

Contemporary society recognises the family as a 'Nuclear Family' with the father financially supporting the family and the mother (have to be married) looking after their children and their home. The Nuclear family is defined as "consists of two adults living together in a household with their own or adopted children." (Sociology, 391, 1993). However; due to changes over time including the invention of the pill, allowing both men and women to file for divorce without having to prove adultery and even religion not playing such an important part in peoples lives meant that changes in the family structure became more acceptable and the family has now evolved into a more complex and diverse institution. Prior to the war, it was the norm to be a part of a nuclear family. This family was a stable unit, as divorce was expensive and very much frowned upon. Divorces in 1947 were ten times the pre-war figure due to the legal Aid and Advice Act in 1949; this figure decreased again around 1969/1971 with the introduction of the divorce reform act. Reconstituted and lone parent families are becoming more common, gay and lesbian families are becoming more acceptable in today's society and in Asian areas around Britain, extended families are also growing. Even people who are unable to have children themselves, adoption or fostering is more available due to the decline in orphanages and is looked at as another family structure in society. These diversities are commonly accepted without question. This essay will explore the diversities from the Second World War on, and their possible causes.

Following the war, the nuclear family is accepted as the 'norm' and is even supported by television advertisements. Leach (1967) (cited in Haralambos) called this "the cereal packet family". These adverts would show the image of a happily married couple with their two children and aimed their products at this particular type of family. This concept of the nuclear family still exists; however as from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there are many more recognised different diverse family types. Study of family and marriage is one of the most important areas of sociological study; different sociologists argue the different functions and structures of the family. The level of interest in research varies according to the perspective. One of the leading areas of research following the war was that of the functionalists. The main premise for the functionalists is a macro approach. They construct theories to explain the whole of the human nature and social

institutions. They believe in a human analogy (society is like the human body) in that there is a knock on effect between institutions. One of the main institutions they studied was the family and they believe the family benefits society and performs basic functions. These functions vary depending on which functionalists view is looked at. A positivist approach was used to support these theories, this means that data collected is quantifiable and statistical. A leading theorist from the positivist school of thought is Comte who stated "The only knowledge is scientific knowledge." (Collins Dictionary of Sociology, 506, 1995). Therefore, functionalists rely on statistics to show trends of family diversity. Murdock a functionalist completed a study of 250 societies and came to the conclusion that all societies perform 4 basic functions, sexual, reproductive, economic, and educational. He believed without these functions society would breakdown, without reproductive functions society would have no members, the loss of economic functions would cause life to cease, lack of education would cause the loss of culture and without culture society would not function. Murdock has been criticised for his theories in his failing to examine alternatives to the nuclear family and stated it was too harmonious. Talcott Parsons undertook a similar study, but only on modern America and concluded that there were only 2 basic functions and that these would exist in all families in all societies. He noted the functions as being "primary socialisation of children" and the "stabilisation of the adult personalities of the population of society" Parsons was also criticised for failing to examine alternatives to the nuclear family, his idealization of the family, and failed to take into consideration any external factors. Morgan criticised him for failing to acknowledge classes, religion and ethnic status. Extended families are an extension of the nuclear family. Vertical includes the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation (Grandparents, parents, and children), and horizontal (brothers/sisters of parents, and their children). Functionalists Bell and Vogel define "the extended family as any grouping broader than the nuclear family which is related by descent, marriage or adoption" (Sociology Themes and Perspectives, 466, 2004). In modern society the functionalist theory can be supported by the article "He's gay, I'm not!" (See appendix). Although the concept of their proposed family appears diverse, the functions laid out by functionalists Parsons and Murdock seem achievable.

