

Thatcher (1987) claimed that ‘there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families’ Critique Thatcher’s (1987) statement above from a modern-day perspective.

The Beveridge report of 1942 ensured it was a legal requirement within Great Britain to provide ‘cradle to grave’ care (Beveridge, 1942). Following the report, British government became greatly concerned with ensuring a state system was in place that protected the health and wellbeing needs of its citizens, particularly those most at risk of poverty and deprivation (Fine, 2007). However, between the 1970’s and 90’s shift in government paradigm concerning the state provision and its utility in practice began to establish and Thatcherite ideology compromised the future of care for everyone in need and the post-war welfare state (Alcock and May, 2014).

Thatcherism, as it is now coined in the contemporary world, can be characterised by a synthesis of neo-liberal and neo-conservative ideologies; a period of focal concern into economic policy making and commitment into sanctity of the individual and of individual choice (Farrall and Hay, 2014). Neo-Liberalism itself, is underpinned by ideological objection of perceived dependency culture and the perverse incentives established by the welfare state. Meaning, neo-liberalist’s, like Margret Thatcher – first female prime minister of Great Britain – argue that providence of services through the welfare state only discourages individuals and families in turn, from fending and providing for themselves (Alcock and May, 2014).

Functionalist theory understands society to be made up of a variety of smaller systems, systems which are interconnected. This perception is underpinned by the idea that to understand a certain aspect of society such as the family, it must be considered in relation to society, for example, understanding the impact family has and the contribution it makes to society, believing that if one system were to fail, society would essentially begin to breakdown (Giddens, 2009). Functionalists perceive family to be one of the most important functions within society, and like Thatcher and the conservative model of the family, theorists such as Murdock and Parsons recognise the nuclear family to be most positive in ensuring social order and positive social reproduction (Parsons, 1951; Murdock, 1949).

Thatcher argued ‘there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and their families’ and therefore believed that individuals and families were responsible for their own prosperity, or conversely their own failures (Thatcher, 1987). Identifying family to be the real foundation of society, responsible for ensuring future social order and economic growth

(Dean and Taylor-Gooby, 2014). This assignment aims to critically discuss Thatcher's famous quote, while focusing on how family diversity has affected breakdown of social norms and values; dependency culture the notion of the underclass and the Universal Credit benefit system and its utility in the COVID-19 global pandemic (Chambers, 2015; Murray, 1989; Brewer and Gardiner, 2020).

Having established that functionalist theory recognises structure to be a vital function in ensuring society operates smoothly (Giddens, 2009), it appears imperative to also recognise that since around the 1960's patterns of family structure have reformed dramatically, and the notion of the conservative traditional family is declining rapidly (Jenkins and Evans, 2009). It goes without saying that this breakdown of traditional social norms will in turn, have consequences on society (Chambers, 2015). This section of this assignment will focus on the changing role of the family within society, and the effects family diversity has had on society, focussing on single parenthood and its effects.

Traditionally, the nuclear family construct was perceived as the most positive family structure, this construct consisting of a man and wife and his children (Murdock, 1949). Functionalist theorists deemed that the nuclear family was best for primary socialisation of children and ensuring stabilisation of adult personalities, both factors regarded as essential in reproduction of social order (Parsons, 1959). The nuclear family was favoured by Margret Thatcher and is also perceived as the conservative model of the family, Thatcher often remarked that family breakdown would result in societal breakdown (Douglas, 1990). Within the traditional nuclear family clear gender roles are usually assigned, meaning, the man's role would be instrumental, providing financially for his family and the woman's role would be expressive, meaning she was responsible for the emotion work of the household, and the unpaid domestic and care tasks (Parsons, 1959; Young and Wilmott, 1973; Duncombe and Marsden, 1995).

Feminist theorists contest the traditional nuclear structure, establishing, that it is underpinned by male patriarchy and power (Allen, 2016). Feminists claim the nuclear family sets oppressive roles for women, hindering them from reaching their full potential in society and the wider world (Few-Demo and Allen, 2020). Explaining that the structure subjects' women to be nothing more than unpaid, unappreciated housewives (Frieden, 1963).

