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Module code SLSP2050

Module title Sociology of Gender

Question number and title **Q3) How and in what ways have understandings and practices of motherhood and fatherhood changed over the last hundred years?**

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**Q3) How and in what ways have understandings and practices of motherhood and fatherhood changed over the last hundred years?**

The essay will consider how conceptions of sex and gender have changed since the one sex model, through to the contemporary period, and how this has informed understandings and practices of motherhood and fatherhood. Whilst the one sex, and part of the two sex model fall outside of the last hundred years, it is important to consider these epochs to better understand the development of sex and gender and thus, motherhood and fatherhood. The essay will firstly define sex and gender and how they relate to motherhood and fatherhood. After discussing the one sex model and its relation to motherhood and fatherhood practices and understandings, the essay will focus on the two sex model, the biological model and then, the contemporary period. Throughout the essay, there will be a consideration of how inequality in relation to women/motherhood has existed throughout history. The essay will argue that there have been positive changes within contemporary society, inspired by a 1960s (onwards) feminist movement that have challenged two sex model conceptions of sex and gender with their social constructionist approach, to promote more fluid and choice based practices and understandings of motherhood and fatherhood. Nevertheless, the essay will also discuss how the two sex model is still strong and evident today, especially within the Conservatives' discourse.

To understand changing understandings and practices of motherhood and fatherhood it is important to ask, what is sex? What is gender? Whilst there is no universal definition, the essay is concerning itself with the meanings of gender and sex in the UK (Richardson 2007). These questions have to be asked within a UK historical framework, as sex and gender mean different things at different times to different people. In the one sex model (prior 18th century), there was a belief that "there existed many genders but only one acceptable sex" (Laquer 1990: 35). Thus, in comparison to the two sex model (18<sup>th</sup> century – modern era), gender roles were not distinct, as men and women were seen as part of the same sex. As Laquer (1990) states, the two sex model sees men and women as fundamentally different; only with the second wave feminist movement, have we moved towards the view that concentrates on the social constructive nature of gender (and sex), instead of perceived 'natural' differences.

The changing views of sex and gender have led to motherhood and fatherhood becoming more fluid, as the two sex model's constraint on what they perceive to be an ideal nuclear family has eroded and become more of a political ideology. Feminist research has been important in leading the movement for change, as they have used social constructionist approaches to illustrate how motherhood and fatherhood are socially constructed roles, thus, not 'natural'. The social construction argument has recently been developed, with Butler (1990) amongst many other post modernist feminists, arguing that both sex and gender should be seen as social constructs (Richardson 2007). Both feminist approaches to sex and gender are relevant for the essay, as both have helped challenge the two sex model.

The one sex model illustrates how there has been inequality in various forms throughout history in relation to women and motherhood. Laquer (1990) outlines three perspectives of fatherhood within the one sex model, which illustrates how fatherhood was privileged over motherhood, which is counter posed to the two sex model's view. The first perspective is that only men have the semen to produce the child and thus the child has the father's blood only. The second perspective further highlights the inequality women faced within the one sex model, as when the child is illegitimate the woman is seen to have provided the only sperm. The third perspective argues that when both the mother and the father have provided the sperm, the sperm that wins determines the child's looks. This view of fatherhood clearly highlights the thought informing the model, such as Galen of Pergamum, who stated that women and men are from the same sex, except women are lesser forms of men (Laquer 1990).

Conceptions of marriage clearly indicate the changing views of sex and gender and their influence on understandings and practices of motherhood and fatherhood. Thus, it is important to consider the arrival of the nuclear family ideal alongside the two sex model, as marriage was seen as the prerequisite for children. Social roles were constructed, with motherhood seen as the 'ideal' for women/wives, and the breadwinner role seen as the 'ideal' for fathers/husbands (Laquer 1990). The two sex model sees women as passionless and men as unable to control their sexual desires (Laquer 1990). These views are within the work of the Founding Fathers of sociology. For example, Emile Durkheim (1970), whilst noting that marriage is rarely beneficial for women, argued that marriage benefits society, as it controls men's apparent 'natural' sexual desires. Feminists, such as Ann Oakley (1981), use primarily

qualitative methods to highlight depressing aspects of motherhood, thus have challenged these conventional views of marriage, motherhood and fatherhood, which has led to increasing choice and liberation for women.

The two sex model feeds into the biological model, where motherhood and fatherhood are seen as 'naturally' defined social roles. Whilst the second wave feminism has helped modify the restricting conceptions of motherhood and fatherhood of the one sex model, two sex model and the biological approach, feminist psychoanalysts such as Nancy Chodorow, still work within a determinist view of sex/gender and consequently motherhood/fatherhood (Rich 1980). Chodorow develops Freud's ideas, claiming the way girls are torn between their mother and father creates the inequalities in society (Rich 1980). This threatens to reverse the important progress feminists have made in challenging restricting understandings and practices of motherhood and fatherhood, as it fails to fully recognise complex social processes.

