

Changes in the family institution



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Evaluate the impact changes to the family have in a social and political context

In order to discuss the changes the family as an institution has gone through and the impact that these changes have had, it is necessary to define the 'family'. The term 'family' is often used to mean a nuclear family, for example two parents, usually married with one plus children. This definition however, is no longer relevant to twenty first century Britain. Factors including ageing populations which result in households containing no children; the delay in having children due to the increase in popularity of career minded independent women; single parenthood caused by divorce/separation; single women conceiving; and finally household division, in other words separated parents remarrying or cohabiting with other partners and their children, known as the reconstituted family. Policies are viewed by some as trying to reinforce this 'normal' view of the family. Many policy makers made the assumption, as Dean points out "the 'traditional' family consisted of a breadwinning husband who could expect to enjoy life-long full-time employment, earning a wage sufficient...to support a dependant wife" (2001: 268). They argue that this model never did 'fit' society's reality and as a result, many families who do not fill this mould could have cause to feel estranged from society and its ideology. Kiernan points out that 'few developments in family life have been quite as dramatic as the recent rises in unmarried cohabitation and having children outside of marriage' (2002: 3). She also states that we should celebrate the family in all its diverse forms and match legislation to support this.

Explain the relationship between family structure and –**1. Social Issues.**

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Teenage pregnancies, often portrayed as a socially 'deviant' act are currently on the decline. Lisa Aria puts forward reasons why Policy makers are explaining the occurrence of teenage pregnancies. With contraception and abortion readily available, they suggest that early childbearing must be caused by low expectations of mothers. In other words due to poor educational opportunities "they see no reason not to get pregnant" (Aria, 2003: 200). Aria however, puts a positive spin on this theory when she states that "many young mothers have a weak attachment to the education system or paid work before pregnancy, and mothering, for them, is a meaningful vocation" and that it "should not be read as a sign of immaturity, but its reverse" (212-213).

2. State Intervention.

The introduction of the welfare state was originally designed to support a small group of single mothers who were either abandoned or widowed. As Primus and Beeson point out "welfare has evolved to serve mostly families headed by divorce, separated, or never married mothers" (2002: 191). The rise of claimants in these categories, and the growth of cohabitation as an alternative to marriage, has caused "policymakers and researchers to question whether welfare and tax policies influence a range of decisions about family, including decisions to marry, have children, or cohabit" (Primus and Beeson, 2002: 121). This concern over whether means-tested benefits are subconsciously persuading single parent families is reflected in new legislation. Perhaps in an attempt to distance means-tested benefits from single parent families, Dean remarks on how the government has only just "stopped short of directly compelling mothers to work" (2001: 271) with the

implementation of compulsory ‘work-focused interviews’ for single parents on income support.

Evaluate the impact of key family legislation on:

1. Mothers.

The main legislation to effect mothers is related to the National Childcare Strategy put forward in 1998. Jane Lewis points out the aims were “linked to the attack on poverty and social exclusion” and this included subsidised childcare (2003: 219). As Dean points out, these policies can be “fuelling personal moral dilemmas” (2001: 274) as policy makers are sending out mixed messages. For example, the government proposed that we “place greater responsibility on parents for the behaviour of their children” (Kroll and Barrett, quoted in Dean 2001), however the pressure on parents, especially mothers to become involved with paid employment is persistent. Dean’s qualitative study entitled “Working Parenthood and Parental Responsibility”, found that due to this pressure to find employment encouraged by means-tested benefits such as the Working Tax Credit and the notion of ‘family friendly companies’, cause women to take up employment that is temporary, most often part-time and poorly paid. As Bryson and Marsh point out “recipients of in-work benefits seldom move on to higher paid jobs” (1996: 272) and often are unable to dedicate more time and effort into the paid position due to familial responsibilities. Dean does claim however, that some mothers stated that they viewed their “lack of responsibility as a positive advantage in so far that their employment...did not interfere with those commitments that are for them of greater ontological significance” (2001: 276).

2. Fathers.

Dean summarizes his research on working parenthood by stating, “ men (should) have the same incentives as women to combine employment and parental responsibilities” (2001: 283). In 2005, the government announced the proposals of a plan to extend Paternity allowance as a manoeuvre in this direction. As Susan Smillie (2005) states in the Guardian, “ fathers could receive up to three months’ statutory paternity pay if their partner returns to work after six months”, on top of the two weeks paid leave known as Statutory Paternity Leave. This is a move in the right direction from a father’s perspective. While this would suit many career-minded women who earn more than their partners do, many mothers would perhaps not be so willing to leave their four/five month old baby with their partner if this was a first child. It has been noted by Dean however, that further developments in maternity allowances could seek to disadvantage women in the workplace if they are not matched by paternity allowances for men, as “ employers might otherwise become increasingly reluctant to engage women” (2001: 282).

3. Children.

The Child Support Act (1991) is another major legislation that has affected families and their wellbeing. This legislation affects fathers and mothers, however it is the child(ren) at the centre. The aim of the Child Support Act is to recover ‘ maintenance’ from the father, which is then paid to the mother. The Family Law Reform Act (1987) and The Children’s Act (1989) make a clear link between “ a father’s obligation to make a financial contribution for his children’s care and his right to have contact with them” (Burghes, Clarke and Cronin, 1997). However, as Bagilhole points out, where the Child Support

Agency retrieved money from “ absentee fathers...it did not benefit many lone mothers and their children because if they were dependent on benefits the child support they received was deducted pound for pound from income support” (1997: 124).

4. Analyse the effect of the media on family values and family structures.

William Douglas has outlined the representation of the family and the values it promotes in his study cited in *Television Families* . He states that Post-War television portrayed a family consisting of women who were sexual but predominantly domestic. May (quoted in Douglas) points out that “ motherhood was the ultimate fulfilment of female sexuality” (1988: 140). Douglas states that this could have influenced the rebellion against familial constraints in the 1960’s as after the war there were numerous women in work, which did not coincide with the family ideology portrayed in the media. He states that the domestic roles within the household portrayed in contemporary television with regard to chores and child rearing, are more equally weighted than in prior decades. Women are usually portrayed as being in paid employment and that spouses are more openly intimate. He does state however, that unlike modern society, divorce is rare as “ spouses simply do not divorce, even when relational and/or economic stress appears acute” (2003: 112). He states that the ideology present in contemporary media has altered dramatically from the past as it now emphasises “ personal ambition and achievement rather than family life and family relations” (2003: 134).

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