

***Select three different constructs of ‘family’.
Critically explore how an ‘individual’ can be located within these structures.***

Introduction

The purpose of this assessment is to examine the role of an individual within three different family constructs, all of which will be demonstrated through illustrative examples in the appendices. It will explore theories of how family constructs are defined, how they have progressed, as well as identify potential developments that may have impacted on the individual’s role. This assignment will also draw attention to policies and legislation that may have influenced – *or been introduced as a result of* – evolving family structures. The focus throughout these three case studies will centre the role of the father.

To understand family constructs, it is important to understand how a family unit itself is defined. Sharma (2013) suggests that census information provides an insight into family structure, but across countries – *and perhaps more importantly across cultures* – perceptions will vary and what one culture may view as a family, will often be seen very differently in another. Unless there is interrelationship between how these individuals function emotionally, financially and socially, then it could be argued that it is simply a household. Weigel (2008), acknowledges the contentious nature of defining family and makes an important distinction in how a scientist may perceive a family, such as a botanist referring to a ‘family’ of plants because of certain defining characteristics, as opposed to perhaps a soldier who may refer to other members of their regiment as their ‘family’.

Construct 1

The first family construct this assignment will explore has become known as the ‘Nuclear’ family (see Appendix 1). According to Cornell (1990), the concept of the modern nuclear family has been at the forefront of family sociology since the early 1950s, characterised by its composition consisting of father, mother and dependent children (as seen in Appendix 1). There has been, they suggest, an expectation by most family sociologists from the post-war period until recent years that the majority of families would comprise of this format, for at least a portion of the family’s duration. Uzoka (1979) however, inferred the largely western concept of the nuclear family as a functioning cohesive unit is wholly inadequate. Portraying families in such a homogenous, stereotypical manner serves only to impede clinical

understanding of family frameworks. Although predominantly a western phenomenon, Rawat (2014) suggests that although nuclear families are often viewed as patriarchal, there has been an increase in nuclear families in India in recent times, driven by educational and employment incentives. This, they infer, has led to a reduction in the patriarchal influence, with a weakening of the male dominance and greater opportunity for what is referred to as 'Eve' empowerment (Rawat, 2014, p. 46).

Losing the multigenerational influence on the nuclear family can have a profound effect. Klever (2015) refers to the Bowen (1978) hypothesis that multigenerational influence is an essential source of stability, and suggests that emotional interaction is key factor in functionality. Reducing the contact with extended family may increase independence but elevates anxiety, putting pressure on the parent. The emotional distance that is created with extended family can also manifest in the relationship between parent and child. Ranson and Urichuk (2008) propose that as a result of societal norms, parental attachment to father figures in the nuclear family has been historically problematic, largely due to the mother adopting the traditional role of primary caregiver. Conversely, a study by Sebastião *et al.* (2020) revealed that as analysis of the role of the father has become more prevalent, the importance of effective communication was now more apparent. Families where fathers participated in caring responsibilities, undertook chores and showed a higher level of engagement, reported far lower instances of behavioural problems.

Emotional attachment is of course not the only issue associated with the nuclear family structure and the prevalence of Intimate-partner violence (IPV) has been well documented (Tur-Prats, 2015). An estimated 30% of women around the world have experienced domestic violence within a relationship, with traditional family structure being one of the most important underlying factors. Gender inequality meant that fathers were traditionally seen as the 'breadwinners' or principle providers, whilst the role of the mother was generally more domestic. This disparity between paid and unpaid work is perhaps why the male provider assumes the more powerful, dominant role. Krishnan *et al.* (2010) found a compelling link between employment status and domestic violence. Women that enhanced their employment status – *and in turn, their empowerment* – reduced their dependency on their husbands but were also more likely to experience IPV as a result of the shift in power dynamics, hypothesising that this was potentially a reaction by the male head of house figure, to the perceived threat to their authority.

Esping-Andersen (2009, pp. 12-15) theorises that the view held by many feminists that marriage will eventually become irrelevant is somewhat unlikely, but that equilibrium will continue to be sort through policy and legislation. The post-war boom with full employment and rising wages gave rise to the male-breadwinner, nuclear family structure but in a more modern context with changing economics and the spread of globalisation, the landscape was beginning to look very different. Jarvis (2010) however, highlighted how the UK had fallen behind the rest of Europe in terms of maternity rights and was the only member state not to offer full statutory maternity pay when they commissioned their annual report in 1988. It was not until 2003 that fathers were eventually granted paid paternity leave and in 2010, this was extended to six months, allowing men to effectively assume the parental role in those early years.

Although policies have enabled a shift in family structure, Rubery (2011) argues that it is perhaps economic recession that has been the primary driving factor in moving away from the role of traditional male provider. The late 70s and early 80s saw a reduction in the male-dominated industrial sectors, at a time when more women sought employment to subsidise the household income. Statistics, according to Conger, Conger and Martin (2010), indicate that socioeconomics are also a highly influential aspect in family cohesion, with higher household incomes reported in nuclear families, as opposed to lone-parent households. Jenkins, Pereira and Evans (2009) suggest the issue is multifaceted, citing the feminisation of the workforce, contraception, delaying the decision as to when to start a family and changing attitudes to marriage and divorce. More couples they report are choosing to co-habit and they also draw attention to changes in legislation that has given rise to alternative family structures, such as civil partnerships.

