

# The case for the traditional family

Source text: O'Donnell (1997) *Introduction to Sociology*

From A H Halsey, *Introduction* to N Dennis and G Erdos, *Families Without Fatherhood* (IEA Health and Welfare Unit, 1992), pp. xii-xiii (slightly adapted)

Whatever the character of society or state, polity or economy, religion or culture, parents cannot escape responsibility for the quality of their children as citizens.

In the light of this political morality I see incontrovertible evidence of a weakening of the norms of the traditional family since the 1960s. It is not that I see a golden age of traditionalism. Material deprivation, and inequality between the classes and the sexes were integral to British society in the first half of the century. There was no utopia. There was cruelty, a double standard of sexual morality, incest and child abuse, savage treatment of unmarried mothers, desertions and separations. Nevertheless the traditional family system was a coherent strategy for the ordering of relations in such a way as to equip children for their own eventual adult responsibilities.

The much-needed reform of the system required comprehensive strengthening of supporting health, education and security services if quality children were to be produced, women were to have freedom to combine motherhood with career and men were to be encouraged to take a fuller part in the domestic rearing of their offspring. Instead the evidence of more recent change is that the supporting services have deteriorated, the increment of economic growth has been transferred disproportionately to the individual pocket horizontally and the rich vertically through the running down of family allowances, the raising of regressive national insurance contributions, the abandoning of joint taxation for spouses, the failure to fund adequate community care, and so on. The individual has been exalted and the social community desecrated. Paradoxically, Mrs. Thatcher may well be seen by dispassionate future commentators as a major architect of the demolition of traditional family.

Mrs. Thatcher inadvertently found her central, (individualistic) principles powerfully supported in this crucial area (i.e. the family) by quite other social and personal forces in the creation of a new and indeed unprecedented wave of pro-individual, anti-social development of economy, polity and community. No one can deny that divorce, separation, birth outside marriage and one-parent families as well as cohabitation and extra-marital sexual intercourse have increased rapidly. Many applaud these freedoms. But what should be universally acknowledged is that the children of parents who do not follow the traditional norm (i.e. taking on personal active, and long term responsibility for the social upbringing of the children they generate) are thereby disadvantaged in many major aspects of chances of living a successful life. On the evidence available such children tend to die earlier, to have more illness, to do less well at school, to exist at a lower level of nutrition, comfort and conviviality, to suffer more unemployment, to be more prone to deviance and crime, and finally to repeat the cycle of unstable parenting from which they themselves have suffered.

1. Who is the author of this passage?
2. What is the advantage of the traditional nuclear family?
3. What criticisms are made of the traditional family structure?
4. How should the traditional family structure have been supported by the government in the views of the author of this passage?
5. How was the traditional family structure undermined by the policy decisions of the Thatcher government according to the authors of this passage?
6. What is the impact of a non-traditional family life on children?

**Evaluate the claims of the authors of this passage in the light of your own sociological understandings.**