Saying that, though, this new emerging trend could be due to women feeling exploited in the home so they are not willing to tie themselves down to the house and one man.

How about the increased rate of reported infidelity for both men and women, in all types of family structure? Could there be some partial truth to a move toward an ethical or moral decay versus the decline in the family, or that is causing a general breakdown in relationships, increased crime among children, etc. with lack of parental monitoring (i. e., lone family, working parents, etc) and the decline in the family structure being one of the many possible reasons for increased crime rate, and the likes.

It seems that men must have some part in this trend too? Unwilling to commit, feeling threatened by strong independent women, etc.). In the 19th Century women were expected to get married and then go on to have children and once married their husbands would take care of them. Once married, it was extremely difficult for a woman to obtain a divorce. This,

however, is not the case in the 21st century, where it is much easier and much more socially acceptable to obtain a divorce, and across both genders. However, often new and often stronger family types emerge as a result of divorce.

The highest number of divorces in England and Wales was 165, 018 in 1993, shows that it is becoming more popular than ever. (National Statistics 2003)

This is down to the ease and quickness that a divorce can be achieved.

Women are now allowed to file for a divorce and on many grounds so they do not feel frowned upon if this is the avenue they wish to choose. Once divorced the women will receive help and support which means that she is not reliant upon the male to provide - this being another reason they do not have to be tied to their husband. In fact women never had this as an option previously, which kept them together with their first husband (this again why the first marriage rate used to be higher)

However, this can not be used as evidence for a decline in the family (only when narrowly defined in terms of the nuclear family type) as lone families are also families, albeit, with an increase in some strains and tensions not experienced by a two parent family (i. e., low economic status, poverty, increased crime rate, discrimination against the female one family structure, increase stress for the lone parent, isolation, etc.). Obviously there has been a big change in attitudes when it comes to divorce as it is seen as acceptable and sometimes the best thing for the children. The cost implications were too high in the past to get divorced but today it is much cheaper and in most peoples reach.

In fact since the early 1900's divorce rates have increased dramatically as a number of Act's have been introduced to society, which enables quicker, easier and cheaper divorces. For instance the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857-enabled divorce's to be easier and cheaper but still out of reach for the lower and working class. Still at this time men had more rights to divorce than women. This was then updated in 1923 when women were granted equal rights, which enable women to terminate unhappy marriages.

Then in 1949, the Legal Aid and Advice Act gave financial assistance and support for the cost of solicitors and court fee's in order to file a divorce. In 1970 The Matrimonial Proceedings Act established that all property was to be divided equally between husband and wife. The Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act of 1984 reduced the time to file for divorce to only 1 year of marriage where as previously couples could only divorce after 3 years. Family Law Act of 1996 increased the cooling off time to 18 months when it was previously 12 months to try and restrict the rising numbers of divorces.

Obviously, the family is not on the decline, when all types of family types are included in the final analysis. The rise in divorce rate only affects the conventional nuclear family type, which is indeed on the decline, due the many changing societal trends.

In fact the rise of divorce is a result of a number of factors including changes in public opinion and the greater ability of women to support them. However, as we have discussed above, out of divorce other family types often emerge. In other words, the family is not in decline. In fact, the exact opposite seems to be true. Many new emerging family types have emerged that are as

strong and as stable as the nuclear family structures. Cohabitation and other forms of family structures are now taking over the previously ideology of a family pre industrialisation

Therefore although areas of family life relating to marriage, separation and divorce suggest a decline in the nuclear family structure, cohabitation and single parenting, are also relevant social indicators of the relative state of family life in contemporary Britain.

This has proved that the family is not in any way declining nor is it in crisis - it's simply not a necessity nor is it required to be married in order to be classed as a family. It seems to be more a matter of definition.