The new right believe the nuclear family is the bedrock of society:

NR is based on the idea that the traditional nuclear family and its values are best for society. They believe that social policies on family, children, divorce and welfare, undermine the family.

CHARLES MURRAY is a NR sociologist who says the traditional family is under threat and that welfare benefits are too high, creating a ‘culture of dependency’ where an individual finds it easier to take benefits rather than work.

NR theorists are particularly concerned about giving lots of welfare benefits to single mothers, and think it’s a bad idea to have children brought up in families where adults aren’t working.

They believe that the increase in lone-parent and reconstituted families and easier access to divorce have led to a breakdown in traditional values, causing social problems such as crime to increase.

NR theory has been criticised for ‘blaming the victim’ for their problems.

Postmodernists say diversity in family structures is a good thing:
1. The central idea of postmodern views of the family is that there is a much wider range of living options available these days due to social and cultural changes. There are traditional nuclear families, stepfamilies, cohabiting unmarried couples, single people flat-sharing, divorced people, etc.
2. Postmodern sociologist STACEY (1990) says that there is such a diversity of family types, relationships and lifestyles that there will never be one dominant type, and that family structures in western society are varied and flexible. This means that a person can move from one family structure to another, it is fluid.
3. The key thing is the idea that contemporary living is so flexible that one individual can experience lots of types of family in their lifetime. Postmodernists see this diversity and flexibility as positive as it means people can choose depending on what suits their needs.

Criticism of postmodernist theory:

Criticisms question whether this movement through different family types is really that typical. O’BRIEN and JONES (1996) concluded from their research that there was less variety in family types than Stacey reported, and most individuals actually only experienced 1 or 2 family types in their lifetime.

Changes in family structure:

Parsons said that industrialisation changed family structure:

There are 2 basic types of family structure: extended and nuclear.

There are also 2 basic types of society: Pre-industrial society (largely agricultural and work centres on home, farm, village and market), and industrial society (after industrialisation, work centres on factories and production of goods in cities).

PARSONS said that nuclear families became dominant in industrial society:
In pre-industrial society, the extended family is most common. Families live and work together producing goods and crops to live from, taking the surplus to market (where the cottage industry comes from).

In industrial society, the nuclear family becomes dominant. There is a huge increase in individuals leaving the home to work for a wage. The key social change is that industrialisation separates home and work.

Functionalists say industrialisation changed the function of the family:
- Parsons was a functionalist who thought the dominant family structure changed from extended to nuclear because it was more useful for industrial society- i.e. the nuclear family is the best fit for industrial society.
  1. Lots of functions of the family in pre-industrial society are taken over by the state in industrial society (e.g. policing, healthcare, education).
  2. The nuclear family can focus on its function of socialisation. The family socialises children into the roles, values and norms of industrialised society.
  3. Parsons said the industrial nuclear family is ‘isolated’- meaning it has few ties with local kinship and economic systems. This means the family can easily move to where the work is (geographical mobility).

FAMILY STRUCTURE ADAPTS TO THE NEEDS OF SOCIETY.

Functionalists say industrialisation changed roles and status in the family:
- The status for an individual in pre-industrial society was ascribed- decided at birth by your family. Parsons reckoned that in industrial society an individual’s status is achieved by their success outside the family.
- They believe the nuclear family is the best for allowing people to achieve status and position without conflict. It is ok for people to achieve higher or lower status than previous generations without conflict for greater social mobility in society so people can better themselves.
- Parsons said that specialised roles for men and women develop within the family. He thought that men are instrumental leaders and women are expressive leaders in a family. As a functionalist, Parsons said these roles come about because they’re most effective for society.
- Feminists and conflict theorists disagree- they say these roles come from ideology and power.

Other sociologists say its all more complicated:
- Functionalists are criticised for seeing the modern nuclear family as superior- something that societies evolve into. They are also criticised for putting forward an idealised picture of history, as there is historical evidence that suggests that there was actually a variety of family forms in the past.

PETER LASLETT (1972) reckons that the nuclear family was the most common structure in Britain even before industrialisation, with evidence from parish records.

LASLETT and ANDERSON (1971) say that the extended family actually was significant in industrial society. Anderson used the 1851 census for evidence. He said that when people moved into cities for industrial jobs, they lived with relatives from their extended family.

YOUNG and WILLMOTT said families have developed through 3 stages:
- They did 2 important studies looking at family structures in British society from 1950s-70s, mainly studying families in different parts of London and Essex to
Some sociologists say you can choose who to include in your family:

Postmodernist BECK believes that many people now live in ‘negotiated families’- family units that vary according to needs of the people in them, they are more equal but less stable.

STACEY 1998 has highlighted the existence of the ‘divorce-extended family’ where mostly female members of an extended family stay connected by choice after divorce (e.g. ex mother-in-law). This is a result of a greater individualism among women- they are able to form a new family structure based on their own needs.

DONOVAN 1999 suggested that family commitment is now viewed as a matter of on-going negotiation rather than something that lasts forever once entered into.

WEEKS 2010 believes that personal morality has become an individual choice, rather than a set of values influenced by religion or dictated by society.

Childhood:

Childhood is partly a social construct:

1. Sociologists say childhood is not only a biological stage of development but a social construct as well. The idea that children differ from adults isn't the same everywhere in the world so it is not universal.
2. An example of this is how the age that you can leave education in Britain has moved from 12 to 18 in the last century so it would now be socially unacceptable and also illegal to work full-time at age 12.
3. The minimum legal age for marriage in the UK is 16 since 2005.
4. JANE PILCHER 1995 highlighted the separateness of childhood from other life phases. Children have different rights and duties from adults, and are regulated and protected by special laws.

ARIES says a Cult of Childhood developed after Industrialisation:

- He said that the concept of childhood in Western European society has only existed in the last 300 years. Before this, in medieval society, a child took on the role of an adult as soon as it was physically able. Children in medieval paintings look like mini adults.
- With industrialisation, social attitudes changed and people began to value children as needing specialised care and nurturing. The importance of the child reinforced the importance of the role of the housewife- their job to look after the children.
- This ‘cult of childhood’ first developed in the middle classes and over time has become a part of working-class values.

Although his findings are important, he has been criticised by POLLACK 1983 as he says Aries’ work looks weak because it uses paintings for its main evidence.

Functionalists see the position of children in society as a sign of progress:

SHORTER takes the ‘march of progress’ argument:

- Society has a functional need for better-educated citizens and lower infant mortality rates.
- So school leaving ages have gone up and child protection has improved
- That means that the current position of children is the result of positive progression from the past.