

In Britain today, most people live in nuclear families

The aim of this piece of coursework is to look at different sources to investigate the hypothesis above. This will show me whether despite the variation of attitudes in society today there is still a dominant view of the family and also different types of family in a household structure.

There is no single right or wrong definition for the family, which applies to all societies as families can come in all different shapes and sizes. The stereotypical view of husband and wife with two children no longer exists. An argument put forward by many sociologists is the family as a unit has lost many of its functions. For example in pre-industrial society parents' are responsible for the health, welfare and education of their children. But now the state in the form of specialised organisations such as hospitals, schools and social security have adopted these roles. But I think it is difficult to say that the family has lost many of its functions when there is no clear definition for what a family is. In views of a British sociologist Ronald Fletcher "Parents are expected to do their best to guide, encourage and support their children in their educational and occupational choices and careers." Quote taken from Sociology textbook.

Families vary enormously in structure and size from society to society, as do the roles played by different members. For instance, the nuclear family usually consists of two adults and their children that can be biological or adopted. The extended family may include three or four generations, as well as uncles, aunts, and cousins. In India, for example, households often include parents, all their children and all their children's spouses and children, and sometimes the parents' own brothers and sisters! However in recent years in western societies there has been an increase in the number of one-parent families, which may consist of an unmarried mother and her child or children, or else of a father or mother, left without a partner through death or divorce, and his or her children. The reconstituted family is becoming increasingly popular as the number of divorces and remarriages increases, so do the numbers of families, which are headed by stepmothers or stepfathers. The children of the family may be a combination of two or more previous marriages.

There are many perceptions towards the family; some people are for the family and some against. The beneficial view of the family is that they can help each other, work for each other and influence the course of each other's lives. Families can also provide the vital link between an individual and society. However there is a critical view of the family to balance with the benefits. Critics have pointed out the various harmful aspects of family life. They point out that violence against children and wives is commonplace and each year in Britain some children are actually beaten to death by their parents.

There have been attempts to abolish the family; probably the most famous is the kibbutz of Israel. The Israeli kibbutz or agricultural collective is an attempt to break away from the stereotypes of the family: members of the kibbutz live communally and bring their children up collectively, but even here, parent-child relationships are encouraged. The advantages of living in the kibbutz is that everyone is equal as jobs and procedures are shared between all the members, not one single person would keep to the same job. It is a large support network. But the disadvantages are that you would not have the chance to become individual in your own family as people are shaped to that of the whole kibbutz collective. As marriage is seen to be unimportant this could lead to a decline in the number of children born, also if children are born they are not the responsibility of the parents but of the whole group. They could feel

disowned and not feel part of close support network that you would get in the family, you would live with the same people everyday for the rest of your life.

All cultures organise and structure the relationships between men and women through which society as a whole reproduces itself, but there is great variation in the rights and duties associated with marriage in different societies. In many cultures, marriage is theoretically regarded as a permanent bond, dissoluble only through divorce, but marriage may also be a temporary arrangement. Marriage can affect society by birth rates, government; availability of financial support, housing, education and healthcare, divorce rates and development of society. A person could have one partner this is called monogamy or many partners, polygamy in the case of men and polyandry in case of women. Most societies have rules prohibiting marriage amongst certain categories of kin (incest) and people may be forced to marry outside a 'group', exogamy. On the other hand, people also often marry within a specific category, endogamy. This is the case in Indian societies of people who marry into the same caste. For example in Sikhism marriage is seen to be a commitment for life, so it is the parents' duty to find the right partner for their child. Although Western societies place great emphasis on romantic attraction and individual choice of marriage partner, marriage always involves a much wider group of people than the husband and wife; most other societies recognise this, and the wider kin group plays an important part in the choice of marriage partner, and in the exchange of gifts and payments such as dowry and bride wealth. Marriage in some religions like Christianity and Islam can be seen as an important rite of passage; it involves particular rituals, often religious in character, which emphasise the importance of marriage to society as a whole. In Hinduism marriage is the second stage in life and therefore it a sacrament or sacred ritual. In Christianity matrimony is regarded as a sacrament. However, unmarried cohabitation is an increasing phenomenon worldwide, especially in countries in which a diminishing number of people treat marriage as sacrament.

