

A state of family dysfunction sociology essay



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Adolescence can be described as a period of physical and emotional change, the transition between childhood and adulthood. It is agreed by theorists such as Erikson, (1968) Freud, (1969) and Blos (1962) that adolescence is a confusing journey of discovery in order to achieve self identification.

Steinberg and Belsky, (1996) agree proposing that adolescence is a complex mixture of “ raging hormones” physical changes and unfettered emotions.

This period in the human life cycle is driven by biological maturation or puberty and is therefore unavoidable in those who are suitably nourished and unaffected by any disease that may deny it. Susman and Rogol (2004: 15) suggest that puberty is “ one of the most profound biological and social transitions in the life span”, thus suggesting that it is important, during this period, for the adolescent to be securely supported by their family, peers, teachers and wider society, in order to achieve psychological well being.

The ensuing physical and emotional developments during adolescents may be enough for a young person to adjust to, however this period, for some, also includes compulsory education at secondary level.

Family

Changes in the types of family were revealed in the trends from Haskey's (1999) research which proposes that cohabitation and second marriage has become more prevalent in recent times, for example in 1965 pre marriage cohabitation was reported as below 1% rising to 60% in 1993. During the same period, the incidents of second marriage increased by over 90% from 4370 to 45107. Therefore, the likelihood of step families was also amplified.

It may considered that the family unit can be described in various ways, traditional/nuclear, extended, cohabiting, matriarchal single, patriarchal

single, lone parent, mixed race, step, adoptive, lesbian and gay families. This list is by no means exhaustive as other descriptive language such as “incomplete” (Kuchmaevo et. al, 2009), “fragmented” (David, 1999) and “never married” (Kiernan, 1999) is used. These descriptions may be employed for the depiction of a family breakdown, irrespective of marital status, or to suggest a family’s non conformity to social expectations. It could be commented that society’s need to elaborate beyond just the title of ‘family’ indicates some adherence to historical perspectives and conformity.

In England and Wales during 2006 71% of parents were married couples, 14% were cohabiting and 15% were lone parent families with 90% of these families being single mother households (Crown, 2003). Subsequent to that year it is reported by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) that 43, 492 children aged 11 to 15 experienced the divorce of their parents. However, these figures do not include those adolescents experiencing family breakdown from the dissolution of both long term and short term cohabiting ‘unions’, therefore a definite figure of adolescents involved in the breakdown of their family is not available (Toulemon, 1997; Andersson, 2002). This figure could be considerable in comparison to the divorced family statistics as a third of families are derived from unmarried unions. Further statistics from the ONS also suggest that that between 1996 and 2006 cohabiting families were the fastest growing family type.

Kiernan (1999) warns that cohabiting families do not provide children with a stable environment as it encourages the creation of temporary/short term families where fathers are less involved and the likelihood of socio-economic problems are common. The potential negative impacts of this type of family

is discussed in the research of Andersson (2004) who compared family structures of 15 countries from Europe compared to the United States of America. The results revealed children born into cohabiting families are at higher risk of experiencing family disruption, for example changes in their mother's partner with periods of lone parenting in between. The weakness with this research is, although demographically extensive, its reliability may be questioned as it relies on the anecdotal evidence of respondents and has excluded countries such as the United Kingdom from its European sample. However, its results do support that of more qualitative data recorded by Videon (2005); Capaldi & Patterson, (1991); Kurdeck et. al (1994) and Adams (2004) also claim cohabiting and lone parent families are prone to family disruption or 'multiple parental transitions'.