However, family structure has been continuously changing and since the 1950's advancements in legislation and policy, decline in religion, accessibility to contraception, women's greater

participation in employment and changing social norms and attitudes have all contributed to the decline of the traditional family and establishment of a diverse range of family and household structures (Jenkins and Evans, 2009). In the contemporary world, family as a term has become more ambiguous and means different things to different people (Giddens, 2009). The Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2019, a) reveals that in modern societies, a family can consist of a heterosexual or homosexual relationship, who are married, cohabitating or in a civil partnership, this couple may have children or may not. However, a family could also be a single or lone mother or father and their children or even a family who lives with grandparents and grandchildren within a household (ONS, 2019, a).

Changing legislation and social attitude on divorce and having children outside of marriage is one of the biggest factors contributing to increased family diversity and particularly increase in lone parenthood and single mother families (McCarthy and Edwards, 2011). This can be considered result of major legislative changes such as the *Divorce Reform Act (1969)*, *Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act (1984)* and the *Family Law Act (1996)*, acts like these made it considerably easier to leave an unhappy marriage, also removing the need for matrimonial offence, in turn meaning people could leave marriages based on terms of unhappiness. Before these acts, adultery or violence would have had to have occurred for a couple to be considered for divorce (Giddens, 2009). Subsequently, the stigma surrounding divorce was reduced on a meso scale in the UK, as it was on a macro scale in the rest of the western world (Chambers, 2015; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

In turn, the UK has seen a significant rise in lone parent families, as well as a rise in teenage pregnancy and cohabitation outside of marriage (McCarthy and Edwards, 2011). In 1961 only around 2 percent of households in the UK consisted of lone parent households (HMSO, 2002 cited in Giddens, 2009), however in 2019, this figure has risen to nearly fifteen percent, a significant increase, ninety percent of these families being female headed (ONS, 2019, a).

Legislation such as the *Sex Discrimination Act (1987)* and the *Equality Act (2010)* has also subconsciously led to rise in family diversity. These protective pieces of legislation, which protect women from being denied employment based on their sex, in turn, mean women can become less reliant on husbands or male counterparts financially to provide for their families (Giddens, 2009). However, regardless of the introduction of such legislations, women were and are still more likely to earn significantly less than men, and lone mothers are likely to obtain employment in low-skilled and low-paid work in sectors such as cooking, cleaning or

care. Subsequently this created new and unique demands on the welfare state (Dewar and Clery, 2019; Morris and Munt, 2019). Single parenthood, welfare dependency and the notion of the underclass has become a subject of concern both in politics and in discourse (Dean and Taylor-Gooby, 2014), this will be critically examined in the next section of this assignment.

In relation to Thatcher's famous quote (1987), when considering society, it may be more appropriate, not to evaluate whether society exists, but, whether the notion of social security and welfare benefit has become too accessible and has created a culture of dependency, leading to a subculture of individuals which rely solely on society and the welfare state to get by (Davies, 2012). Therefore, since the 1970's and still in the contemporary world – despite Thatcher's best efforts - poverty, unemployment and inequality are major concerns for policy makers. Additionally, the notion of an underclass and determination of who constitutes as deserving or undeserving poor are contemporary issues in both social and political discourse (Wiggan, 2012).

Margret Thatcher's time as Prime minister in the 1980's saw the breakdown of political consensus on welfare, and its utility in practice. One of Thatcher's priorities was to roll back the welfare state, and to subsequently counteract the dependency culture which existed (Giddens, 2009). Arguing that the system in place at the time allowed individuals such as working age, young people to become indeterministic and dependent on the very system which was invented to support the most vulnerable and susceptible to poverty in society (Alcock and May, 2014). Thatcher's government implemented a series of reforms which focussed on shifting the welfare responsibility from the public sector to the private. Pierson (1994) established that although, some success can be noted, objectively, Thatcher had failed in implementing the full welfare state retrenchment she and the Conservative party had wished for. Additionally, plethora of social systems survived the new right governments attempt to overturn them (Starke, 2020). Pierson also argues that, these reforms in turn resulted in rise in inequality and expansion of the disparities between the affluent and the poor and contributed to significant increase in the number of individuals living in poverty in the UK (Pierson, 1994; Giddens, 2009).

In the contemporary world the notion of benefit and welfare dependency can still be considered a pressing and contested issue, particularly, when considering families which no longer fit in the traditional family structures, such as lone mother families and teenage parent families (Griffiths, 2017). Lone mother families are more common now in the UK than ever before and

subsequently there has been a significant decline in married two parent families (ONS, 2019), as explained previously this can be result of decline in religion and rise in divorce and due to women playing a more active role in the labour market (Giddens, 2009). Conversely, some more radical sociologists claim that the rise in lone parenting is due to the generous welfare system in the UK (Graham and McQuaid, 2014).