Source one

Source one was collected from the government website that is specially devised to give statistics. The information from this source can be found at www.statistics.gov.uk. There have been large changes in family types in which children live as shown by the statistics. Over the last twenty years there has been a decrease of the number of dependant children living in couple families and an increase in the number of dependant children living in single parent families. In Spring 2002 when these statistics were compiled around one fifth of dependant children in Great Britain lived in single/lone parent families. This is almost twice the proportion in 1981. For example if you add both the columns of lone mother families to lone father families in 1981 you get 12% and by 2002 you get 21%. However despite the increase in lone parent families most children still live in the traditional family headed by two parents in one household. 78% lived in such family in spring 2002 compared to 84 % in 1992 and 88 % in 1981. This is justified as I have already said that there has been an overall increase in children living in single parent families.

As there has been an overall increase in single parent families I will look closely at the statistics to try and determine why this has occurred. A large part of the increase was due to divorce in the mid-1980s. But more recently the number of single lone mothers has grown at a faster rate because of a higher proportion in birth outside marriage. As in my introduction I stated that marriage was not treated as a sacrament by an increasing majority of people hence the increase in divorces and lone parent families. So it is not surprising that the overall lone parent families is headed by mothers as the law will always grant custody to the mother unless

she is deemed unfit to look after the children. But in saying that lone fathers head 10% of lone parent families during Spring 2002, which is also the same in 1992 and 1981 showing that this number has stayed constant.

In relation to the hypothesis even though there has been an increase overall in lone parent families and a decrease in couple families there still is a considerable amount of children living in couple families, 78% in Spring 2002. So this source agrees with the hypothesis that most people today in Britain live in nuclear families. The standard number for nuclear families consists of the 2:4 ratio. When looking at the statistics in 1981, 1992 and 2002 there overall majority of couple families have two children, which complies with the stereotypical nature of the nuclear family. In 2002 the percentage of two children in couple families was 47%, which is almost half the number of children in couple families that is a considerable majority. As the statistics have been conducted by the British government through the 2001 census results I would say that the results are very reliable as they cannot be bias and are available to be studied by various different people and are used for the benefit of the country.

Source 2.

“Society can do its part in educating children, healing them when they are sick, ensuring they have a roof over their heads and food to eat. But this is on the understanding that parents are fulfilling their responsibilities. If I have a right to have children then I also have a duty to bring them up as good citizens. It is also duty to attend their spiritual needs, so they can grow up to know and love god. Real families are omitted to each other, and grow to maturity through that commitment.”

“I don’t agree that family values should mean people staying married no matter what. The priority has to be on individual welfare and development. Children need to be put first in so far as their security is concerned. But in a family the relationship of the couple must come first. If that’s not the case, the children have too much power, get frightened, and don’t get the message that there are things that are much more important than they are.”

Quotes form The Archbishop of Canterbury and Robin Skynner a Psychiatrist.

I have decided to compare these two quotes as they both have different perceptions of the family. Unlike the first source these sources are extremely biased in being for or against the family, as they are personal opinions.

The quote by the Archbishop of Canterbury promotes the family. He as believes that there is no excuse ands that a family should stay together no matter what. In my introduction I said the in the Christian faith marriage is a sacrament; this is the underlined theme in the quote. “If I have a right to have children...” is taken from the passage this shows that in his opinion children should be looked after by their parents as they have conceived them and therefore are responsible to bringing them in to the world and bringing “them up as good citizens.” This view is completely opposite to that of the kibbutz, which completely abolishes this idea of family. He also outlines the importance of parents’ roles in their children lives and what they must do to fulfil “their responsibilities.” He also believes that they should be educated in religion and that it is the parents’ duty to do so, so they can “grow up to know and love God.”

But some families whose parents are “fulfilling their responsibilities” may not be religious and still bring up their children well. But in the eyes of the Archbishop of Canterbury this is not just. Showing that this source promotes the family agreeing with the hypothesis but is also extremely biased. He also says “real families are committed to each other” I think that just because a child may not have two parents doesn’t mean that they are any less provided for. There may be a number of reasons for not having two parents for example death and divorce. If the situation were divorce would it not be better for the child to live with one parent than to live with both and have to cope with emotional turmoil.

