

Changes in family structure in contemporary Britain



Describe the changes in the family structure since the nineteenth century with reference to appropriate research and the apparent decline of the extended family. Demonstrate knowledge of the diversity of families in contemporary Britain.

In order to answer this question it is necessary to address the assumptions regarding the structure of the family pre and post industrialisation, focussing upon the research of historians and social scientists such as Laslett, Anderson, Young and Willmott.

Sociologist Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) put forth the view that prior to industrialisation families were extended and lived a rural life with democratic gender relations. After industrialisation, society consisted of nuclear families who lived urbanised lives with women financially depended upon men. He describes post-industrial family units as ‘isolated’ as they are not “part of a wider system of kinship relationships” (Haralambos et al, 1995, pg335). He states that the decline of the extended family was due to industrialisation, as the requirements of skilled labour demanded geographical mobility (Abercrombie et al, 1995).

Parsons’ theorizing has since been proven incorrect. The historian Peter Laslett actually found that between 1564 and 1821, only 10 percent of households contained members beyond their immediate family. He states that when couples married it was only a matter of a few years before both their parents died, which implies that there simply not enough members of a family to create an extended unit. He claims “There is no sign of the large, extended co-residential family group giving way to the small, nuclear,

conjugal, household of modern industrial society” (Haralambos at al, 1995, pg338).

Michael Anderson’s research also discredits the assumption of the rise of modern nuclear families during industrialisation and the death of the extended family. Anderson conducted an 1851 census of Preston and found that “ 23 percent of households contained kin other than the nuclear family” (Haralambos at al, 1995, pg339). He stated that the families worked as a support network with Grandparents looking after siblings whilst both parents worked. It also meant support during periods of ill health or unemployment and it produced a lower share of rent paid. It was what Haralmbos et al describe as a “ mutual aid organisation” (1995, pg339).

In the 1950’s, Young and Willmott’s study of Bethnal Green found that two out of three couples lived within three miles of their parents. They also discovered that close ties existed between female members of the family such as mother and daughter, with a “ constant exchange of services such as washing, shopping and babysitting, between female relatives” (Haralambos at al, 1995, pg341). Young and Willmott described many families as “ a combination of families who to some degree form one domestic unit” (Quoted in Haralambos at al, 1995, pg341).

During Willmott and Young’s surveys and historical research, they produced three stages of the family based on their findings. The first stage is Pre-industrial, where the family acted as a ‘ unit of production’ with everyone working together, in agriculture for example. This unit is similar to that of Parsons’ pre-industrial family, however it does not appear to be extended.

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This family structure is still seen in modern society, such as within rural farming areas. The second stage is the Early-industrial family which was extended, and acted as a support network similar to the families studied by Anderson. This is also inclusive of Willmott and Young's Bethnal Green families in the 1950's. The third stage is the Symmetrical Family, which is nuclear, home centred, with a shared responsibility concerning housework. Willmott went on to carry out research in 1980's London. He found a nuclear family, which is reliant upon kin for support but is still an independent family unit. This greatly contradicts Parsons' view of an isolated nuclear family for modern society (Abercrombie et al, 1995, pg304).

Robert and Rhona Rapoport however, state their research illustrates how the family structure is still evolving. Twenty percent of families in 1978 were married parents with one main breadwinner. The number of single-parent households has increased from 2.5 percent in 1961 to 10.1 percent in 1992 (Haralambos et al, 1995, pg348). Many factors could contribute to the cause of such a radical change in family structure. Legislation is one factor, as since the 1960's it is easier to get a divorce, have an abortion, homosexuality is legal and the contraceptive pill is widely available. Women are much more financially independent, which means financial security is not the only reason for marriage. The fact that people are leaving it later to get married and cohabiting for longer periods suggests a higher expectation of marriage. Burgoyne and Clark found examples of couples in this situation in their study of Sheffield. They state that these individuals often view themselves as 'pioneers of an alternative lifestyle' (Quoted in Haralambos et al, 1995, pg347). Returning to the rise of single parenthood, the General

Household Survey in 1990 found that there was not only a rise in single mothers who had divorced, but a rise from 16 percent to 34 percent of mothers who had never married (Haralambos et al, 1995, pg348). There are numerous arguments as to why this is the case, Haralambos et al suggest many by Politicians such as John Selwyn Gummer, Peter Lilley and John Redwood who all stated a concern regarding the welfare state and the possibility of it encouraging single parent families (1995, pg349).

To conclude, changes in family structure since the nineteenth century have been subtle. The assumptions that prior to the Industrial Revolution families were large and lived together as one egalitarian unit has been discredited. Even though it is safe to say that modern society consists of mainly nuclear families and single parent families, these units depend on their extended kin network for support, which live in close proximity.

Bibliography:

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