American sociologist Charles Murray (1989) claimed that lone parenting was result of the generous welfare state which exists and from this notion a new stratum of society has been formed, this being described as the underclass. Claiming that the welfare policies available to lone mothers, allow women in contemporary society to independently support and raise her children, displacing the need for present male counterparts and in turn, displacing traditional family structures which were favoured by Thatcher (Griffiths, 2017). He perceived children born illegitimately or who grow up without a present father figure are likely to never be employed or have stable employment, rely on the welfare state and live a life which involves criminal and anti-social activity (Murray, 1989 & 1994).

Underclass is the term used often to describe the section of society that subsists at the bottom of the assumed class structure. Characteristics of Murray's underclass would be unemployment, welfare dependent, crime, and poverty (Giddens, 2009). However, Murray explained the underclass does not refer to a classification of poverty, but behaviours associated with a specific subculture people in poverty, where laziness, alcohol and substance misuse and delinquency was common (Murray, 1989 *cited in* Haralambos, 2013). This perhaps suggesting, in relation to Thatcher's quote (Thatcher, 1987), that society does exist, but that welfare dependency itself and many of the families, individuals and groups which exist within this notion of dependency, create a subculture of society, the underclass (Griffiths, 2017).

Many sociologists in contrast consider Murray's notion of the underclass in a more sympathetic manner, viewing this stratum of society as socially excluded from the means and services needed to succeed and prosper which leaves them vulnerable to deprivation, poor standards of living and poverty. This perspective views the structural social inequalities which exist in society to be at blame, these sociologists often contest Murray's theory of the underclass claiming viewing their failures in terms of individual failure is purely victim blaming (Walker, 1990 *cited in* Haralambos, 2013). Also, it is apparent that existent research focuses to heavily on the most deprived lone parent families which reside in areas of persistent poverty (Griffiths, 2017). Subsequently, ignoring well educated, prosperous and successful lone mothers who

have made conscious choices to become lone mothers and are neither reliant on welfare benefits nor the welfare state (Klett-Davies, 2012). Despite this, in 2019, the UK unemployment rate was at an all time low, the lowest it had been since the war, it can be said that one reason for this was the introduction of Universal Credit (UC) and its underpinning incentives for work (ONS, 2019, b).

In the UK, UC is the current system of welfare benefit, which aims to combine six means tested benefits into a single payment system (Department for Work and Pensions, 20120), it is designed to promote the idea of moving away from welfare dependency and promoting how for able people of working age, employment is the most positive and efficient route out of poverty (Griffiths, 2017). The UC system comes with a compulsory job search obligation and when regarding lone parents, this means they must stay in touch with their local job centre and remain committed to becoming active members of the labour market, in failing this they will be penalised. With these initiatives in place the idea is that the financial gap between non-working and working lone parent households will significantly expand (Davies, 2010).

Churchill (2011) explains initiatives in policies such as UC works to encourage and promote specific social norms and values, this in turn should increase better practice of socially desired and acceptable behaviour, such as working. This idea being underpinned by the idea that employment creates better sense of social inclusion, security and better health and social outcomes for not only parents in the short term, but their children in the long term (Davies, 2012). The next section of this essay will look at how the current COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant increase of strain on families in terms of finance, and the way UC has aimed to support individuals and families during this crisis.

Currently in 2020, on a macro scale globally, on a meso scale across the UK and on a micro scale at individual level, a health and economic crisis is being experienced (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Brewer and Gardiner, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has meant that a plethora of economic sectors across the UK have been forced to shut down, resulting in many individuals and families losing their means of household income, or having to obtain this income at a reduced level. The pandemic also means that a significantly higher proportion of the population must rely on the welfare state (Brewer and Tasseva, 2020). The amount of UC claims rose by approximately 1.2 million in during the first four weeks of the economic calamity, emphasising the extent of crisis (Brewer and Handscomb, 2020).

Like many other countries across the globe, in response to the crisis, the UK government released a variety of policies in the attempt to protect people's financial circumstance in the event of not being able to go to work, also changes to the social security system were made (Brewer and Tasseva, 2020). One of the most notable alterations was a twenty-pound increase in the standard allowance of UC payment. It is notable, that when considering the pandemic, the increase of UC payment was the same for all family types, with no additional assistance for those families with children or those who were single parents, it is also notable that the amount received in UC payments would have been significantly lower than one's employment income in many circumstances (Brewer and Gardiner, 2020). Also, families with more than sixteen thousand pounds of savings were not entitled to accessing this support at all. Thus, suggesting that such an economic shock hinders the social security systems ability to function as a safety net for all (Brewer and Handscombe, 2020).

