

A Level Sociology – Summer Bridging Work

Firstly, congratulations on choosing to undertake such a successful and challenging A Level. As a department we are very much looking forward to meeting you all in September. In the meantime, we have set you a task for you to complete over the holiday period.

Task: *Read the following article. Using this article and evidence from elsewhere (including the internet), write an extended paragraph explaining the major changes to the structure of the family in the UK over the last 30 or so years.*

Please make sure that you clearly identify the changes and then give reasons for these changes. Try to include relevant statistics in your answer.

This work should be handed in our **first lesson back**.

Make a good first impression.

Goodbye married couples, hello alternative family arrangements

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Britain has become a significantly more tolerant nation over the last 20 years, with increasingly liberal views on marriage, relationships and same-sex partnerships, according to research showing that the heterosexual married couple is no longer at the centre of UK life.

The British Social Attitudes report, conducted annually since 1983, reveals both dramatic social change around family life and a widespread acceptance that traditional structures and life patterns are being eroded.

However, it also shows that some traditional norms endure: adulterous sex is still as strongly condemned as it was two decades ago - 85% say it is always or mostly wrong - and people are more wary of alternative family arrangements where children are involved.

The latest report, based on more than 3,000 interviews with a random, representative sample of people in 2006, offers a picture of a fast-changing landscape of relationships and living arrangements, including partners who do not live together, unmarried, long-term cohabitantes, "reconstituted families" made up of previously divorced parents and their stepchildren, and a rise in solo living.

The Victorian notion of marriage as the "socially accepted and religiously sanctified means of having sex" has vanished, says the study: 70% of people think there is nothing wrong with sex before marriage, compared with fewer than half (48%) in 1984. Cohabitation and marriage have become effective equivalents in the minds of most: two-thirds of people believe there is little difference between being married and living together, and only just over one in four (28%) think married couples make better parents than unmarried ones.

Views are somewhat more evenly balanced where children are concerned: three in 10 people think it should be harder for couples with children under 16 to get divorced, though four in 10 disagree. Four in 10 people believe one parent can bring up a child as well as two, and a similar proportion think two are better than one. Nevertheless, support for divorce is strong: almost two-thirds think it can be a positive step towards a new life, and over three-quarters think it is not divorce that harms children but conflict between their parents.

The past two decades have seen a revolution in attitudes towards gay and lesbian partnerships, the survey shows. Fewer than one in five now believe homosexual relationships are always wrong, while half regard them as rarely or never wrong.

The public is more divided on the issue of gay men and lesbians becoming parents. Just over a third believe a lesbian couple can be as good parents as a man and woman, and just under that proportion think that a gay male couple can be as good parents.

Prof Simon Duncan, co-author of the study, said: "The heterosexual married couple is no longer central as a social norm. But ... children seem to hold a particular position in people's attitudes to family life. When they are involved, alternative family arrangements are seen as less acceptable."

The report reveals that people remain ill-informed about the lack of legal protection afforded to cohabiting partners, with half still wrongly believing there is such a thing as "common law marriage". Public support for legal reform - being considered by the government - is strong, with 90% arguing that a long-term cohabiting partner should be entitled to financial provision on separation if children are involved.

The division of housework is one area where behaviour is lagging behind liberal attitudes. Over three-quarters (77%) of couples say the woman usually does the laundry, little changed since 1994. Two-thirds of women say they do the cleaning, yet only 54% of men say this of their partner.

Main points

- In 1987, 75% of people thought homosexuality was always or mostly wrong. Now 32% take this view.
- People are generally more tolerant, but 36% think measures to promote equal opportunities for black and Asian people have gone too far.
- Only 20% of graduates regularly read a quality newspaper, compared with 50% in 1986.
- The decline of print readership has not been taken up by the internet. Among those who do not read a paper regularly, only 3% regularly consult a newspaper website.
- Since 2002 the views of Labour supporters have become less leftwing, with fewer wanting the government to redistribute income to the poor. The values of Conservative supporters have changed little.
- Two-thirds of young public sector employees "strongly agree" that their job is useful to society, compared with 14% of their contemporaries in the private sector.

Britishness

Gordon Brown's choice of Britishness as one of the defining themes of his government may be out of tune with the popular mood, the report suggests. It found that people in England are substantially less likely to define themselves as British and more likely to assert an English identity than 15 years ago.

In Scotland, the proportion of people claiming to be British rather than Scottish is now only 14%. The study found that "only" or "mainly" British has fallen to 13% in England and 3% in Scotland.

But there was only a weak connection between people's feelings about national identity and devolution. Only 28% of people in England, who defined themselves as English, thought an English parliament would be the best way to govern England.

Environment

Nearly half of Britain's drivers say they could use their cars less often to help save the environment. About 80% in the survey think the current level of car use in the UK is having a serious, detrimental effect, and 66% say everyone should respond by using vehicles less frequently.

Nonetheless, a hard-core minority of 23% - which includes many high-mileage drivers - insist that people should be allowed to use their cars as much as they like, even if that damages the environment. And there is less consensus about how easy it is to cut car use for short journeys.

But there is widespread concern about the impact of cars on climate change. The survey found 45% of drivers claiming to be willing and able to find other types of transport. Another 12% were able to use the car less, but unsure whether they were prepared to do so. And 18% were willing to cut back - but unable to do so for lack of public transport or safe routes for walking or cycling.