

# Is the nuclear family in decline essay sample

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



The family have always being seen by most people as the bed rock of the society. In both pre- modern and modern times, the importance of the family in carrying out basic but vital functions of the society has long being valued. Most people belong to at least one family during their life time and see the family as a source of identity, reassurance and safety.

Like many contents that are familiar with us, the family is generally looked upon favourably, for example we see most politicians stressing the importance of Family values and associate themselves to being family friendly, even church and other religious leader are not left in preaching the importance of family environment to communal, national and international harmony. The media and adverts even use the happy family to advance their cause. The nuclear family is the smallest family unit and consists of husband, wife and their own dependent offspring.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, the nuclear family was the norm and was assumed uncritically that this kind of family was a good thing as it positively provides for the needs of its members and at same time contributes to the society by carrying out basic and vital functions of reproduction. This view, although dominated by persons and Bales (1955) and Goode (1963) were tailored to suit the modern, industrial society (The family 2001). Over the years it seems this kind of family unit is seriously threatened and in some occasions appears to be ignored or undermined. The aim of my research is to find out 1.

If the nuclear family is in decline. 2. What factors lead or contribute to this decline. 3. What is a good nuclear family? Many sociologists have long

agreed that the family is a universal social institution. Others claim that groups of kins living together as recognised social units occur in all human societies, but some do argue that there are exceptions to virtually any definition of family. From the functionalist view Murdock sought to show that some form of family structure was the basis of society and that the family is universal.

It concluded by saying that the family 1. stabilizes sexual and reproductive functions. 2. it provides basis economic requirements such as food and shelter, 3. It provides the functions of socialization of the next generation into the norms, values and other aspects of culture in the society. Although a functionalist, Parsons (1959) did disagree on the exact meaning of the nuclear family. From the Marxist-feminist view (Barrett and McIntosh 1991) did suggest that the nuclear family is presented as an ideal for us all to aspire to, and this makes the concepts of family 'anti social' as it presents other forms of family as inferior.

On the other hand the new right sees the nuclear family as division of labour between breadwinner and home maker. Although different debates carry different views as seen above, it might also be important to look at family as having a number of structural forms which varies according to how many people are considered family members, and what the relationships are. Murdock definition of the family includes at least one male, however significant proportion of black families in the island of West Indies and Central America do not include adult male.

This may indicate that the family is not universal as Murdock suggested or that the family might be defined in another way. Talcott Parsons argues that the family retains the basic and irreducible functions which are common to all societies, this he called the primary socialization of children and the stabilization of the adult personality. Parsons believed that families are factories which produce human personalities. According to him the institution of nuclear family is more peculiar and important to the western industrial societies, since it is largely isolated from kins, thus couples increasingly look to each other for emotional support.

According to Parsons the nuclear family does not form an integral part of a wider system of relationships, although there might be contacts between members of a wider family and others. Parsons suggested that might be as a result of choice rather than anything binding, this he put forward make the institution of the nuclear family less involved in different functions of the family and as such these functions have been transferred to factories and other institutions (Halarambos p483)

Sociologist and alternative thinkers like Gough (1972) did criticise Parsons and argued that the nuclear family and monogamous marriage exist in small scale societies, they form part of a larger kinship group. According to Gough when individuals marry, they take on a series of duty and obligations to their spouse's kin. Communities are unified by kinship ties and consequently it becomes a large extended family. Nicholson sees the nuclear family as a unit where parents and children live together, where bond between husband and wife is very important.

According to Nicholson working class people have always aspired to form a nuclear family even though their low income usually prevents them from doing so, as they sometimes have to share accommodation with others outside the family and this was so until the 1950s and even before that time some groups lack of resources for this type of family was still a hindrance, therefore alternative family forms were developed such as gays, lesbians and heterosexuals, also parents living alone and married couples with husband at home caring for children, as well as step families, single parents and others.

Postmodernists have argued that there has been a fundamental change in the modern family, thus denying any one family type can be seen as the norm. According to them, although the modern society have held up and promoted one dominant family type, the changing trends makes it no longer possible to produce a theory of the family as traditionalists have always believed.