Instabilities from cohabitation may be a) serial monogamy in the form of multiple marriages or many short term non committed partners b) residential mobility and c) parental separation (loss). New relationships can also bring step siblings and extended families, all of which necessitate adjustment on behalf of the adolescents in both families. Literature on the impact of divorce on adolescents propose that these transitions match with the effects of family breaking down leading to divorce such as lower academic achievement, reduced parental involvement, economic hardship, poor social competence, behavioural problems (externalising) and depression (internalising) (Amato and Keith, 1991; Storksen et. at. 2006; Sun and Li, 2002, Richardson and McCabe, 2001). However, the legal separation of parents could be an isolated event for some children thus requiring adjustment to only one initial separation of their biological parents, as

opposed to the dissolution of the multiple relationships between a biological parent and step parent, be it long or short term. Goldstein and Solnit, (1984: 1) comment from the perspective of the child, " when a parent moves out of the home the emotional impact on the child does not depend on the presence of a marriage certificate".

Adam et. al. (1982) found that the incidents of teenage suicide or attempted suicide were strongly correlated with family instability. Instability was considered to include; the death of a parent or loss by separation or divorce, remarriage and step families and the changes in social circles including school. The results found that females from the age of 15 - 35, had difficulties with their psychological adjustment to change, were more likely attempt or commit suicide. Further results revealed;

" a highly significant overall relationship between long-term family stability and suicidal ideation. 95% of all subjects with homes rated as chaotic were recorded as having suicidal ideation, as compared with 62% of those rated unstable and 20% of those rated stable" (Adam et. al, 1982: 1084)

These statistics lead to a strong indication that, especially for female adolescents, the need for stable family relationships whilst experiencing personal developmental change could be crucial for successful psychological adjustment. Erikson (1950) implies that an adolescent's drive to become independent involves the redefinition of the child-adult to adult-adult relationships. One could argue that this may be hindered considerably by any inconsistencies demonstrated by parents during this process thus failing to construct an " arena of comfort" (Simmons, 1987) for challenges

presented by hormonal and physical changes for example. It is suggested by Hine (1997: 379) that adolescents should be “ facilitated by a parent-child relationship that maintains a strong affective bond while tolerating disagreement and the expression of the adolescent’s growing sense of individuality”. This can be associated with the view of Freud (1969) and Blos (1962) who posit that adolescence is triggered by biological changes, therefore it may be contemplated that the timing of parental transitions or family breakdown may coincide with this inexorable physical event which could lead to an exaggerated form of the normally expected “ intrafamilial storm and stress and adolescent rebellion” (Hine, 1997: 378) which in a more stable family may have been more easily tolerated.

According to Adams (2004) the effects of multiple parental transitions is under researched or indeed is unreliable, as the control groups are usually taken from middle class families where such incidents are fewer however unstable families are difficult to recruit. This view may be supported by the longitudinal research of Ackerman et al., (1999) and the observations and case studies of Linver et al., (2002) who found that the incidents of ‘ multiple parental transitions’ were most prevalent in socio disadvantaged families which, in their opinion, provides a direct link to poverty and negative outcomes of well being.

There is a wealth of research investigating the effects of divorce upon adolescents and since the majority of parents are still married this may be unsurprising. However, as social trends are indicating that cohabitation and lone parents make up a significant proportion of family structures in the United Kingdom, therefore the possible effects of multiple family breakdowns

on early adolescents could be of considerable importance. For these types of families, breakdowns are not isolated incidents and may be considered condensed versions of the conflicts, stresses and consequences associated with the processes of family breakdown leading to divorce (Amato, 2000) and therefore “ tax the individual’s ability to cope” with and adjust to change (Videon, 2005: 130). Amato (2000) suggests that psychological adjustment and the strength of interpersonal relationships within families are ‘ moderators’ for adolescents during family breakdown and attempt to reduce negative impacts. Positive adjustment strategies are associated with healthy separation-individuation in adolescents as found in the research of Holahan et al. (1994); Beyers (2003) Hobfoll and Spielberger, (1992). Berg-Cross (1977) agrees by implying that the promotion of healthy adjustment strategies, through positive social interactions, can help the adolescent differentiate between their feelings about themselves and those for their parents and to balance them with their emotions towards their parent’s behaviour (McDermott, 1968). The ability to differentiate may be viable due to the cognitive development of the adolescent. This leads to Piaget’s hypothesis that during adolescence young people progress into the ‘ formal operational stage’ and are therefore capable of hypothetical thought (Inhelder and Piaget, 1958). Kohlberg (1976) proposes that this stage enables the young person to formulate their own system of morals and values, thus reducing their dependency on their parents. Therefore, to the role of parents is to allow this development to occur through positive support, Etzioni (1993: 56) may call this the parental “ scope of commitment”. Conversely, poor adjustment, caused by the change in parental attitude driven by their own needs, can lead to an indefinite delay,

