

## CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY INCLUDES A WIDE VARIETY OF FAMILY PATTERNS. DISCUSS WITH REFERENCE TO SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH.

The family has often been regarded as the cornerstone of society. In pre-modern and modern societies alike, it has been seen as the most basic unit of social organisation and one that carries out vital tasks such as socialising children. From the 1960s, an increasing number of critical thinkers began to question the assumption that the family was necessarily a beneficial institution. In the following decades the family was not just under attack from academic writers- social change also seemed to be undermining traditional families. Rising divorce rates, cohabitation before marriage, increasing numbers of single-parent families and single person households and other trends have all suggested that individuals may be basing their lives less and less around conventional families.

In 'World Revolution and Family Patterns' **William J. Goode** argues that many of the functions once performed by the family have been taken over by outside agencies such as schools, business and welfare organisations. This has greatly reduced the importance of the family in contemporary society. **Fletcher** however commences that the family has not lost functions for they were never performed to the standards of today. If any the family has more functions than before.

Today there is the emergence of the nuclear family. The extended family became a nuclear family due to space and privacy, and in an industrial society people need to move from one country to another for different/ better job opportunities. It is possible to move four members of a family from one country to another (nuclear family) rather than fifty members (extended family). **Talcott Parsons** says that the isolated nuclear family is the typical family in modern industrial society, since it does not form an integral part of a wider system of kinship relationships. However, sociologists' view of the family are no longer influenced by the idealised image of a perfect unit of members living in the same social space. Nowadays the family is influenced by the wider social structure and the cultural context. The idea that the family lives in isolation from the social context was largely plausible up to the mid-twentieth century. **Eugene Litwak** argues that a new term, the modified extended family, should be introduced to describe the typical family in modern industrial society. Litwak says that the modified extended family is a coalition of nuclear families in a state of partial dependence. Such partial dependence

means that the nuclear family members exchange significant services with each other, thus differing from the isolated nuclear family, as well as retaining considerate autonomy and therefore differing from the classical extended family.

**Young and Willmott's** study suggests that there has been a move towards the symmetrical family, in which there is greater sense of partnership between couples, where segregated roles are becoming integrated. This development of the joint family is the result of the improved status----- and rights of women which has forced men to accept them more as equals and the number of working women has increased women's independence and authority in the family. Also since women are spending more time outside their home this may have encouraged men to help more in the housework. In addition the decline of the extended family has meant that there is less pressure from the wider kin on newly married couple to maintain traditional roles. From Young and Willmott's research, it was found that 72% of husbands did housework. However, in this regard **Ann Oakley** stated that even men who made a very small contribution to housework would be included in this percentage. She found out greater equality in terms of allocation of domestic tasks between spouses in the middle class than in the working class. However, in both cases few men had a high level of participation in housework and childcare.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the family has become smaller and this led to more individual attention to each other. Since in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the typical working hours were 70-80 hours per week, while today it is about 44, this meant that parents have more time to spend with their children. As a result of higher standards of living more money can be spent on children and their activities (clothing etc.).

Today there has been a decline in average family size. This is due to more effective and cheaper methods of contraceptive have been developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and even societies' attitude towards them has changed. This change was also due to compulsory education and since the children have a drain on the resources of their family and as a result parents started to limit the size of their families. In addition the declining infant mortality rate has also helped in the decrease of family size since in the past parents had many babies so that hopefully some of them would survive. The changing position of women has led them to pursue a career of their own, rather to stay at home and take care of children. **Anthony Giddens** argues that today plastic sexuality has been developed, where sex can be freed from its association of childbirth altogether.

Another family pattern in contemporary society is the rise in divorce rate and high rates of re-marriage. Concerning marital breakdown **Gooder** has suggested that historically marriage was not based on love but was merely an economic relationship. **Shorter** on the other hand argues that capitalism brought about a degree of individual freedom from family and community pressures to conform. This enabled romantic love to develop and with it the potential emotional instability of marriage. The result of this is that the family becomes an emotional pressure cooker with propensity to explode. If the family fails to provide all the emotional and social needs, then the marriage breaks down. Unfortunately, women's increasing economic independence and the fact that men are no longer the sole earners in the household has led to the increase of divorce.

Today there has been an increase in single parenthood. Lone parenthood can come out through a number of different routes. People who have been married can become lone parents through divorce, separation and the death of the spouse. Lone parents who have never been married may have been living with the parent of the child when the child was born, but subsequently stopped living together, or may not have been living with the parent of the child when the child was born. This increase was mainly due to an increase of the rate of divorce and of unemployment and poverty. It was also because social attitudes towards the single parent family have changed and become more acceptable.

Other forms of family diversity have developed or become more prominent. Gay and lesbian households may have become more common place, certainly there are more openly gay and lesbian households than there were several decades ago. As **Jeffrey Weeks, Catherine Donovan and Brian Heaphey** argue, 'During the past generation the possibilities of living an openly lesbian and gay life have been transformed' (Weeks, Donovan and Heaphey, 1999). Many sociologists believe that such households, where they incorporate long-term gay or lesbian relationships, should be seen as constituting families. However this contrasts with **Murdock's** definition of the family which contains 'adult of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship'.

The types of families we know today are quite different from those of the past. This is due to the changes in family patterns. However to sum up once can still say that about 95% of the people still marry, and have a family, regardless to the what type of family this is.

*(1,277 words)*

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