Another positivists approach to research is that of Marxism. There is little research to support Marxist views of the family, but one of the leading

theorists Engels, believed that the family evolved over time "During the early stages of human evolution, Engels believed the means of production were communally owned and the family as such did not exist" (Sociology Themes and Perspectives, 470, 2004). However his views are very primitive (1884). Although his theory is dated, it laid the foundations for Marxist and Socialist Feminist theories. More recent work on the Marxist theory is that of Eli Zaretsky (1976), he argues that "the family in modern capitalist society creates the illusion that the 'private life' of the family is quite separate from the economy" (Sociology Themes and Perspectives, 471, 2004). Although he believes this, he believes the capitalism is perpetuated by family consumption of the products, which keeps it going. He also believes the family to be an important tool in the capitalist economy, in that women provide a dual function as they reproduce future workforce and provide labour in the current workforce. However Jennifer Somerville (2000) criticises Zaretsky for "exaggerating the importance of the family as a refuge from life in a capitalist society" (Sociology Themes and Perspectives, 472, 2004) and "underestimating the extent of cruelty, violence, incest and neglect" (Sociology Themes and Perspectives, 472, 2004) within families. Somerville also argues "during the early stages of capitalism most working class women had to take paid work for the family to survive financially and relatively few stayed at home as a full-time house wife" (Sociology Themes and Perspectives, 472, 2004).

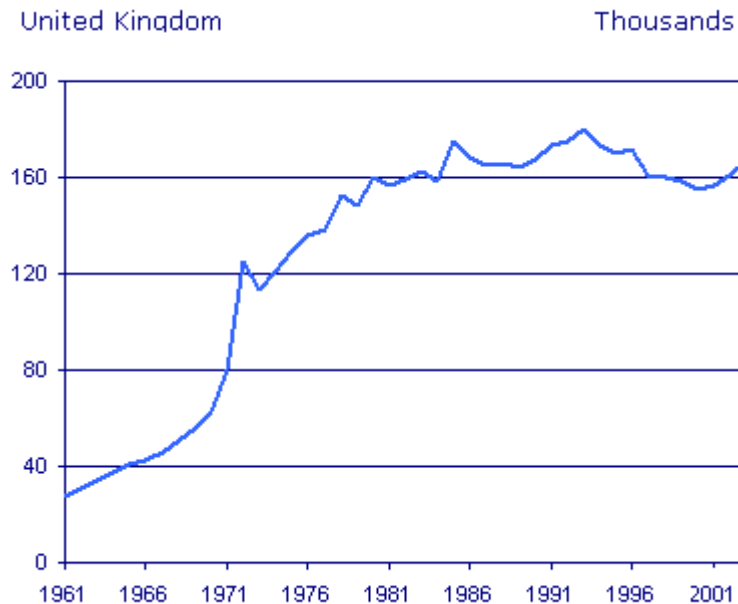
The nuclear family is also supported by the new right theorists who believe it is the ideal type of family, and is essential for the stability of society. They believe that to provide social order you would need two heterosexual white middle class parents. They argue that diverse families are unsatisfactory as adequate norms, morals, and socialisation are not provided. A major criticism with the new right theories is that there is little empirical evidence/research to support them. In contrast to the positivists approach is that of the interpretivists who adopt an idealistic approach. Leading work of interpretivism is that of Interactionists; a leading interactionist is George Herbert Mead who adopts a theoretical approach "places strong emphasis on the role of symbols and language as core elements of all human interaction" (Sociology, 764, 1993). Interactionists do not study the family as a unit, but focus more on individuals, and how they interact in society. They do not question family diversity as they accept families differ so much due to external factors. The article "He's gay, I'm

not!" would not be questioned by interactionists, as freedom of choice in modern society has allowed for diverse interaction. The nuclear family is defined as a two generation household of parents and their offspring. This family was seen as the ideal family and well adapted to the demands of modern societies. From the 1960's onwards Feminists and Marxists questioned whether the family was a beneficial institution and they began to expose the dark side of the family.

Feminist perspectives have varied strands of theories such as Marxist Feminists, Liberal Feminists and Radical Feminists; they state that the nuclear family benefits men only and reinforces male dominance, leaving women responsible for childcare and domestic work even if they are in paid work. Delphy and Leonard argue "we see the familial basis of domestic groups as an important element in continuing the patriarchal nature of our society: that is, in the continuance of men's dominance over women and children". (Sociology Themes and Perspectives, 474, 2004). However they fail in proving inequality is built into the structure of the family "They do not show theoretically or empirically that all families have a head who has more power than other family members, or that power is never shared equally between men and women" (Sociology Themes and Perspectives, 475, 2004). Feminists do tend to focus too much on the relationship between men and women and tend to ignore the external effect of other social structures.