The effects of the pandemic at an individual level for families can be perceived as catastrophic (Brewer and Handscombe, 2020). It must be understood that even with adequate benefits available the challenges of the pandemic meant that children are home from school. Particularly for those parents living on UC, who rely on free school meals to ensure their children are provided with two meals a day and the Trussell Trust establish a significant rise in reliance on food banks to ensure families were able to eat (Brewer and Tavessa, 2020). Thus, emphasising the health and social effects of social isolation and lockdowns on families even given the policies which were established to protect people during this period. The pandemic also means a shift must be taken from the initial incentives of UC which focuses on its purpose on seeking employment, in the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic this appears both unrealistic and unfeasible (Brewer and Handscomb, 2020).

Brewer and Gardiner (2020) suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic offers significant lessons moving forward for policy makers. Establishing, that the focus in the future for policy makers must concentrate on those families and individuals in society with low or no incomes. They explain that for economic recovery policy to be affected it must not focus on those it affects the least and instead of providing a universal approach for all, ensure that the differentiated effects of crisis on groups in society is considered to ensure preventing long-term deprivation and poverty and ultimately a long-term living standard crisis (Brewer and Handscomb, 2020).

Conclusively, it does appear that the functionalist view of society can be said to be true in many ways, as it is clear with the breakdown of family structure has led to breakdown in work ethic incentives to work (Giddens, 2009).

However, in relation to Thatcher's quote (1987), it appears that in the contemporary world it may be impossible to fend entirely for one's self and family, and the incentives for work which underpin the UC system appear to appear to be successful when looking at 2019's unemployment rate (ONS, 2019, b). The UC is underpinned by many neoliberal and neoconservative ideals, which suggests the UC would have had Thatcher's approval (Alcock and May, 2014).

Although welfare dependency is still a pressing issue in the modern world, it is apparent that existent policies such as UC are working to overturn and combat this issue (Churchill, 2011). In the absence of such policies, and due to the stigmas, which exist, it would be extremely difficult - particularly for single parents and teenage mothers and Murray's perceived underclass - to make any attempt at escaping the viscous cycle of poverty (Giddens, 2019; Murray, 1989).

It is also notable, that although individuals and families are encouraged to create their own prosperity and success (Thatcher, 1987), in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic this is unrealistic and unlikely, and families find themselves in a position where they rely on help from the welfare state more than ever before. Especially in times of crisis it does appear that society exists, although it may no longer look or behave the way Thatcher would have wanted, it is apparent that the welfare state is essential, especially during a global pandemic, and especially for the most deprived in society (Brewer and Handscomb, 2020).

References

- Alcock, P and May, M (2014) *Social Policy in Britain*. 4th ED. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Allen, K, R (2016) 'Feminist Theory in Family Studies: History, Reflection, and Critique' *Journal of Family Theory and Review*. 8(2), pp. 207-224. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12133> (Accessed: 15.December.2020)
- Beveridge, W. (1942). Social Insurance and Allied Services (The Beveridge Report). London: HMSO.

- Brewer, M. and Gardiner, L., 2020. The initial impact of COVID-19 and policy responses on household incomes. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 36(Supplement_1), pp. S187-S199. Available at: https://academic.oup.com/oxrep/article/36/Supplement_1/S187/5863392 (Accessed: 29. December. 2020)
- Brewer, M and Handscomb, K. (2020), 'This Time is Different—Universal Credit's First Recession: Assessing the Welfare System and its Effect on Living Standards during the Coronavirus Epidemic', *Resolution Foundation*, May.
- Brewer, M and Tasseva, I, V (2020) *Did the UK policy response to Covid-19 protect household incomes?* Working Paper: CeMPA WP 6/20. Available at: <https://finchley.essex.ac.uk/research/publications/working-papers/cempa/cempa6-20.pdf> (Accessed: 29. December. 2020)
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Chambers, D (2015) *A Sociology of Family Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Churchill, H. (2011) *Parental rights and responsibilities: Analysing policy and service user perspectives*. Bristol: Polity Press.
- Davies, L (2012) Lone parents: unemployed or otherwise engaged? *People, Place and Policy Online*, 6(1) pp. 16 – 28 Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3351/ppp.0006.0001.0003> (Accessed: 14. December. 2020)
- Dean, H and Taylor-Gooby, P (2014) *Dependency Culture*. London: Routledge
- Department for Work and Pensions (2010) *Universal Credit: Welfare that Works*. London: HMSO
- Douglas, G (1990) 'Family Law under Thatcher Government' *Journal of Law and Society*. 17(4) pp. 411-426. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1409899> (Accessed: 03/December/2020).
- Divorce Reform Act* (1969, c. 55) Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1969/55/contents/enacted> (Accessed on: 01/12/2020)