The second quote completely contradicts the views of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Robin Skynner who is a Psychiatrist believes that “the priority has to be on individual welfare and development” so the family does not necessarily have to stay together. He doesn’t believe that good family values means that people should stay married “no matter what.” He believes that the children’s welfare and security is very important but so to is the relationship of the parents. If you compare this with the first quote from the Archbishop of Canterbury “Real families are committed to each other” we have two different arguments cause by to different perceptions. He believes that if a family stay together for the sake of the children i.e. the Archbishop of Canterbury’s view than this is wrong as he thinks children need to know “that there are things that are much more important than they are.”

In relation to the hypothesis the archbishop of Canterbury believes that everyone should stay in a family therefore having two married parents. This agrees with the hypothesis, but we know that it is incorrect as source one shows an increase in single parents with dependant children. Whilst the second quote from Robin Skynner shows that a family can still be a family even if parents are separated and the welfare of the individual is far more important than that of the family as a whole, disagreeing with the hypothesis.

Source 3.

Source three shows a graph that portrays marriage and divorce rates in Great Britain between 1971 and 1991. There is a direct correlation between marriage and divorce rates shown on the graph. As the marriage rate slowly declines the divorce rate increases, which one would expect as you, need to be married to get a divorce. The graph shows rates in thousands. But there has not been a substantial increase or decrease it has happened steadily over time. This could be due to changes in laws and people’ perceptions. In 1969 the liberalisation of divorce laws made it easier to file for a divorce on a whole, this also meant that the mother was more likely to be granted custody of the children. Also nowadays it is perfectly normal for the wife to obtain a full time job whilst still up holding the maintenance and care of house and family. With much attention led to trying and creating economical stability a lot of stress can be applied to the relationship as both partners do not have enough time to spend with each other. This is just two reasons why divorce rates may have increased. If you look on the graph after 1971 there was a surge in divorce rates but also there was a surge in marriages. This shows that marriage is still popular but people may have expectations of this perfect marital life, which in reality may be difficult causing a strain on relationships and in turn leading to divorce. In 1971 the marriage rate in Britain was around 400 thousand and by 1991 it was about 350. With divorce in 1971 over 50 thousand, which is about 300-350 thousand difference compared to marriage of the same year. But by 1991 the divorce rate was just under 200 thousand showing around about 150 thousand increase in divorce over 20 years and only around about 150 thousand difference between marriage and divorce in 1991. This shows an exceptional decline in the difference between divorce and marriage rates.

In association to the hypothesis this source shows that the overall marriage rate is declining and divorce rate is increasing. However the marriage rate is still by 1991 150 thousand more than the divorce rate, which is a considerable amount. So I would say that this source would support the hypothesis as marriage is still popular and a nuclear family is based on a married couple with children. We know from source one that married couples have the overall majority of dependant children.

Source 4.

Source four is a photograph of my family. It consists of two parents and two children of opposite sex, which complies with the stereotype of 2:4 ratio involved with a nuclear family. In my family both parents' work but still the father is the breadwinner and the mother upholds the role of looking after the house. The fathers role within the family is to be the head of the family as he earns the most and pays the bills however there is no overall dominance as everyone has a say. You could say that the mother holds the stereotypical role of the housewife who does most of the chores mainly including the cleaning and cooking, but as she too works, chores are shared in the household. For example each member of the family will take it in turn to cook the evening meal when it is a time for the whole family to sit together and talk about the days events. Generally though the father or son will mow the lawn, everyone is responsible to wash and iron their own clothes as after all they are for personal use. Occasionally though when need do the family members will do the others washing and ironing. With recreational activities and leisure the whole family will play together, this may involve tennis or badminton. The children go to school and there is one family car and we live in a four-bedroom house.