Construct 2

DeGroff (2017) puts forward the idea that society views family as being binary restrictive, as well as culturally normative but when it comes to adoption and other alternative family structures, many cultures still reserve the use of term ‘family’ for those with biological parents and in some cases, only those born through natural childbirth. Exploring these nuances and how they affect the role of the father, will be the focus of this second construct; the Adoptive Family (see Appendix 2).

Rueter *et al.* (2009) believe the role an adoptive father plays can vary greatly, dependent in no small part upon the age and background of the child they adopt. An adolescent for instance will often encounter adjustment issues, whereas with an infant, the focus may initially be one of promoting attachment. Despite more modern approaches to parenting, the traditional roles of father as disciplinarian and mother as the nurturing caregiver can all too often be assumed. Yogman and Garfield (2016) broadly define a father to be the male with the majority of care giving responsibility, be that biological, foster or adoptive father. They suggest a new form of 'fatherhood' has emerged in recent years, one where fathers are more involved and are more able to find a balance between work and home life, as well as rise in the number of stay-at-home fathers. The changes, they infer, have been enabled by a combination of welfare policies, socioeconomics and opportunities in academic study for mature students.

Foster and adoptive families are not always viewed as a traditional family construct but from a sociological perspective they can still be seen as the atypical nuclear family. In fact, studies show that adoptive families are more likely to live within a nuclear family environment than their non-adoptive counterparts, with the exception of those from an ethnic minority background (Thomas and Larson Gibby, 2019). Historically – *at least in western culture* – adoptive parents were typically white, middleclass, infertile couples but Bornstein (2019) states that in much the same way as the characteristics of adoptive children has evolved, so too has the demographics for those adopting. The change in attitudes has meant more opportunities for families from blue-collar and less affluent backgrounds to formally adopt.

With issues of multi ethnicity seen as less of a barrier to adoption, new challenges are presented in meeting the cultural needs of the child. Parekh (2010) believes that many prospective adopters, despite entering the adoption process with eyes seemingly wide-open, are not always prepared for the subtle and sometimes complex occurrences of racism that can be encountered. Friedlander (1999) recognises that for children entering an adoption placement, issues of identity can be extremely challenging and to then add other complexities such as multi ethnic culture, can exacerbate this further still. For an adoptive parent, this could present a unique challenge and one that would appear lacking in extensive research.

Conventional fatherly expectations can appear very different through the context of adoption though and as a new father, fulfilling the role of grief councillor is probably not anticipated

by many. In the experience of Eldridge (2020) however, dealing with the grief that follows the loss of family is crucial to forming attachment within the new family structure. Though the newly approved adoptive parents may be excited and looking forward to their new journey, supporting the child through the grieving period can awaken their own unresolved vulnerabilities such as; miscarriage, child mortality or issues of infertility. Freeark *et al.* (2008) propose that having experienced such tragic events as a miscarriage or a stillborn child, although traumatic, may actually strengthen their relationship and build resilience. The process of becoming a parent in a non-conventional manner – *as with adoption* – can also have a positive effect in accentuating co-parenting responsibility, re-dressing the balance of involvement between mother and father. The therapeutic approach to adoption in the UK has changed dramatically since the 1980s according to Clapton and Clifton (2016), who cite the transition from previous practice of ‘relinquishing’ children – *pre-1980* – to considering adoption to be not only a credible, but sometimes even a more desirable option in terms of permanent placement.

Construct 3

If adoption is in fact seen in a more favourable light, raising children as a lone parent (see Appendix 3) is still considered by many as anything but. Carroll (2019) suggests that despite single parent households accounting for one in four families, there remains a great deal of stigma surrounding lone parent families. Many mothers and fathers are reportedly apprehensive when it comes to revealing their status as a lone parent, particularly when meeting someone for the first time, for fear of being judged or stereotyped. Conversely, Dowd (1997) says that although being labelled a lone parent can invoke reactions of scepticism, pity, even disgust, it can also evoke admiration and sympathy. It would appear few choose to raise a child as a lone parent and the circumstances that lead to that situation are often traumatic and sometimes accompanied by issues of poverty, crime and delinquency. Interestingly, a study by Haire and McGeorge (2012) revealed a stark contrast in how lone parents were viewed, dependent very much upon their gender. Single mothers were generally viewed more negatively than single fathers and attitudes to single mothers appeared to be predominantly based on personal perceptions, whereas the attitudes to single fathers centred more on their situation.