Between 1961 and 2001; single parenthood has quadrupled from 2% to 8% according to government statistics and that figure is only exceeded in Europe by Denmark. This could be due to either the death of a spouse or more commonly divorce. Divorce rates dramatically increased around 1970 due to the introduction of the 1969 Divorce reform act. Divorce has an increasing impact on children's lives it has been estimated that "40% of children born in the UK in 1970 will at some stage before adulthood be members of a one-parent family." (Sociology, 404, 1993).

### Divorces Third successive annual increase



Divorces (Includes annulments. Data for 1961 to 1970 are GB only)

However separation figures are unreliable and unobtainable as some couples separate without going to court, and one of the methods of gaining statistics for separation is through the magistrates' court. Marital breakdown can be because of divorce/separation, couples living in empty shell marriages in which couples live together, but remain married in name only, conflict between couples, the value attached to marriage, and opportunities for individuals to escape from marriage. In modern society it is easier for couples to divorce due to the Divorce reform act 1971, also a new legislation in 1984 came into force changing the period of time in which a couple had to be married before they can divorce, and also altered the basis on which financial settlements were determined. Marriage is becoming less popular. Alternatives to marriage are now being developed by people. A popular alternative is cohabitation by couples who are not married. Between 1979 and 2001 the number of 18-49 year olds cohabiting has tripled from 11% to 33%. Patricia Morgan (1999) "sees this as a part of a worrying trend in which marriage is going out of fashion and the family is in serious decline"

(Sociology Themes and Perspectives, 518, 2004) However Chester argues "in most cases cohabitation is only a temporary phase: most of those who cohabit get married eventually" (Sociology Themes and Perspectives, 518, 2004).

Mixed race relationships were; and still in some societies very much frowned upon. The cultural life of Britain has been greatly enlarged by the mass immigrations of the 1950's and 60's.; ethnic groups are very much common place in the UK, more so inner cities like London and Birmingham. Many of these ethnic groups have contributed to family diversity in the UK today and some have succeeded in retaining many of the culturally distinctive features of their family life.

Postmodernists challenge all other theories as they believe that in modern society the type of family you have is a life style choice. A leading American sociologist; Judith Stacey (1996) believes "contemporary societies such as the USA have developed the post modern Family" (Sociology Themes and Perspectives, 534, 2004). She also argues "gay and lesbian families have also played a pioneering role in developing the postmodern family." (Sociology Themes and Perspectives, 535, 2004). According to Stacey's research 6-14 million children were being brought up by gay and lesbian families towards the end of the 1980's. But postmodernists tend to over emphasise on individuals and like the interactionists do not have any empirical evidence to support their arguments.

Many homosexual men and women live together as couples; some have even been formally blessed and married. According to Weeks (1999) lesbians and homosexuals see their chosen families as their close friends and households they live in. Donovan and Heaphy argue "During the past generation the possibilities of living an openly lesbian and gay family life have been transformed" (Sociology Themes and Perspectives, 496, 2004). A local newspaper recently published an article "He's gay, I'm not!" which appears to contradict the socially accepted view of the family, the article describes a couple who plan to marry and raise children like a traditional family, even though the female is heterosexual and the male is homosexual! Although on the surface this appears to contradict the definition of the traditional family; when examined closer it appears that the basic functions of the nuclear family are still achievable. Modern technology can be seen as

a cause for this diversity due to the introduction of artificial insemination and surrogate motherhood, which is what this couple plan to do to raise children.

So in conclusion, although the nuclear family is still around and popular in modern Britain it has been slightly adapted to changes both in society and in the house. People now have far more freedom to form the sort of family they prefer difference. As Britain is such a multi-cultural society with different races, religions and sexualities there are many more diverse families and with society how it is today there is much wider tolerance of diverse structures The families today are mainly typified by diversity.