Even though we are a typical nuclear family we do visit many relatives frequently and keep in close contact with them. So you could say that my family is a network a tight-knit nuclear families. I think that if we were to live nearer the majority of our relatives then the pattern of our family life would change considerably and become an extended family of some sort. But due to where we live, the number of people in the household and where the children go to school and parents to work, we are a typical nuclear family. This shows me that my family agrees with the hypothesis as we live in a nuclear family. This is portrayed on the photo of the Dad, Mum, Daughter and Son sitting together on one sofa dressed for a special occasion that is to be spent together. Even though I can be extremely biased when interpreting this primary source of my own family I think that it is safe to say that it is typical to a nuclear family with 2:4 ratio. As I am using one photo to prove the hypothesis relating to the hypothesis correct or incorrect I will compare my family to that of 10 other friends.

Name	Number of people in family	Type of family
Carly Riddle	5	Reconstituted
Erica Gomer	5	Nuclear
Nicola Scivea	4	Nuclear
Katherine Blake	3	Single parent
Ellen O'Leary	8	Reconstituted
Anna Gulliver	4	Nuclear
Becky Martin	5	Nuclear
Katie Jerrum	4	Nuclear
Sam Self	4	Single parent
Emma Baker	4	Nuclear

According to this mini survey excluding my family six out ten people (60%) live in a nuclear family.

Source 5.

This source is a newspaper clip by Action Aid promoting 1994 International Year of the Family otherwise known as IYF. The purpose of this article is to inform the reader about this cause and what the aim is. The underlined message that has been picked out of the text and is in bold “The aim is not to define the family but to promote awareness about sustaining it.” Shows that the United Nations General Assembly who devised this plan are making sure that no opposition can try to oppose them if they are against the family. They understand that “around the world, the structures, sizes, roles, values, beliefs and traditions of families are constantly evolving.” This shows that they can accept that the stereotypical nature of the family in changing and society will have to change with it, but this doesn’t mean that there is no place for the family and that is what they are trying to promote. They know that “the family is still the basic building block of society.” As most people will learn the nature of the world, values and their way of life from other family members. They know that the family has come of age and needs further and better support hence the theme for the IYF “family resources and responsibilities in a changing world.” It shows that family life is a worldwide concern as even though this campaign is not government based and formed by a non-government organisation “97 governments have officially pledged commitment to promoting IYF.” A problem that was faced by the IYF according to this source was from religious groups such as the Catholic Church and women’s organisations. The women’s organisations believe that the focus of family means that women may be denied the right to pursue other aspects of life. The final paragraph of the article shows the reason for the IYF as on World Family Day (15th March 1994) the message that will be spread will be “by protecting families, we are helping the next generation on which the future of our world will soon depend.” Showing worries and fears by many people of the world that with the stability of a family unit life, as we know it in our society today will fall to pieces.

This source indirectly agrees with the hypothesis as it promotes the family. It shows that families can come in all shapes and sizes and that in order to keep the unit strong in society, help must be given. It doesn’t specifically say that everyone should be living in a nuclear family as this is a worldwide cause and that situation may not be possible in many situations around the world. This can be due to an imbalance of sexes, poverty, death and birth rates, accommodation, education to name but a few. This is why I think so many governments supported a non-government campaign.

Source 6.

Source six is a pictorial advert promoting a children’s toy. These dolls that are part of the “happy family” set have caused much controversy around the world consequently leading to them being discontinued from many shops worldwide. The happy family sets include Midge who is the legendary Barbie’s best friend and her husband Alan and their three-year-old son Ryan. The pregnant version of Midge wears a pink skirt, a tiny wedding ring and a detachable stomach with a curled up baby inside. The doll-which says “Mommy loves her new baby”- comes with a cradle and other baby accessories. Pregnant Midge can be white skinned or African-American skinned according to preference, showing that an issue with race has been dealt with here to prevent criticism. The makers Mattel believe that these sets “can help parents discuss pregnancy without having to have graphic descriptions of the reproductive

process.” To justify their actions to bring out such a toy Mattel employed a psychologist called Jo Ann Farver her view is “the pregnancy-themed Happy Family dolls complement children’s strong interests in family relationships, supports their social and emotional development.”

