

Critically assess the view that family breakdown is an international social pheno...



This paper will attempt to examine and discuss what is meant by family, what social factors have led to the breakdown of the family and, with reference to two countries in particular, how this is reflected in the social policies of those countries. The notion of family has different connotations and meanings in different countries and cultures. However, sociologists have broadly divided the concept of family into two main types, ??? the nuclear family, consisting of parent(s) and child(ren), and the extended family, consisting of parent(s), child(ren), and grandparent(s) or other kin.??? (Campling, 1993, p.

6) Whilst historically women and children have been defined in terms of their relationships to the family and kinship, men, whilst still within the kinship system, have primarily been defined in terms of their occupation. Thus, according to Campling, ??? by definition the family has been an unequal institution premised on parental authority and power.??? (Campling, 1993, p. 35) There is a clear patriarchal division of responsibilities, with the man being the bread-winner of the family and the woman being the primary carer.

However, in the contemporary world this is no longer the case for many sectors of society, certainly in advanced western societies. The Second World War brought about many changes for the women in England as they were called away from the traditional patriarchal family to work for the war effort. As many of the women had young children to care for the Government provided nursery care. This was to be many women??'s first real taste of how life could be if they were not tied to the home. The 1960s saw a drop in the birth rate as people began to trust the guarantee that the welfare state

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would look after them in their old age so no longer needed to have large families to look after them in their twilight years. The introduction of labour saving devices into the home meant that women had more free time and gradually became more restless at home. An economic boom at the same time meant that there were labour shortages and as a result certain sectors of the employment market were extended to women, mostly part time.

However women were very poorly paid in comparison to men and the gap between men and women's earnings only began to close in 1970s with the Equal Pay Act, which was supposed to ensure equal pay for the same job and whilst not perfect it did go a considerable way to closing the gap between men and women's pay. The Sex Discrimination Act was also passed in 1975, designed to outlaw sexual discrimination in the workplace. All of these changes led to more women both wanting and being able to work and subsequently to massive changes in the division of labour as more and more women went out to work. Roughly fifty percent of Britain's workforce is now female, undermining the post-war model of the welfare state, which relies on both full employment and the assumption that the man is the breadwinner. However, despite making up half of the nation's labour force women are still over-represented in the lowest paid groups. The Beveridge Report, upon which the modern welfare state was founded, was influenced by Keynesian economic principles and relied on full employment to underpin it assuming that the man would be the main breadwinner and the woman would be at home, in effect undertaking many hours of unpaid labour.

These radical changes in the labour market and the family structure have effectively removed the underpinning principles and the discourse upon <https://assignbuster.com/critically-assess-the-view-that-family-breakdown-is-an-international-social-phenomenon/>

which Beveridge had founded his notion of care ??? from the cradle to the grave??™. Add to this the declining birth and marriage rates of many western countries and it become clear that the patriarchal family has changed beyond recognition in recent years. The live birth rate in England and Wales in 2001 was 594, 634, the lowest recorded figure since records began in 1838. (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/cambridgeshire/3023054.stm>)

Estimates suggest that an average of 2.1 children per woman is required in order for the population to adequately replace itself, however, the actual figure is between 1.58 and 1.

74, way below the estimated requirement. (www.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,3604,859079,00.html)

However, whilst birth rates are dropping, the number of children being born outside marriage has risen sharply. Figures at the end of 2002 suggest that as many as 40% of all children born in England and Wales are born outside marriage (www.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,3604,859079,00.html), a figure which seems to be reflected throughout Europe, according to birth surveys. (<http://news.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/145175.stm>)

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It is no longer necessary for women to remain chaste until they are married and is now socially accepted that both men and women may have several sexual partners before they eventually settle down and marry, if at all.

Marriage rates are declining, as more people are choosing to either live together or alone. Figures suggest that as many as 11% of households in the UK, and 24% in Sweden are one person households. The number of lone parents has also increased dramatically, with an estimated 10% in the UK, compared to 3% in Sweden. (www. nationmaster.

com/country) Several steps have been taken in order to make life a little more comfortable for the increasing single parent families. In the UK, the benefits system in Britain is generally means tested, however, child allowance is not and is paid to all parents for each child, but any support above and beyond this is means tested. Income support is available to lone parents with a child under the age of sixteen. Furthermore, the Government has introduced several measures under its New Deal for lone parents in order to encourage parents back into the work place and encourage them to be less dependent on the state and lead more independent lives. Whilst parents do not have to be available for work with a child under sixteen years of age, at certain points through the duration of their time on Income Support they must attend a compulsory gateway interview with a lone parent advisor at the job centre. The aim of which is not to force them into work but to make sure they are aware of their options and opportunities and provide help and advice regarding in-work support benefits and help with child care fees. The New Deal offers lone parents help not only with finding employment but can also find suitable training courses for them, advise on

help with the costs of child care and can arrange help with many other aspects related to returning to the workplace. For example, smart clothes for interviews might be required by a lone parent who does not have the means to afford them, New Deal can help them.