in what is considered, normal adolescent behaviour or the promotion of extreme risky behaviours. It may be pertinent to suggest that the selfishness of both the parents and the adolescent may be difficult to tolerate within a family system.

According to Bernedes (1986: 590) a family is a “ complex unity of experience” thus suggesting that the family unit is based on emotion, interaction and the relationships of individuals as well as its function within society. Daly (2003: 782) agrees by stating that a family is an “ inconsistent, paradoxical, irrational and contradictory” concept. Daly also suggests that the family unit is a “ cycle of emotional contagion” (774) with its intricacies stemming from family traditions, storytelling (LaRossa, 1995; Gillis, 1996) and emotional transmission (Larson and Almeida, 1999; Thompson and Bolger, 1999). Research of emotional transmission reveals that family members have the ability to manipulate the impact and duration of negative emotions during times of stress; such as periods of unemployment or chronic illness. The meta-analysis of Larson and Almeida (1999: 5) examined the multiple methods of data collection for the evaluation of family interaction and emotional experiences. Although they identified some weaknesses in some of the studies they agree that this area of research is useful in attempting to understand the ‘emotional processes within the daily ecology of family and community life’. Some of the method weaknesses identified were the demanding nature of data collection which included the recording of emotions and behaviour through diary entries, face to face and telephone interviews along with computer generated diary entries using a handheld device, programmed for 2 hourly reminders, over a

40 day period. The use of so many data collection approaches necessitated the need for small samples sizes in order as not to be cumbersome a task to accurately control respondents and collate data. The authors also considered that the responses were subjective and could also be subject to " recall bias" (: 8). However, the results can be considered reliable by the cross examination of data and interviews which circumvent any reliance on just one piece of evidence from any one family member. Also cross examination provides further depth of understanding for the concept.

It may be considered that this area of research has lead to an understanding of how emotional pathways developed throughout the family thus enabling the recognition of where emotions and reactions originated from and how they flow throughout the family in the form of behaviour. An understanding of emotional transmission may be useful for families with adolescent children during adjustment to family breakdown or the introduction of ' step' relationships. Recognition of the cause and effect of negative emotions may bring clarity to communication processes and possibly lead to reduced negative consequences. Link to further research into Non custodial parent and step families.

Considering the multifaceted interaction of family members and contemplating the role emotions play within the family, it could be concluded a definition of ' family' may be too diverse and complicated for a rational description. Social and political policy, however may attempt a rational definition of the family using influences of culture and tradition.

Functionalists such as Parsons (in Robinson, 1993) and Murdock (1949), suggest that the nuclear family comprising of two parents of opposite

genders with children, conceived inside of wedlock, is the preferred norm. The functionalist view of family structure may be criticised for the retention of traditional values of the past and therefore failing to adapt to societal change (Schwab, 2000).