As mentioned above, the feminist movement has helped change understandings of motherhood and fatherhood by reducing the nuclear family to little more than a political ideal. Pahl and Spencer (2004) critically highlight the importance of questioning the concept of a 'traditional' family. This is often the phrase used by the Conservatives within their 'Broken Britain' analogy, and, as Pahl and Spencer rightly argue, this use of terminology neglects the historical context of so-called 'traditional' families (such as in Ancient Greece).

It is now important to consider areas of change, occurring over the last hundred years (notably the last 40 years), that have influenced understandings and practices of motherhood and fatherhood. What is telling when considering the changes is the optimism vs. pessimism debate. The Conservatives represent the pessimistic view, whereas the optimistic side consists of those who support the conception of gender (sex), motherhood and fatherhood as a social construction. Whilst the essay supports the optimistic side, it is also important to recognise that there are new inequalities that have formed in relation to motherhood and fatherhood.

The first challenge to the two sex model's understanding of motherhood and fatherhood is the increasing acceptance of homosexual motherhood and fatherhood. However, relating to discussions above about what is a 'traditional family', Weston (1991) rightly points to how those who say that homosexual families are an 'alternative' have to consider what it is an

alternative to – as there is no dominant form of family. Actually, Weeks et al (2001) uncover marked power dimensions in homosexual relationships, similar to heterosexual relationships. However, they also found that homosexual relationships provide more basis for equality, as heterosexual couples have to challenge the institutionalised heteronormativity. This informed the respondents' perceptions of homosexual motherhood and fatherhood, as shown by the following quote by a female respondent:

...the fact that two adults of the same gender choose to do different things within the house, doesn't give kids a message that says 'Men are only supposed to do this one' or 'Women are only supposed to do that one' (p.255).

This clearly challenges the two sex model's conception of sex determining gender roles; motherhood is not seen as a 'natural' female role, nor is fatherhood seen as a 'natural' male role.

IVF also illustrates the increasing challenges to the two sex model's 'natural' conception of motherhood and fatherhood and indicates fatherhood is arguably becoming more negotiable. Geen (2009) reported the story of a lesbian couple denied access to IVF because they were both women, however, as from October 2009, the 'need for a father' in order to access IVF is no longer required. Nevertheless, as Rich (1980) outlines, compulsory heterosexuality, supported by the pessimistic side of the debate, can still constrain motherhood and fatherhood in a prism of heterosexuality. However, interestingly, Stanworth (1987) states an important point – whilst IVF has provided more choice for homosexuals and thus provided a broader conception of motherhood and fatherhood, it has paradoxically reproduced the two sex model ideology that sees motherhood as a natural phenomena, as it has promoted children as an ideal.

Medicalisation relates to IVF and is another change that has occurred over the last hundred years that has influenced understandings and practices of motherhood and fatherhood. Maternity has been turned into a medical 'problem' (Oakley 1981), as whilst medicine can provide more choice for women, pregnancy is now largely controlled by medicalisation (Stanworth 1987).

Abortion is another challenge to the two sex model conceptions of motherhood and fatherhood. Whilst feminists helped legalise abortion in 1967, Shrage (1994) shows how there are many feminists who oppose abortion. Shrage uses the concept, 'Iceberg Hypothesis', which argues that individuals' views on abortion reflect wider values that they hold. Shrage cites Ginsburg and Luker's (1984) research, who argue that pro-life feminists are so because they see motherhood as the *primal* way for females to become women, whereas pro-choice feminists see motherhood as one of the *many* ways females can become women. Thus, your conception of sex and gender influences your views of motherhood and fatherhood, as pro-life feminists believe women fulfil their 'natural' gender role by becoming a mother. The pro-life feminists are dangerously close to the views of the Conservatives on abortion, as shown by how the Conservatives were the only party who collectively supported reducing the abortion limit last year.

Another change that has occurred over the last hundred years, influencing understanding and practices of motherhood and fatherhood, is the transformation of intimacy. As Seidman (2002) highlights, the contemporary era has seen a 'sexualisation of love', which many argue has produced social evils. Whilst the changes have been important for increasing choice in motherhood and fatherhood, as it challenged the idea of marriage being required to have children, the concern with social evils is valid when considering problems such as the objectification of women.