Therefore different explanations are needed for different types of families (Halarambos p465) The family appears to be seen more problematic than it was in past times. In looking further, George Peter Murdock carried out a study entitled social structure (1949) where he examined the institution of the family in a wide range of society. Murdock took a sample of 250 societies ranging from small hunting and gathering bands to large-industrial societies. He claimed that some form of family existed in every society and concluded on the evidence of his samples that the family is universal and consequently defined the family as ' A social group characterised by

common residence, economic co-operation and reproduction, it includes adults or both sexes, at least two of which maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted of the sexually co-habiting adults. (Murdock 1949).

Murdock also found that either on its own or the basic unit within an extended family, the nuclear family was present in every society in his sample and argued again that the nuclear family is in all human society groupings either as the sole parenting form of the family or as the basic unit from which more complex forms are compounded. it exist as a distinct and strongly functional group in every known society(Murdock1949) However, looking at the institution of the nuclear family and if there are any changes to that held by the formal, it will be what while to look at the views of other writers.

According to Graham Allan and Graham Crow (2001), there was a suggestion that there have being a continued trends towards diversification of family types as each individuals follows a more unpredictable family course, complicated by co-habitation, remarriages, periods living alone. This diversity is based upon increased choice or individualised families are now more able to exercise choice and personal volition over so many things that concern them, they're no longer constrained by social or ethnic needs due largely to separation of sex, parenthood and marriage.

Now people do not feel they have to get marriage before sex and having children outside marriage is increasingly seen as legitimate and an acceptable opinion and this have affected the nuclear family. There are

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different families and these have developed and change over time. Allan and Crow gave some reasons for this diversity to include the high rate of divorce- this have affected most countries in the west, lone parent households have increased as social trends have changed, co-habitation outside marriage is now common, marriage rates have declined and a big rise in numbers of step families.

Thus this view are partly in agreement to that of Murdock and Nicholson. Again the gay and lesbian households have become common. Jeffrey Weeks and Catherine Donovan (1999) did observe in their studies that during the past generation the possibilities of living together in an open lesbian or gay life have being transformed. Moreover the new reproductive technologies have affected the way traditional families are seen. The first ' test tube baby' was born in 1978 through a process called In Vitro Fertilization which involves implantation of a fertilized egg in a woman's womb and the woman may or may not be the one producing the egg.

The issue of surrogate motherhood which involve one woman carrying a foetus produced by the egg of another woman, and this Calhoan sees as undermining the centrality of the reproductive couple as the core of the family, thus introducing other ranges of choice into families. This he concluded takes the family out from the traditional norms (Halarambos) p497 Globally, according to Rhona report (1989). Decline of traditional nuclear family are part of global trends.

In 1980, the European coordination center for referral and documentation in social sciences organised a cross cultural studies of family life in fourteen

European nations and concluded that all EU countries had experienced rising divorce rate and many have made it easier to get divorce, also birth rate have declined. Katja Boh argues that there is a consistent pattern of non vengeance in diversity and that throughout the EU a great range of family type is now being accepted as normal (Boh, 1989) The family life as put forward by new right and feminist sociologist have being dominated by an ideology of familism.

According to them, there is an ' ideal family' which should have the following characteristic 1, nuclear in structure (mother, father and own children), 2 based on marriage and should be heterosexual and males should be bread winners while females should be primarily responsible for child care and house work (The family 2001) p31. consequently other types of family other than those proposed becomes deviant. This ideal of nuclear family as an institution appears to be promoted by the media and government social policies especially on taxation and social security systems.

The new right believe that marriage is the bedrock of the family and that marriage is in decline and therefore the nuclear family is fast becoming an ideology that is fast losing its edge. Though the new right thinkers did agree that most people still marry and see it as a desirable thing to do, as the numbers of re-marriages have increased compared to all marriages (15%-40%). It is clear that most people are not put off despite some having had bad experiences from their first union.