If they need to pay a deposit for child care or perhaps need a bus pass for the first month but do not have the funds available, New Deal can help them. There are numerous ways in which the government is trying to encourage lone parents back into the workplace and away from a dependency culture. (www.thejobcentreplus.gov.uk) Whilst this is all relatively new to Britain, Sweden has operated in this manner for many years, having supported their benefits system on a policy of full employment, which has included lone parents. Perhaps the biggest burden on the income of lone parents who wish to return to work is the cost of childcare, proportionally it takes up a much larger amount than it would out of the salary of two parents.

Coupled with the inherent conflict associated with the dual responsibility of both caring for the family and working, in many cases it can provide a perverse incentive to stay on benefits and out of the labour market. Sweden has developed its policies in tow major areas in order to accommodate women into the labour market and continue with their policy of full employment. It has invested heavily in day-care with public provision of childcare heavily subsidised by the government, in some cases parents pay as little as ten or fifteen percent of the childcare costs.

It has also given parents substantial statutory rights with regard to parental leave. Maternity provisions could also be described as generous, which are

available to all employees without qualifying rights, along with the right for parents to work reduced hours until their child is eight years old. (Cochrane & Clarke, 1993, p. 194) According to Hill (1996), ??? Where provisions for the care of children by others and labour market participation by women are widely accepted (for example, Sweden), there is some acceptance of the ??? knock on??™ implications of this for the income maintenance system???. (Hill, 1996, p. 71) It could be argued though that Britain is making efforts to provide parents with the same kind of help and assistance. As well as paid maternity leave for mothers, fathers are now entitled to paid paternity leave. Help is available to lone parents with the cost of childcare through a ??? Childcare Tax Credit, covering 70% of childcare costs for low - and middle ??“ income families.

??? (Powell, 1999, p. 16) As well as a drop in birth rates and marriages and an increase in divorce, homosexuality has also become much more socially accepted with same sex couples now cohabiting and raising children, further undermining the notion of the nuclear family as one man, one woman and 2.4 children.. There have been several amendments to the law with regard to same sex couples, bringing their rights more in line with those of heterosexual couples.

Previously same sex couples were not recognised by the law and as such in the event of a death the partner could be excluded from funeral preparations, lose their home and access to children. Under laws which have been introduced in some parts of Europe and the USA people in same sex relationships are able to register their partnership, giving them the same rights as married couples, with the exception of adopting foreign children, <https://assignbuster.com/critically-assess-the-view-that-family-breakdown-is-an-international-social-phenomenon/>

artificial insemination and church weddings. These reforms have been applied in Sweden since 1995 ([www. stff. suite. dk/partner. htm](http://www.stff.suite.dk/partner.htm)), however, the proposal for a similar civil parity scheme has only been put forward in the summer of 2003 in the UK. ([www. labour. org. uk/forlesbiansandgaymen](http://www.labour.org.uk/forlesbiansandgaymen)) Secondly, it has been suggested that economic changes might have contributed to the decline in birth rates. As well as having the choice about when children are conceived, as people's health improved and they began to trust the guarantee that the welfare state would look after them in their old age, and as such, the need to have large families has declined.

As people's material conditions have improved and standards of living increased desire for children might also have decreased due to the lifestyle changes brought about by having children. Lifestyle is obviously relative to income, and large families will obviously increase the cost of living and reduce the amount of disposable income left over for luxuries. Those with higher incomes will most likely have more luxurious lifestyles, but the average family still needs to maintain their income at a reasonable level in order to achieve a reasonable standard of living. Many couples might choose to have children later on in life, or not at all, in order that they can fully enjoy the benefits and freedom brought about by good careers and well paid jobs etc. An issue reflected in a recent survey in which, almost 25% of women with children in their 20s cited missing out on a career or putting their work life on hold as a disadvantage of becoming a parent before 30.

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bbc. co. uk/1/hi/uk/3270125. stmmenu= news.

latestheadlines. uknews) Some commentators have suggested that the nuclear family was only ever a social construct rather than a reality.

However, it is indisputable that given that certainly in the UK and to some extent in Europe the welfare state is based around the family and as such, analysis of the changes and trends in the demographics outlined above have serious ramifications for social policy.

Merely quoting figures such as birth, death and marriage rates does not demonstrate the impact of these changes on society and the Welfare State. In order to assess the real burden of dependence we must contextualise the demographics and look at the burden of dependence. If birth rates are declining it stands to reason that the population is ageing.

Children will be the economically active sector of tomorrow's society, and as there are less of them a declining economically active population will have to support an increasing number of old people. This has serious implications for the future of the Welfare State and for Social Policy. The cost of running the National Health Service and Social Services is already high. Faced with a growing aged population, the burden on an already over-subscribed health service is only likely to increase, whilst the funding raised from income taxes is likely to decrease as the economically active population decreases.