The Happy Family sets promote the stereotypical nuclear family. The parents are married and they have two children. The son Ryan is always portrayed with the father and the baby with the mother, segregating roles within this “typical” family. These products have angered many people as they think that it is immoral and also it can heavily influence children who may not live in this type of family causing them to think that their family is not proper. Not only are these dolls stereotypical to the nature of family but also to colours, as father and son wear blue and mother and baby wear pink. This shows that even in a modern society today these roles are still what perceive and think right there has been no room for change. However when I researched further in the Happy Family sets I found out views of many different people. Here are two quotes one from an educator and one from apparent of two young girls; they both have different views about this toy. “As a Christian and an educator, I think this is a wonderful doll. The parents are married and have one child already. This is very educational and helpful. I am pregnant now and my little girl tries to pretend she is by stuffing her dolls up her shirt! With this doll, the child can role-play what a family goes through with anew birth in the family. Highly recommended.” In comparison to “I am a parent of two young girls. I am not usually one to think bad about toys for young children, except for when it came to this one. I strongly feel that this Barbie is not suitable for young children to have. Girls look at Barbie’s and want to dress like they do and be like them, as much as we teach our children the difference between right and wrong, they form an opinion based on what they see...If children need education on this topic, I do not feel that a Pregnant Barbie is the way to do it...especially in this day and age when there are so many young children having children of their own. I do not feel that this is acceptable.”

So many people have different views towards the family and in this case the two examples above have complete opposite views. These toys promote a happy family hence the name. They show that marriage is needed in order to have a happy family and also they need children nice clothes and fully equipped house for them to be a “Happy Family.” Even though the idea of these toys are to promote the family I don’t think that they should be so typical in their marketing and should aim at an ever changing world and society where families come in all shapes, sizes and numbers. In relation to the hypothesis this source show that many people are willing to spend hundreds of pound marketing a toy to much controversy to promote the family and show how important it is in society today. It shows that the nuclear family is the typical family.

Conclusion

In conclusion the source that I have collected show that most people in Britain live in a nuclear family today. Even though the number of lone parent a reconstituted families are on the increase. According to an article called “Changes in family structure” published by Barnardos 37% of marriages will end in divorce with Britain having the highest divorce rate in Europe. The sources show me that despite the variation of attitudes in society there is still a dominant view of the family that is the nuclear family of a married couple with children even though there is much evidence to prove otherwise in an ever-changing world.

In relation to the hypothesis in order for me to prove it correct I could not justify with the six sources that I have used. A much wider range of material would be needed. This would make the investigation much more reliable and thorough. I think that the most reliable sources that I have used in this investigation are the two data sources compiled from Censuses. This is because there is no reason for them to be biased and they are official government statistics on the portrayal of the country. The other four sources are more biased. This is because they are opinionated and are used for a specific purpose. The quotes from The Archbishop of Canterbury and the psychiatrist are opinionated and promote individual views on family and therefore can be unreliable to more of an extent than the data sources. The range of my family photo does not portray other families from all around Britain and the comparison with other friends can be unreliable too as firstly the range is too small and secondly as we all live in the same area the nuclear family can be typical to this part of the country likewise it could be atypical to other parts of the country. The advertisement's sole purpose is to promote a toy to gain profits; it is extremely biased towards the nuclear family and disregards all other types of family. The source promoting the IYF recognises that families are different around the world and there does not have to be a typical family so I would say it was less reliable than the government data but more reliable than the opinionated sources. Therefore in order to come to a justified conclusion for the hypothesis "In Britain today, most people live in nuclear families" I would have to plan an investigation with a much wider range of sources that were both primary and secondary.

But in relation to this piece of coursework with the six sources that I have collected they strongly agree with the hypothesis, but they do recognise that family life has changed and that even though 78% of families in Britain are nuclear families the percentage of lone parents and reconstituted families has increased quite substantially over the years. This could be due to people's financial situation, careers, compatibility and attitudes towards the family. Also pressure of staying in a relationship from both partner and family along with the change in laws can cause the divorce rate to increase and put many people off from firstly getting married and then starting a family and settling down for the rest of their lives.

By Amareen Bhambra 11B.