

Families and Intimate Relationships



What are the most significant social changes that have eroded the dominance of the traditional nuclear family?

Throughout Chapter 9 the diversity of family forms is emphasized and the point made that most sociologists prefer to use the term 'families' to capture this diversity. This question makes the assumption that the concept of a singular family – the family – previously taken to be the nuclear type, is less relevant amidst this growing diversity of family forms.

A family is defined as 'a group of persons directly linked by kin connections, the adult members of which assume responsibility for caring for children' and 'kin' are those linked by marriage or blood relationships (p. 331). The chapter contains many examples of different forms that fall within this definition – single-parent families, extended families (often associated now with some minority ethnic groups) and reconstituted families where children are raised across two households. There are also households which do not fit the definition but would still see themselves as families. For example many families exist outside marriage through heterosexual, gay and lesbian cohabitation or civil partnership. The children raised within these households may not be biologically related to one or both of the adults in the household. There are also increasing numbers of households that contain childless individuals and couples. The chapter does, then, contain ample evidence of the diversity of forms, which families and households can take and your first task in this essay is to describe this variation. Rehearsing this evidence establishes the proposition that the dominance of the nuclear family has been significantly challenged, thus setting the scene for your explanation in terms of social changes.

Which social changes you consider most significant is a decision that should be made on the basis of your assessment of the empirical evidence described in the chapter, but there are two ways of going about this. One is to select only what you see as the three most significant factors and explain how these have eroded the dominance of the nuclear family. For example, one important factor is the long-term change in gender relations, particularly the decline in patriarchal power within families (p. 337). The broad movement towards greater equality for women has profoundly transformed the institution of marriage, changed attitudes towards women in formal work outside the home, and brought about new arrangements for the care of children. A second factor is increasing migration flows across cultures and the creation of multicultural societies in which the nuclear family is but one type (pp. 340-41). You might focus on the different family forms associated with South Asian and/or African-Caribbean families in order to illustrate the argument here. A third factor might be the increasing popularity of alternatives to marriage and traditional family life, evidenced in lone-parent families, cohabitation, gay and lesbian relationships and civil partnerships, as well as people choosing to live as singles. In this way, the question is addressed in a very literal and structured way which should work well.



However, if you are feeling a little more ambitious, you could structure the argument thematically according to Rapoport et al's five types of diversity: organizational, cultural, class, life-course and cohort (p. 339-40). This would be more challenging but would provide a broader analysis of the ways on which families are now patterned across these five basic dimensions. Remember though, that you must always answer the question set, which, in this case, means arriving at an assessment of which changes in which domains of diversity have had the most impact on family life.