Duncombe, J and Marsden, D ‘Women’s “triple shift”: paid employment, domestic labour and “emotion work”’ *Sociology Review* 4(4) pp. 221-242

Equality Act (2010, c. 15) Available at: [Equality Act 2010 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/42/contents) (Accessed: 21.December.2020)

Farrall, S. and Hay, C (2014) *The Legacy of Thatcherism*. Oxford: Published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press.

Few-Demo, A, L and Allen, K, R (2020) ‘Gender, Feminist, and Intersectional Perspectives on Families: A Decade in Review’ *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 82(1), pp. 326-345
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12638> (Accessed: 15/December/2020)

Friedan, B. (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*. London: Victor Gollancz.

Giddens, A (2009) *Sociology*. 6th ED. Cambridge: Polity Press

Graham, H and McQuaid, R (2014) *Exploring the impacts of the UK government’s welfare reforms on lone parents moving into work*. Available at: https://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/0000/4284/Lone_parents_Literature_Review_web.pdf (Accessed: 22.December.2020)

Griffiths, R (2017) ‘No Love on the Dole: The Influence of the UK Means-tested Welfare System on Partnering and Family Structure’ *The Journal of Social Policy*. 46(3), pp. 543-561. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279417000046> (Accessed: 22.December.2020)

Haralambos, M (2013) *Haralambos & Holborn Sociology*. London: Collins.

Jenkins, S, Pereira, I and Evans, N (2009) *Families in Britain: the impact of changing family structures*. Policy Exchange. Available at: <https://www.policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/families-in-britain-apr-09.pdf> (Accessed: 19.November.2020)

Klett-Davies, M, M. (2012), *Going it alone? Lone motherhood in late modernity*, London: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act (1984, c.42) Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1984/42> (Accessed: 16.December.2020)

- McCarthy, J, R and Edwards, R (2011) *Key Concepts in Family Studies* London: SAGE Publications
- Morris, C and Munt, S, R (2019) 'Classed formations of shame in white, British single mothers'. *Feminism & Psychology*, 29 (2). pp. 231-249. Available at: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/75251/> (Accessed: 21.December.2020)
- Murdock, GP (1949) *Social Structure*, New York: Macmillan.
- Murray, C (1989) 'Underclass' *Sunday Times Magazine*. 26 November
- Murray, C (1994) *Underclass: The Crisis Deepens*, IEA, London.
- Office for National Statistics (2019, a) *Families and households in the UK: 2019* Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2019> (Accessed: 24.November.2020)
- Office for National Statistics (2019, b) *Labour market overview, UK: December, 2019*. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/uklabourmarket/december2019> (Accessed: 04.January.2021)
- Parsons, T (1951) *The Social System*. Free Press: New York
- Parsons, T (1959) *The Family: its Functions and Destiny*. New York: Harper & Row
- Pierson, C (1994) *Dismantling the Welfare State?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Sex Discrimination Act (1975, c.65)* Available at: [Sex Discrimination Act 1975 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1975/75/section/1). (Accessed: 21.December.2020)
- Starke, P (2020) *What is Retrenchment?* Available at: <file:///C:/Users/loisr/Downloads/StarkeChapter3WhatIsRetrenchment.pdf> (Accessed: 21.December.2020)
- Thatcher, M (1987) 'Interview for "Woman's Own" ("No Such Thing as Society").' in *Margaret Thatcher Foundation: Speeches, Interviews and Other Statements*. London. Available at: <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689> (Accessed: 10. December. 2020)
- Wiggan, J (2012) 'Telling stories of 21st century welfare: The UK Coalition government and the neo-liberal discourse of worklessness and dependency' *Critical Social Policy*. 32(3)

pp. 383-405 Available at: <https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/doi/pdf/10.1177/0261018312444413> (Accessed: 14.December.2020)

Young, M and Wilmott, P (1973) *The Symmetrical Family*. Penguin: Harmondsworth