AS Sociology Essay: “Examine the extent of and reasons for family diversity in today’s society” (24 marks)

Family is a difficult term to precisely define due to the current variety of family types - the existence of these variations and the corresponding perspectives shall be explored.

One reason for the diversity is divorce, which has become significantly easier to undertake and has become more frequent. The reasons for this are many: changes in the law; declining stigma; secularisation; rising expectations of marriage and changes in the position of women. In regards to the law, there have been three kinds of change – the equalisation of the legal reasons for divorce between the sexes, the widening of the grounds for divorce and divorce being cheaper. Additionally, it is more socially acceptable, resulting in it being more frequent with less of a stigma attached. On top of this, the Church no longer condemns divorce, and with the secularisation, religion’s influence has drastically declined (this is supported by how 3% of young individuals with no religion are married, against the 17% of those with a religion).

Post-modernists view the high divorce rate as entrusting individuals with the freedom to end a romantic relationship when it no longer provides gratification – this is ultimately a cause of family diversity. Similarly, feminists see it as desirable as it shows that females are rejecting the oppression of the patriarchal nuclear family, whilst functionalists state that this is due to the higher expectations of marriage in this day and age, interactionists claim that we cannot generalise as each individual’s interpretation of marriage is different. On the other hand, the New Right sees the diversity as the undermining of the traditional nuclear family.

An example of family diversity is cohabitation, which is constructed through an unmarried couple in a sexual relationship living together. A reason for this prominence is how there are currently two million cohabiting couples in Britain – this is expected to double by 2021. A reason for this is the decline in stigma to sexual intercourse outside of marriage (this is supported by 62% of the participants believing that “premarital sex is not wrong at all”, according to British Social Attitudes (2000)). Moreover, the increased career opportunities for females mean that they do not require the financial security present in marriage. Furthermore, due to secularisation, the 2001 census states that young humans with no religion were more likely to cohabit than those with a religion.

Stonewall (the campaign for lesbian, gay and bisexual rights (2008)) estimate that 5-7% of the adult population today have same-sex relationships and whilst it’s difficult to gauge whether this represents the increase to the past as stigma and illegality meant that these types of relationships were more likely to be hidden, it’s still a prospect worth exploring when analysing family diversity. The reasons for these types of relationships are as follows. This is in part due to increased social acceptance as it is seen by how male homosexual acts were decriminalised in 1967 for consenting adults of 21 years of age, with opinion polls showcasing a greater tolerance. It can also be attributed to the changing of social policy in that since 2004, the Civil Partnership Act has granted same-sex couples similar legal rights to married couples in regards to pensions, inheritance, and transferring the property. Jeffrey Weeks (1999) states that homosexuals create ‘chosen families’ (individuals who remain emotionally close without being biologically related), as well as contending that they offer the same security and stability as heterosexual families.

There has been a hefty increase in one-person households – since 2006, approximately three in ten households contained one human, which is triple that of 1961. A reason for this is the increase in separation following divorce, as children are more likely to remain with the mother whilst the father is outcast. Also, there is a decline in the amount of humans marrying and those who do not tend to marry later in life. Furthermore, there is less restriction on how one’s life course is carried out, resulting in more humans opting to live alone – this has been coined ‘creative singleness’. Another factor is that for older widows, for instance, there isn’t much choice of romantic partners in the corresponding age group.

Simon Duncan and Miranda Phillips conducted research for the British Social Attitudes Survey which indicates that one in ten adults are in a romantic relationship, but not marrying or cohabitating. Some of these individuals stated that they couldn’t afford to live together, others stated they they’d prefer to keep their own place of living whilst a minority chose to live apart. Reconstituted families (also known as stepfamilies) are another family type that accounts for over 10% of all families with dependents in Britain. This is testament to lone parents forming new partnerships, thus the reasons for the existence of lone parents (such as divorce, secularisation, the death of a spouse, greater employment opportunities for women etc.) also applies to the formation of reconstituted families.

In terms of perspectives, functionalism and the New Right have been described as ‘modernist’ and see modern society as having a clear-cut structure, with the nuclear family being the most beneficial type. They would say that it performs vital functions in that it creates a geographically and socially mobile workforce, whilst performing the primary socialisation of children and the stabilisation of adult personalities.

New Right thinkers are firmly opposed to family diversity; believing that the traditional nuclear family is ‘natural’ and so alternative family types are seen as irrelevant. For example, they see lone-parent families as harmful and unnatural (as the children are believed to not be disciplined due to the lack of a father figure), and are a burden on the welfare state. In response, critics have pointed out how there is little to no evidence of lone-parent families being part of a ‘dependency culture’, nor that their children are more likely to be delinquent, but rather the New Right is simply utilising the lone-parent families as a scapegoat for society’s issues.

Robert Chester (1985) argues that the only significant change is a move from the dominance of the traditional nuclear family to what he calls the ‘neo-conventional family’, in which both spouses work. He holds the view that alternatives to the nuclear family are short lived, with the nuclear being the pinnacle of lifestyles towards which humans aspire to be in. Chester supports his view with a series of patterns: most humans live in a household headed by a married couple; most adults marry and breed – with the children being raised by their natural parents; most marriages last until death with divorces remarrying; most couples get married if they have children; most cohabiting couples eventually marry; and lastly, though births outside marriage have increased, the presence of joint regist