

To what extent is the modern family symmetrical essay sample

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



A symmetrical family is one in which both the partners perform equal roles, both within the marriage and the domestic roles. There has been an ongoing debate between sociologists as to whether patriarchy is still present in the contemporary families or has it disappeared, turning the family into a symmetrical family, especially recently with the emerge of the new man-men who contribute towards the domestic work, decision making etc. just as much as their partners. Sociologists Willmott and Young conducted a study on the working class families, which they published in their book- " The Symmetrical Family" in 1975.

In this study they found that a working class family goes through four stages: pre-industrial nuclear family, post-industrial extended family, symmetrical family and the final stage of asymmetrical family. They stated that the pre-industrial nuclear family is a unit of production, based mainly on the cottage industry and family business. In today's society only a small minority of people still continue this trend, i. e. : through the business being passed on down from generations e. g. family shops and business', but it has mainly been replaced.

The next stage of post-industrial extended family began with industrialisation in 1750 and it developed throughout the 19th century. At this stage the family doesn't work together as a unit of production but as individual wage earners. The extended family networks were the solution to the hardship the industrial working class had to deal with. The mutual aid ties between a mother and her married daughter were strong which led to the conjugal ties turning weak.

Willmott and Young stated “ husbands were often squeezed out of the warmth of the female circle and took to the pubs as their defence. ” In addition to that, many families became female headed due to the high male mortality rate. Although, this trend of the post-industrial extended family began to descend in the mid 20th century, yet this trend can occasionally be found in long established working class areas with low income. In the third stage known as the symmetrical family, Willmott and Young researched 2000 people in the early 1970's in Greater London.

They found that a new isolated nuclear family was being formed and was home centred with home-based entertainment and strong conjugal ties; Willmott and Young described their relationship as companionate, separating the nuclear family from the extended family. Due to the isolation, roles within the family became more symmetrical as the workload remained the same therefore were shared, men became more involved in the family life, e. g. : 72% of husbands did housework other than washing up during the course of the week.

Willmott and Young suggested that the move from the post-industrial extended family to the symmetrical family was the result of a reduction in the need for mutual aid amongst kin, this was caused due to: increased wages for the male breadwinner, a reduction in unemployment, increased employment for women, reduced male mortality, welfare state allowance, increased geographical mobility and the reduction in the number children. They claimed that symmetry is more typical of the working class who are more home centres rather than the middle class who are more work centred.

From this Willmott and Young concluded that the structure and role of a family is highly dependent on the changing nature of work. Finally, the asymmetrical family, for this Willmott and Young developed the “ principle of stratified diffusion” and claimed that high living standards are because of industrialisation. In a sample of 190 top country directors they found that all the samples evaluated themselves as being work centred rather than home centred, “ my business is my life”. The wives of these businessmen were less likely to be involved in their husband’s professional lives as the women’s job was at home with their children.

Even the leisure time was integrated with business, which only allowed the wife to play the role of a hostess at parties for their husbands colleagues. Willmott and Young concluded that the development of technology would help reduce routine work therefore resulting in a more work centred and better paid life for the working class men. On the other hand, many critics believe that Willmott and Young’s theory about the working class family turning asymmetrical is in fact false, and the opposite of that is true, i. e. the middle class may be becoming symmetrical rather than working class becoming asymmetrical.

Whereas feminists such as Oakley disagree with Willmott and Young’s claims of a symmetrical nuclear family and pursue the theory that isolated nuclear families are still patriarchal. In her book “ The sociology of housework” (1974) she says that Willmott and Young’s claims on the symmetrical conjugal roles were based on inadequate research, for instance she says Willmott and Young only asked one questions “ do husbands help at least

once a week with housework apart from washing up? to their sample with 72% responding positively.

Oakley states that men performing one domestic task a week does not show equality as women perform many tasks including caring for the children whilst still conducting other domestic chores. Edgell (1980) tested Willmott and Young's symmetrical family theory in his book "Middle Class couples". He examined 38 middle class couples' conjugal roles, and found that patriarchy was still maintained within an isolated nuclear family.