Despite feminist opposition to patriarchal tendencies, it is suggested that functionalist perspectives have endured social and political changes (Gilbert, 1999). This is argued by David (1999: 2) who suggests that the model is covertly adopted by the current New Labour government within their 'third way' strategy of welfare policy, which manipulates conformity of families with "partnerships and punishment", through the allocation or denial of social security. It may be recognised that the promotion of the traditional nuclear family could be an attempt to alleviate dependency on State funds as this view believes that families should ideally be "economically responsible [and] self providing" (Fletcher, 1973: 137). It could be argued that the current government may not overtly or intentionally promote the traditional nuclear family, however their policies as argued by Prideaux (2001), are 'authoritarian' and 'judgemental' thus striving for the reduction of the burden on the State of unconventional families. Such inequalities may be unintentional; however any paradox could be perpetuated by what Longwe (1997: 148) describes as a "patriarchal cooking pot", with which it is surmised that certain intentions and policies to avert inequalities borne from patriarchal attitudes can be "evaporated" by rational systems. It may be suggested that examples of this are the payment of Working Family Tax Credit, the continuation of the Child Support Agency from a Conservative

Government, as well as other policies that coerce lone mothers to work i. e. New Deal (Prideaux, 2001).

Additionally, a patriarchal paradigm supports gendered roles within society and thus disadvantages in the workplace, leading to comparatively poorly paid jobs for women rendering them unable to support a family alone.

Should it be the case that the State does indeed support certain Functionalist perspectives then, it can be argued, therefore that it cannot produce a welfare state or Laws that sufficiently support the realities of family structures (Stromquist, 1999; Jagger and Wright, 1999; Gilbert, 1999) which are revealed by the quantitative research of Haskey (1999) as becoming more diverse. This leads to the view that contemporary or alternative families, therefore not conforming to perceived social norms, are regarded as a 'problem' to be solved by political policy and family law (Morgan, 1995; Silva and Smart, 1999; Jagger and Wright, 1999). " Indeed, the 'crisis' in the family... can be seen as no more than the 'gap' between the ideological construction of 'the family' and the diverse realities of family life (Gittins 1993: viii).

Haskey's (1999) research may be considered reliable as it uses data collected from the Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Census and other social surveys between 1845 and 1995. Conclusions drawn include changes in parenting from the growth of individualism and increased choices borne from education, mobility and industrial growth. It could be commented that the traditional promotion of the nuclear family unit is supportive of the economy as it is disconnected from the ties of an extended family unit and

therefore more likely to move to where employment can be found, therefore more self reliant and less of a burden to a welfare state.

Literature on the characterisation of family include definitions such as “ a most important institution” (Haskey, 1999: 9) for the socialisation of children and the security of adults leading to well-being and social conformity (McRoy and Altstein, 2000; Corbett, 2004; David, 1999; Parsons in Robinson 1993). However, it can be considered that a definition of family is more complicated than just a structure to stabilise society as suggested by functionalist theory or a ‘ haven that weakens the workers’ determination to stand and fight capitalism” or in other words a distraction from other realities, as posited by a Marxist perspective (Wilson, 1985: 28). Some of its complexity may be illustrated by Gillis (1996) who suggests that everyone has two families, one that is constructed by family values or traditions and the other subjectively constructed by culture and society.

As previously mentioned the consequence of a patriarchal paradigm may be that some mothers cannot afford to support their family alone which can lead to some remaining in destructive marriages or to endure cohabitation with abusive partners. The relevance of this is that children within such families are exposed to inter-parental conflict. Consequences of such relationships are illustrated by the research of Cummings and Davies (1994) and Harold, Osbourne and Conger (1997) who findings propose that adolescents who witness inter-parental conflict may feel less secure in their relationship with their parents, due to a sense of loss, which in turn hinders their abilities to form trusting relationships beyond the family.

It is suggested by such theorists as Blos (1962), Fried (1969) and Erikson (1968) that parental support allows for healthy social interplay leading to the development of 'self'. Erikson (1968) describes the period between 13 to 18 years as the life stage "Identity versus Role Confusion". It is during this stage that teenagers are socialised by their parents to function more effectively in the arena outside of the family, thus they examine and explore relationships in order to establish their own roles and identity. This phase coincides with education at secondary school where it is considered that well adjusted and healthy psychosocial development is important in order to develop peer, as well as romantic relationships as a precursor to young adulthood.