Robert Chester (1985) suggested that rather than the nuclear family declining, most people are delaying marriage and can be as a result of



different economic or personal reasons (The ultimate study guide, revise AS). Figures from government statistic show that there are fewer marriages, more divorce, more single parents families and also more children born out of wed lock. Also there are more extended families especially people from some ethnic minority communities. According to statistics first marriages numbered 221, 100 in 1961 and declined 345, 000 in 2005.

And also second marriages were reduced, giving the suggestion that the nuclear family is in decline. But many statistics might not be as accurate as the numbers of people that are single and available are not known. In 1991 average age for marriage was 27. 5 for men and 25. 5 for women. Thus not only are fewer people marrying, it appears more are doing so at a later age. In 2005 this age has increased to 31. 7 and 29. 5 respectively and the number of those who have never marriage have increased from year to year.

The issue of co-habitation according to statistic is a trend that have affected traditional nuclear family as an institution. y 2002, there were 25% of unmarried adults that were co habiting, while of this 50% of women are involved. This suggest that formal marriage might be in decline but family format is still desirable (social treds. www. curriculumpress. co. uk. no36) There have being evidence for changes in family structures as 2% of households were single parents families with dependent children in 1960, this increase to 7% in 2003. 20% of under 19 year olds were living with one parents family in 2004, and even amongst people of Caribbean origin, this figure is much higher(36%).

Most single families are headed by women, three quarters of the children of single parents did at birth live with two parents. but the proportion of mothers who have never married are fast increasing. According to Moore et al (2005) 726, 001 children were estimated to live in reconstituted families in 2003 i. e. over 10% of children. In 2002 government statistic showed that 25% of households of people of Asian origin were extended by young single people, couples or parents(s) with dependent children.

Some of these can be said to be changing trends in family structures but can it be attributed to a decline in the nuclear family as an institution? A kind of family in crises seems to be put forward by politicians, sociologist and even journalist. The preferred assumption was that the family was in decline and that this decline has a negative effect in the society. According to M. Phillips, 2006 ' The causes of crime is in the widespread and systematic breakdown of all the connections and restraints that creates a civilised society,,,,,, above all, the principal cause is the dismemberment of the traditional family'.

Thus from the above it could be said that the spread of crime in society is as a result of the breakdown in the nuclear family, this can't be completely true as reasons are not given to crimes that are carried out by children who have being raised and still remain in the traditional nuclear family structure. Again T. Beggs (1849) argue and concluded that the withdrawer of women attention from care of her offspring and from domestic duties is an unnatural arrangement as young children are left at home..... o play at will and to expand into every lawless form....

The early direction of a child's mind to the value of money and the consequent temptation to procure it by illicit means. New right theorists did agree with Beggs and added that government policies have encouraged women to go out and work and this has undermined the role of women in the family and hence the decline. Morgan(2006) also suggested that the change and laws that are made in response to divorce have made it easy to part with a partner who would have tried to resolve their differences.

The most recent change seen as undermining the family is the legality of civil partnership. This law came into operation in 2005 and enables a same sex couple to register as civil partners of each other. Before 1923, women cannot divorce men for adultery, and before 1857 divorce was almost impossible and rare as it required an Act of Parliament. The matrimonial courts then allowed this only on the basis of matrimonial offence which according to men were if their wife has committed adultery and on the basis of desertion or cruelty, whereas for women only desertion or cruelty applied.

Today the grounds of divorce are the same for both sexes. Other legal changes like the Legal Aid 1949, The Divorce Reform Act of 1969 which removed the need for an offence and allowed divorce on the basis of the irretrievable breakdown of marriage was to strengthen the position of women in deciding what type of family they want to be. The new right thinkers claim that welfare policies have encouraged diversity of the family and this is seen as deviant.

Feminist like Ann Oakley disagreed with the views of some new right thinkers and suggested that familial ideology promotes a woman's maternal instincts, thus leading to a hegemonic view that 'real women will strive to put their family before their careers. For feminists, if working women are harming their children in some ways, why is there never being a debate about working fathers. They are also criticised for ignoring certain facts like the difference between maternal and paternal parental leave which clearly assumes women will spend more time with the baby.