The NHS, formed on the basis of The Beveridge Report and Keynesian economic principles has already been described by some as being in crisis. Changing demographics, medical advances, rising expectations and demand have all weighed heavily on an outdated system with constrained resources <https://assignbuster.com/critically-assess-the-view-that-family-breakdown-is-an-international-social-phenomenon/>

that is already struggling to cope. With this in mind the Community Care Act 1990 was introduced by the Conservative Government, despite Mrs Thatcher's earlier claims that there was no such thing as a society, only individuals and families. Cost-benefit analysis convinced her that community care was cheaper than running institutions. The family, whether immediate or extended, are considered to be community carers. Traditional gender roles mean that the burden of care usually falls onto the women of a family unit, thus when we talk about care within the family, we are usually talking about care by women.

(Bond J, Bond S, 1994 p. 112) The Conservative Government argued for the reassertion of traditional values and morals. They saw the family as being under threat from a permissive society, which threatened stability, a view similar to that of Talcott Parsons (1956) who stated the basic and irreducible functions of the family are two: the primary socialisation of the children so that they can become members of the society into which they have been born: second the stabilisation of the adult personalities of the population of the society. (Davies, Berger & Carlson, 1993, p. 1) The family operates best when it is stable and children are socialised into societal norms, which is not as easy to achieve when traditional morality is undermined by increasing divorce rates, full-time working mothers, more single-parent families and homosexuality being openly accepted. Various policies were implemented in order to try to re-establish family values. It could be considered that the concern with re-establishing the strong family unit and traditional morals and values was an attempt to displace the responsibility for care from the NHS back to the individual, or their families.

Marxists might argue that this was another way of Bourgeoisie controlling the proletariat, forcing the woman into the home to take on a caring role and thus making the whole family reliant on the wage of the man, therefore making him more susceptible to exploitation.

Labour have advocated similar policies since their election in 1997. Although Tony Blair has also advocated community care, he has placed the emphasis on communitarianism through his Third Way Policy, rather than promoting it solely as a cost cutting measure. ??? The Third Way has banished not only the belief that the market is the source of all evil, but also the simplistic notion that if citizens just pay their taxes, the welfare state will do the rest.??? (Etzioni A, 2001, *New Statesman*, Vol. 130, Issue 4543, p.

25) Communitarians believe that a strong family unit and sense of social responsibility would serve to lessen the strain on the welfare state.

If the younger people of a community or family felt a social responsibility to care for the elderly there would be less need for welfare services such as home help. If more schemes like neighbourhood watch, for example, were set up crime would effectively be reduced. In short, people should give more to each other and take less from the welfare state. That is not to say that Etzioni, and thinkers like him, would encourage complete reliance on the community and dissolve the welfare state. More that they believe there are better ways of utilising its limited resources and if people were to rely on each other more it would free up more resources to be used in more constructive ways. Again this might be criticised for pushing the burden of responsibility back into the hands of the people and away from the

Government, as well as adding to the dual burden already experience by mothers trying to juggle work and family life.

As well as the increased burden on the health care system an increasing ageing and decreasingly economically active population will lead to issues regarding payment of old age pensions. The UK Government might be considered to be proactive in this arena, proposing to raise retirement age to 70 years old, thus ??? buying??™ some time before paying out pensions to today??™s economically active population. However, moving the goal posts in this manner can only postpone the problem short-term if the current trend in birth rates continues. Many people have blamed the Welfare State for the perceived decline in family values and morality, for providing perverse incentives, particularly in respect of single mothers. However, this seems to be contradicted by the figures for lone parent families in Sweden, a mere 3%, compared with 10% for the UK.

(www.nationmaster.com/country) The Redistributive, or Social Democratic Model of Welfare, which Sweden operates, whose main concerns are with the social rights of its citizens and benefits are open to everyone, is considered to be much more generous than the UK system. So surely based on the reasoning of perverse incentives their incidence of lone parent families should be higher. It might be reasonable to suggest that rather than trying to hold onto outdated and disputed concepts of what the family is, Sweden has been more adaptable to changes in the family structure. They seem to have accepted that the nuclear family is not the way that most people live and has actively sought to increase its birth rate by offering its citizens better services in fundamental family based services. Sweden has developed its <https://assignbuster.com/critically-assess-the-view-that-family-breakdown-is-an-international-social-phenomenon/>

policies in two major areas in order to accommodate women into the labour market and continue with their policy of full employment. It has invested heavily in day-care with public provision of childcare heavily subsidised by the government, in some cases parents pay as little as ten or fifteen percent of the childcare costs.

It has also given parents substantial statutory rights with regard to parental leave. Maternity provisions could also be described as generous, which are available to all employees without qualifying rights, along with the right for parents to work reduced hours until their child is eight years old. (Cochrane & Clarke, 1993, p. 194) Schemes such as this in the UK might reduce the negative effect prospective parenthood might have on single people's lifestyles and encourage them to have children earlier than they currently are doing, thus offsetting some of the possible future problems or the Welfare State. However, surely this begs the question, in an age of consumerism, has the family now just become a lifestyle choice like any other purchase? Word count 3, 529

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