Giddens (1992, cited in Smart and Neale 1999) and Beck and Beck Gernsheim (1995, cited in Smart and Neale 1999) have influential theories on the changing practices of intimacy in society, and its relation to motherhood and fatherhood. They relate to the pessimistic vs. optimistic debate, as Giddens is optimistic and Beck and Beck Gernsheim are pessimistic. Giddens says we have seen a change from 'romantic love' to 'confluent love' leading to 'pure relationships', which do not require love, and instead are based on negotiation. However, Smart and Neale (1999) state that Giddens neglects to consider the importance of children as agents and how they affect relationships. This is something Beck and Beck Gernsheim do take into account, as they argue the mother and father come into conflict when the relationship ends, as they both want to keep the child due to the fragility of love in an increasingly fragmented and insecure world (Smart and Neale 1999).

These discussions relate to the increased divorce rate; but it is important to note that divorce rates in England and Wales experienced a 26 year low in 2007 (ONS 2008). The divorce rate changes the understandings and practices of motherhood and fatherhood, as the two sex model ideal of a nuclear family breaks down, as children are raised outside a marriage context. The Conservatives have clearly reacted to the change, with policy commitments such as tax breaks for married couples. Smart and Neale (1999) argue, when children are involved in divorce, a paradox is created where the parents are separated yet connected. The parents have to develop new 'moral horizons', so they are flexible and take into account both their own and the other parent's interests. Thus, an inequality has formed in parenting as it has become more demanding.

In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the 21<sup>st</sup> century, feminists have focused on improving childcare, as there is still not a comprehensive childcare scheme in place to assist with allowing mothers and fathers to balance work and children. It is interesting that whilst men have increasingly helped with childcare, Smart and Neale (1999) point to legislation that has meant this involvement is more financial than social. Conservative policies, such as the Child Support Agency that Margaret Thatcher introduced in 1990 supports this – illustrating prevailing two sex model conceptions of the need for both a mother and father, thus, a modified version of the nuclear family. Rich (1980) argues however, that due to compulsory heterosexuality, even if men became overwhelmingly involved in childcare, there would still be engrained male power.

As well as men becoming more involved in domestic work such as childcare, more women have gone into the job market, especially the part-time sector. Whilst Sullivan (2000) claims this represents a meaningful change, Sullivan's analysis highlights new inequalities that have formed. For example, whilst men's domestic responsibilities have increased, women's have tended to stay constant, with childcare responsibility actually increasing. This illustrates the double-burden that exists for women, as they are expected to take primary responsibility in many areas of domestic work, such as childcare, as well as working. This arguably links to the two sex model ideology, which sees women 'naturally' as mothers, and men 'naturally' as breadwinners.

Thus, whilst changes appear to be happening, it is important to take into account the marked inequalities created and sustained by interrelating childcare, domestic work and

labour practices of mothers and fathers. Maternity/paternity legalisation and recent changes illustrate this. For example, recent amendments have increased paternity leave up to 6 months, but it can only be claimed after the child is 6 months old, linking to a biological conception of mothers being the 'natural' caregivers. However, whilst these changes are far from equal, they are signs of positive progress, which has provoked right wing newspapers that support the Conservatives to produce reactionary responses. Delingpole (2009), writing in the *Daily Mail*, claims that feminists have scared men from telling women they would rather work than look after the children. However, his argument is shown up by Prosser (2009) writing in *The Independent*, who rightly says that only through equalisation of maternity leave will we see the end of discrimination in this area.

In conclusion, what the essay has shown is that changing conceptions of sex and gender throughout history have informed practices and understandings of motherhood and fatherhood. The essay has illustrated that throughout history, irrespective of the model informing debates around sex and gender, there has always been inequality towards mothers and women. The one sex model saw women and men as the same sex, privileged fatherhood whilst believing women were lesser forms of men. The two sex model, defined social roles in accordance to their belief that men and women are 'naturally' different – thus, women are 'designed' for motherhood, whereas men are 'designed' to be a breadwinner. The contemporary changes, influenced by feminists, have seen important challenges to these inequalities and sexist conceptions of motherhood and fatherhood. There has been a rise in what has been branded as 'alternative' motherhood and fatherhood practices. However, as the essay has illustrated, the conceptions of a 'traditional' family collapses when using the argument of social construction. It is important to note, whilst there have been changes to understandings and practices of motherhood and fatherhood - that have provided more liberation and choice in the increasing individualised society that we live in - there is still a strong political two sex model/biological ideology, which most notably the Conservatives hold. The essay has highlighted that in contrast to the Conservatives' ideological belief that the family is falling apart in the chaos of 'Broken Britain', the family is actually reconfiguring, as motherhood and fatherhood become fluid concepts. However, with the Conservatives appearing as likely winners of the next election, there may be more need for feminism to continue its rightful attacks on the two sex model's views of motherhood and fatherhood.

**Word count (excluding question) – 2,739**

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