One important factor that influences how single parents are viewed is their employment status. Dowd (1995) suggests single parents are unfairly stigmatised, not because their family structure is somehow dysfunctional, but because the legal framework is disproportionately skewed against families that do not fit the nuclear family stereotype. Policies surrounding the benefit system and also divorce legislation perpetuate and facilitate poverty and inequality, it was inferred. Avram, Brewer and Salvatori (2018) highlight recent policy reforms in the UK, aimed at encouraging more single parents back into employment and increasing their levels of workplace participation, which is historically quite low compared to two-parent households. The staggered rollout of these 'Lone Parent Obligations' reforms (LPOs), are intended to reduce the reliance on income support, but although initial findings suggest some parents have improved their standard of living, this is not true for all and many have found themselves worse off. Munn and Rocco (2008) argue that for lone parents, employment is simply not as practical for many of them as opposed to a working couple. Unless they have an extended network of support, unexpected events where the burden could otherwise be shared by another parent or partner, can suddenly become more challenging. Within a nuclear family, roles are often divided – *though interchangeable* – to enable a better work/life balance, allowing one parent the opportunity to work as provider, whilst the other manages childcare responsibilities. In a lone parent household, that is not always luxury so easily afforded.

Finding a work/life balance is perhaps not the only aspect that is easier with the assistance of a partner. When it comes to discipline, according to Leve and Fagot (1997), alternative methods are often required. Despite statistics estimating 50%-60% of children will at some point be part of a single parent household; most studies still focus on the dynamics within two-parent families. Research indicated that single mothers tended to be more nurturing, whilst single fathers had a more relaxed approach to supervision. Gender was a significant factor, with parents reporting higher levels of negative behaviour from children of opposite gender. Currie and Sider (2013) believe that to group single fathers in with their single female counterparts is problematic, as the challenges they face are actually quite unique and particular to that role. Lone parents tended to be more creative with discipline and use more problem-solving strategies. Nelsen, Erwin and Delzer (2012) acknowledge that although lone parent families appear to be more common than they were previously, many of the myths and preconceptions are age old. For single parents, the doubts and fears that may be present

following relationship break-ups are more likely to present a barrier to effective parenting, than any perceived lack of ability. In reality though, they suggest that even as a single parent, if they devote the time and energy to nurture their children, they will then grown up no more disadvantaged than a child raised within a more conventional family structure.

Convention and societal norms are perhaps most apparent when it comes to issues of puberty and gender. There appears however, to be very little contemporary academic research regarding the issues encountered when raising a child through puberty as a single parent, especially within a father/daughter construct. Parker (2020) proposes that whilst parenting is a challenging prospect for anyone, for single fathers raising a daughter alone it can be even more disconcerting. Puberty can be a traumatic time for any young girl and having a mother who has first-hand experience would quite naturally be one of the first people they might turn to for advice and support. It is important therefore, for fathers to make sure are informed, accept support themselves from female mentors and professionals where possible – *and perhaps most importantly* – actively engage in discussion. That sentiment is echoed by Foster (2020), who also advocates the involvement of the birth mother where possible, but states that in the absence of mum or a suitable female role model it is imperative that dad takes the initiative and embraces the opportunity to be supportive at such a crucial time.

A literature review by Coles (2015) concluded that comparative studies between single mothers and fathers revealed a number of positive outcomes for fathers. Behaviour was one area where fathers fared equally and in many cases better than single mothers. One source of research from Ambert (1982) though, suggested that the favourable outcomes achieved by fathers were largely attributed to greater levels of support and increased opportunities for intervention. It is worth noting too, that the data collected was largely from the late 1970s/early 1980s and must be taken within the context of that period.

Conclusion

It is clear from the research how multidimensional an individual family role can become. Influences from circumstance to structure and from gender to culture, all contribute to a unique experience, with no two families sharing the same journey or provenance. Kirkpatrick Johnson (2005) proposes that the subject of parenthood is a prime example. Such defining events will likely result in a reappraisal of values, a restructuring of social networks and fundamentally change an individual's attitude to work and indeed, life in general. Perrone-

McGovern *et al.* (2014) assert that as women began to participate in the workplace to a much greater extent, much of the focus was directed towards how the roles of wives and mothers changed, but suggested the changes to the role of fathers and husbands that inevitably followed, was largely ignored. Responses from the male participants in their sampled research, reported that the role they fulfilled as a parent was – *at least for them* – as important and rewarding as that being reported by their female counterparts and in some cultures, the parental role of the father was particularly defining. In Korea for example, parenthood is considered a primary element of a father's identity. Senécal, Vallerand and Guay (2001) depict the family environment as fraught with conflict, part organic, part socially constructed, in which idiosyncrasies evolve from intrinsic and extrinsic interaction. Society has changed dramatically in some respects and societal attitudes, policies and legislation are still running to catch up. Arku and Arku (2011) ascertain that transformations to integration, driven by globalisation, have influenced how societies and individuals function and interact. As globalisation expands, so too will the ways in which humans interact, not just on a macro but a micro level, too.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – The ‘Nuclear’ Family



(The History Reader, 2017)

Appendix 2 – Adoptive Family



(Children First Foster Family Agency, 2020)

Appendix 3 – Lone Parent



(Medium, 2018)