

Assess the view that despite recent changes in family life today the conventional nuclear family remains the norm for families and households in Britain today

In sociology, there are many debates as to whether or not the nuclear family is still the norm in today's society. This essay will assess the theories and perspectives on this topical argument. There are many sociologists who see family diversity as a positive thing, including Giddens, Beck, Stacey, Weeks and The Rapoports. In contrast, Chester and New Right theorists think that family diversity is disrupting the stability of our society.

Giddens believes there is greater choice and more equal relationships between men and women within society today. Due to contraception, he argues that relationships are now often based on sex and intimacy rather than childbirth and producing a family. This would therefore reject the idea that the conventional nuclear family remains the norm, as fewer women are starting families but are in relationships for the sexual partnership. It could also suggest that cohabitation is overtaking the role and value of the traditional nuclear family.

In contrast to Giddens' pro-diversity views, New Right theorists argue that the family is in decline and losing its value within society. They say this is because there are higher divorce rates meaning more lone-parented families which, they contest, leads to delinquency in children. They claim that there are higher crime rates amongst youth now combined with failure within education. However, there is no clear evidence to show lone-parents cause delinquency.

New Right theorists challenge feminism and are opposed to same sex relationships. They say the nuclear family is the ideal and believe society must return to this family type. Feminist Anne Oakley argues that New Right theorists are wrong to assume that husbands' and wives' roles are fixed by biology. She argues these roles may in fact be shaped by society. Although the New Right say that the nuclear family is the norm they also believe the family is in decline and that other family and household types are becoming increasingly common.

The Rapoport are advocates of family diversity. They argue that it is vital for modern Britain because it embraces different cultures and lifestyles which is important in respecting everybody in society. Sociologists such as the new right theorists or functionalists challenge this view, saying that people function better in a nuclear family and learning to accept people in society can best be taught through primary socialisation. The Rapoport argue that there are five types of family diversity in modern society: organisational, cultural, social class, life stage and generational. They assert that the nuclear family is no longer the traditional, dominant family type, rejecting the view that it remains the norm for families and households in Britain today.

Robert Chester (1985) argues that changes have occurred in recent years from the conventional family to the neo-conventional family (a family in which both spouses work). This is similar to the symmetrical family studied by Willmott and Young. Chester says that people aren't choosing to live in a different style of family for long, and will still conspire to the nuclear family eventually. He believes that most people still prefer marriage and although cohabitation has increase, it is just a trial marriage. He is therefore against diversity within the family, agreeing with the view that the conventional nuclear family is still essentially the norm within society.

One sociologist, Cheal (1993) looks at both sides of the argument and doesn't actually place himself in either camp. He does however say that the family has become more diverse and there is no one single type of family or household that is dominant. Cheal says that there are no general norms and values directing family life. He does not necessarily agree with family diversity, because he says that there is greater risk of instability and there is now an increase in divorce because of this. However he says that there is an advantage with diversity because there is greater freedom for people to choose the family type they want and this flexibility enables the family to meet individual needs. On balance, Cheal's overall view on diversity undermines the argument that the nuclear family remains the norm in today's society.

To conclude, although statistics show that the nuclear family is still the most common family type in today's society, family diversity is on

the increase and there are many more lone-people households, same sex families, lone-parent families and reconstituted families. The claim that the nuclear family is the “the norm” is therefore difficult to justify, although it remains the most common family type in society today.