

To what extent do sociologists agree that the married couple family is no longer the typical family?

Facts tell us that there is a huge increase in family diversity since the 1950s. Since 1971 there has been a huge decrease of married couples with dependant children from 35% of all households in Britain to 23% in 2002. There has also been a corresponding increase in single person households from 6% in 1971 to 10% in 2002. The married couple family is undoubtedly also under threat now with around 40% of marriages ending in divorce. This has increased steadily throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century although the rate appeared to stabilise during the 1990s.

It is strongly argued by some sociologists that marriage is becoming much less popular. This is echoed by the statistics that say that the marriage rate has declined. The decline according to sociologist Jon Bernades is not due to lack in marriage but more due to the increasing average age that people get married. He points out however that most people do marry at some point in their life. This may suggest that the reasons people do marry have changed. Some may argue that the family is no longer the child rearing agent for capitalism that Marxists believe it is.

However, others argue that these couples that are marrying late are still reproducing because of the breakthrough medical science allowing women to have children at a later age. This also could be because of the vast increase in the amount of women in the workplace resulting in women becoming more career-minded and also out of financial necessity and are therefore waiting until a certain advanced point in their career before settling down to get married and have children.

The increase in family diversity is also believed to be because of the rise in the lone-parenthood. This increased in lone-parenthood could be as a result of the acceptance that pregnancies do not have to be legitimised by marriage. This is backed up by the fact that 8% of all children were born outside of marriage in 1970 which rose to 41% in 2004. It also could be because of the financial ability to leave a marriage because of increasingly generous state benefits for the single parent. This argument could also be a factor in the rise of divorce rates and therefore decrease in the amount of married couple families in Britain today.

However, the recent census said that still only 7% of families are lone-parent families whereas 22% of families have two parents either in marriage or cohabiting.

Another reason why people are marrying at a later age is because of the rise in acceptance of cohabitation before marriage which is Britain's most common type of cohabitation. Trial marriages mean there are fewer marriages because people may realise while cohabiting that they are not right for each other and therefore decide not to marry but they may have had children which is another factor towards the increase in lone-parenthood. Trial marriages also mean there are less divorces because people know that they can definitely stay together in marriage if they decide to marry. However, some of these couples may decide that marriage is too expensive and decide to just cohabit.

Although most arguments for greater diversity suggest that there have been a vast amount of changes in the structure of families in Britain, the census in 2001 says that of all families with children in the UK 70% were married couple families. This is conclusive that the married couple family is still the typical family in Britain today.