For instance: none of the couples had joint conjugal roles in relation to housework, although only 45% did in relation to childcare; women still spent more time on the responsibilities. He also found that when it came to decision making within a family, women made the inferior decisions e. g. : domestic spending, interior designing etc. whereas men dominated the three superior decision making issues i. e. : moving houses, car purchasing and family finances. And joint decisions were only made on children's education, leisure, furniture etc.

Hardill et al (1997) published a book called "Who decides what? Decision making in dual career households" in which she tested Edgell's finding on decision making to see if a shift towards equality had been made. She sampled 30 professionals and managers from Nottingham and found that in nineteen households men's career was the top priority, women's career in five households and neither came first in six households. Men still dominated decision making in most households, but this wasn't the case for a significant

minority, e. g. men decided where to live but joint decisions were made on buying and renting in a particular area.

From her study Hardill concluded that a miniscule shift towards equality had taken place since Edgell's study. This argument was supported by Pahl (1993) also found that equal decision making was being taken place within a household. Although, this was only the scenario when the wives were in paid employment and the decision was about how the family income should be spent. Vogler (1994) also performed a study on money management.

She studied a sample of 1211 couples, from which 12% had a housekeeping allowance system i. e. : the man gives the women allowance to pay for the expenses. 25% of the couples had patriarchy as the man had the final say, and a majority of 65% had equal control. A later study on money management was conducted by Laurice and Gershuny (2000) in which they analysed data from the British Household Panel Survey of 10, 000. They found that 10% had a housekeeping allowance system, 20% had a male controlled allowance system and 70% had equal control.

In addition to that they also analysed changes in the time spent by couples on domestic housework according to their employment status. They found that the portion of housework done by wives in 1974/1975 to 1997 had significantly decreased, for instance: in 1974/1975 81% of the housework was done by unemployed wives with husbands in full time work, this had decreased to 72% by 1997. Like Pahl, they also found that more equality was

found where women had higher earnings, especially professionals and managers.

Laurice and Gershuny concluded: " although there was continued movement towards equality we are still far from a position in which the balance between the sexes in the work place corresponds to the balance of work and economic power in the home. " Gershuny (1992) conducted a study on the time spent on domestic labour and leisure time by couples in his book " Change in the Domestic Division of labour in the U. K 1975- 1987". He established that husbands spent on average 20minutes more on cleaning and cooking each day in 1987 than in 1975, if their wives were in full time employment.

His study also proved that total time spent on domestic labour and employment was approximately the same for both men and women, although men spent more time in employment with women spending more time in domestic labour chores. Sullivan (1996) studied the overall time spent on leisure activities by husband and wives. He found that on adding the time spent on domestic work and employment for each gender, the time spent on leisure activities was the same.

Duncombe and Marsden (1995) researched 40 couples that had been married for 15 years and found that many women were dissatisfied with their partner's emotional input, i. e. : not expressing their feelings and as a result often felt lonely. Devault published " feeding the family" (1991), she conducted interviews with thirty women and three men from a range of

ethnic and class backgrounds. She examined that feeding the family required more than shopping, cooking and washing up. It required planning meals and taking into account family members tastes and preferences whilst insuring a healthy and balanced diet.

It was also important that meal times are a relaxing and socially rewarding experience. This leads to the conclusion that meal times aren't just physical labour but also emotional work. In conclusion, it is clear that traces of patriarchy still exist in the contemporary family, although life for married women within the house is a lot better, as equality between men and women is visible but to a certain extent, e. g. : majority of the women still do most of the housework despite being in full time work.

This was shown in Laurice and Gershuny's study in 2000 in which they found that 62% of the housework was done by women in 1997 despite both partners being in full time work. On the other hand, it is obvious that the family is slowly but most certainly becoming symmetrical, this was also proved by Laurice and Gershuny's study in 2000, in which they found that 70% of the British Households had equal control allowance systems. Most modern families are already completely symmetrical in Britain but that is a small, yet significant minority. Yet, to a certain extent almost all modern families are symmetrical.