

Has the extended family been replaced by the isolated nuclear family essay sample...

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



There has been an ongoing debate between functionalist assumptions and historical and sociological research that the extended family gave way to the nuclear family which became increasingly isolated. This essay will examine this question using the arguments presented. Fulcher and Scott in 'Sociology' 1999, define the nuclear family as an isolated two generation unit consisting of parents and unmarried children.

According to Jack Hobbs in 'Sociology' 1986, people who have children will have been members of at least two nuclear families, the family of origin into which they were born and the family of destination which they have created themselves. However this definition by Jack Hobbs does not account for divorce and remarriages which may mean that members may have been in a series of such families. The extended family has been defined by C. Rosse and C.

Harris in 'The Family and Social Change,' (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965) that it is any persistent kinship grouping of persons related by decent, marriages or adoption which is wider than the nuclear family in it characteristically spans three generations from grandparents to grandchildren. Fulcher and Scott goes on further by saying that it extends vertically to include three generations of grandparents to grandchildren and horizontally to include in-laws, cousins, uncles, and aunts.

Talcott Parsons a functionalist and theorist sees the emergence of the isolated nuclear family from the extended family in his Theory of Social Evolution. He argues that the pre-industrial extended family was a multifunctional unit that met most of its members needs. It performed

economic, educational, political, religious and other functions. This means that roles in the family were ascribed. According to Parsons modernisation involved institutional differentiation, as specialised institutions emerged to meet particular needs. The family lost many of its functions to these other institutions.

Production moved from the household to the work place. Specialist occupations and organisations took over functions of the family. The family itself became more specialised around its core functions of socialisation and personality stabilisation. In other words we can say the roles were now achieved rather than ascribed. Parson argues that the isolated nuclear family was properly shaped to meet the requirements of this change. This industrial system with its specialised division of labour demanded considerable geographical mobility from its labour force.

People with these achieved skills were required to move to places where those skills were demanded. The isolated nuclear family was best suited to the need for this geographical mobility as it has no obligations to kin unlike the extended family. It is this isolated nuclear family that is dominant today according to Parsons. Concurring with Talcott Parsons is William J. Goode who surveyed various parts of the world. He says that industrialisation undermined the extended family and larger groupings.

Goode explains that the high rate of geographical mobility in industrial society decreases the frequency and intimacy of contact among members of the kin network. Unlike Parsons, Goode also considers the move to nuclear

family has been far more rapid than supposed from the degree of industrialisation alone. Goode believes ideology of the nuclear family has encouraged its growth in the western ideas and life styles which are later spreading world wide. On the other side of the on going debate, historians and sociological researchers have put forward a lot of criticisms on Parson's and Goode's theories.

A Cambridge Historian Peter Laslett who studied the family size and composition in pre-industrial England found that from 1564 to 1821 only about 10% of the households contained kin beyond the nuclear family . This percentage was also the same for England in 1966 according to him . However this low figure was criticised by M. Haralambos as he felt this may be due to late marriages and short life expectancy . Lasletts findings suggest the family pattern in pre-industrial Britain and America are the same today if we may go by the dates of 1564-1821 and 1966, which means that the isolated nuclear family has been and is still dominant.

This undoubtedly contradicts with Parson's and Goode's theories. Further contradicting historical evidence is drawn from Michael Anderson who suggests that the early stages of industrialisation in England may have strengthened kinship ties beyond the nuclear family. Anderson found that 23% of the households contained kin other than the nuclear family using census data from Preston. He argues that Preston in 1851 was dependant on the cotton industry. Life for the working-class families was characterised by a severe hardships resulting from low wages, periods of high unemployment, large families and overcrowded houses.

In such circumstances the maintenance of kinship network could be advantageous to all those concerned. These views are in conflict with Parson's and Goode's theories because they suggest that the extended family got coined up because of economic and social hardships. Historical and Social Researchers Michael Young and Peter Willmott outline that in the beginning there was a nuclear family which performed all functions as explained earlier in this essay. Due to industrial revolution the family ceased to be a unit of production. Since some individual members were employed as wage earners.

Working-class poverty got wide spread, wages were low and unemployment was high. The family then extended its network to include relatives beyond the nuclear family. However this new extended family phased off paving way to the nuclear family again with most of its functions now achieved rather than ascribed with specialised institutions taking control of the functions of the family. Evidence supplied by Peter Laslett, Michael Anderson and Michael Young and Peter Willmott have one common thing, which is that the nuclear family was there during pre-industrial period.

Peter Laslett contradicts with the rest because they say industrialisation paved way to the extended family from the nuclear family. On the other hand there is Talcott Parsons and William Goode with their own perspective. This makes it very difficult to decide with all these contradicting views. Apart from Peter Laslett all evidence provided show that the extended family performed the same social, economic, religious political and other functions which suggest that it is best suited with hardships.

However evidence used from the pre-industrial period is derived from demographic data which may be abet difficult to be relied on in this sociological context. It does not cover why they are such changes in society but rather assumptions are used to explain why there were such changes. All evidence provided does not have a common time shift of patterns of the family, which may be confusing. It also overrides the idea of choice in life which may in turn have a common view in society.

The arguments from most of these people do not account for the availability of kinship ties today amongst nuclear families. Wilmott and Young say that the relationship between mother and daughter was and is still strong. This argument defeats the entire idea of a closed nuclear family. According to Davidoff (1990), the nineteenth-century middle-class family was typically large, with families interlinked by marriage into a network that blurred the boundaries between them.

People kept in touch with their relatives through; letter-writing , visiting and the exchange of gifts. The domestic focus of the middle-class household clearly did not prevent important relationships with a wide circle of relatives. Technological change later made it easier to maintain such relationships, with the telephone providing a new means of keeping contact and eventually car ownership making visits much easier. However Davidoff's description of the extended family is not in line with Parsons description and the functions which he said it performed.

To clear up this confusion surrounding the term “ Isolated Nuclear Family”, Eugene Litwak argued that a new term should be introduced to describe the typical family in modern industrial society, which he called “ The Modified Extended Family”. Litwak defined the modified extended family as a coalition of nuclear family in a state of partial dependence. Such partial dependence means that nuclear family members exchange significant services with each other, thus differing from the isolated nuclear family as well as retaining considerable autonomy that is not bound economically or geographically, thus differing from Parsons extended family.

In conclusion indeed the nuclear family exists today but it still maintains some kinship ties . The welfare state has taken over functions of the extended family. In these circumstances the nuclear family is more suited to develop emotional ties . The evidence provided by the functionalist, historians and social researchers is really confusing as it does not have several things in common.