Therefore, should the adolescent experience confusion between; their need for 'individuation' (Blos, 1962), the feeling of loss from parental 'detachment' arising from reduced parental interest (Noak and Puschner, 1999; Belsky and Steinberg, 1996) and any extra responsibilities to assume ascribed roles, such as an advocate for one parent or comforter of siblings, then as suggested by Daniels (1990), the adolescent may become detached from the family. Furthermore in extreme circumstances, this confusion can lead to detachment from society as well as the search for 'self'. This extreme, according to Erikson (1969) can lead to the inability to complete the expected transition to young adulthood and may lead to a crisis in identity. Such crises are borne from ageing into the next life phase with little or no experience of how to forge healthy relationships.

Research also reveals a strong parallel between the effects of inter-parental conflict within intact families and that of divorced families. Fincham and

Beach (1999), Borrine et. al (1991) and Amato and Keith (1991) conclude that conflict is a most important cause of behaviour and mental health problems for the children. According to Amato and Keith divorce can be a long process starting many years before the actual event, which may include a long period of detachment by one parent as well as inter-parental conflict. This research may also be associated with that of the effects of chaotic or unstable families, where multiple transitions within a family structure are suggested to be detrimental to adolescent development (Andersson, 2004 and Kiernan 1999).

The opinion of Steinberg and Morris (2001) is that problem behaviour in adolescents may also originate from traumatic experiences within their childhood years. The findings of Heatherington (1993) support this view, as the results of this longitudinal research found that a group of children who had experienced inter-parental conflict, leading to the divorce of their parents, did not exhibit any significant behavioural problems until they reached the age of 15 when more behavioural difficulties were demonstrated along with reduced social competences.

Family Function and Dysfunction

Despite the labels a family may have, its functions may be considered the same. According to researchers and authors such as Kuchmaevo et. al 2009; Schwab, 2000; Lidz, 1980; LaRossa, 1995; Gillis, 1996; family function includes such categories as; a) guardianship for the provision of safety and services for daily life b) Processes of socialisation for the transmission of family values and beliefs and the preparation for future life c) Cognitive support for knowledge about the world outside of the family as well as the

encouragement of abilities and interests of each family member d) Satisfaction of emotional needs e) Reproduction and regulation of adult sexuality f) To carry out activities in compliance with society at large g) economic contribution, through mobility for work and consumerism (Smith & Preston, 1977). However, due to the temporary and possibly chaotic nature of serial monogamy and/or the reduced commitment of one parent, it could be argued that devotion to the execution of family functions could be irregular thus resulting in dysfunction. Koopmans (1995page) proposes that family dysfunction arises when such concepts “ are unclear, confused, or absent”. Hence, in order for a family to function effectively, roles, responsibilities and boundaries are required to be executed and recognised through parenting and communication within a family system (Bowen, 1979). However, this does not mean that functionality can only be achieved within a married/intact family or conversely that dysfunction is the domain of alternative family structures only.

According to a review of literature conducted by Schwab (2000) family functions and functioning are prone to change. It is suggested that a functioning family should be an effective system that reacts efficiently to such stresses as family breakdown, chronic illness, bereavement or unemployment on a micro level, or socio-cultural events and developments on a macro level. Such effectiveness is demonstrated by the family redistributing their emotional resources and applying attention to the most immediate functions in order to reduce the impact of stress on its members. Such events can lead to changes that can shift the focus of parenting, for

example a mother taking employment for the first time or requiring adolescent children to take more responsibility for younger siblings.

A state of family dysfunction may be temporary due to a period of psychological adjustment (Adam and Chase-Lansdale, 2002) to accommodate a change. However, due to the nature of adolescent development, in which the paradox of autonomy and parental acceptance are courted, defined by Blos (1979) as the “ separation-individuation process”, dysfunction can become long term and even escalate to the demonstration of extreme behaviours in adolescents. Such behaviours can be substance abuse as found in research by Cavanagh (2008) and suicidal ideation (Adams et. al 1982; Koopmans, 1995).