Willmott and Young (1973) The Symmetrical Family

Writing from a functionalist perspective and based on a large scale social survey (nearly 2,000 people were interviewed in Greater London and surrounding areas).

Young and Willmott argued that in 1973, families had become symmetrical - that is, that men and women performed similar roles. Rather than the traditional nuclear family described by Parsons where men and women had very separate roles in the family (segregated gender roles) Willmott and Young argued that in modern families men and women both did paid work and both did work around the house, including childcare. They did not find that men and women did exactly the same type of jobs - whether in the workplace or at home - but (compared with earlier periods) family life was becoming more shared and equal. Part of this was also that men and women and children spent more time together in the home rather than separately outside the home (e.g. men going to the pub).

Another important concept for Willmott & Young was stratified diffusion. They argued that changes in norms and values tend to start among the wealthier in society and then others start to behave in the same way (the behaviour is "diffused" from one strata - class - to another).

This led them to a perhaps surprising conclusion that they predicted that the next stage of the family would be the asymmetric family. They found that richer families spend more time apart and had more segregated roles, with wives not needing to work, and men spending time on the golf course rather than at home. This prediction has clearly not turned out to be accurate, with - if anything - family life becoming more symmetrical since 1973.

However, the research was quite widely criticised, particularly by feminist sociologists such as Ann Oakley. She argued that the concept of the symmetrical family was flawed, as was WIllmott and Young's data. For example, quite small contributions to housework by men was deemed by the research to mean that housework was shared and therefore the family was symmetrical. Instead Oakley argued that women had now had a dual burden. Yes, more women were going out to work, but they were also doing the bulk of the housework and childcare. As such, she argued that increased female employment had not made the family more equal but just meant that women had to work two jobs.

A further criticism is that, certainly in the 1970s and even today, while both men and women went to work, men were paid more than women and women experienced a glass ceiling and were unable to gain promotions. It also presupposes a nuclear type of family with a husband and wife, rather than other diverse households that exist in contemporary society.

Task 1- 5 ways of thinking...

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| Three images that relate to this key study... |  |
| Three key words/concepts including their definitions... |  |
| Three strengths of the research method... |  |
| Three weaknesses of the research method ... |  |
| Three findings... |  |

Task 2-

Item A- The symmetrical family According to Willmott and Young, the family has become more symmetrical, with both partners contributing more equally to the home. The reason for the move to the symmetrical family has been explained in a number of ways including; the rise in feminism, more effective methods of contraception, women's’ increased participation in paid work and the interest in home life increasing resulting in leisure time being spent at home

Identify and explain one reason for the move to a more symmetrical family structure according to Willmott and Young, including what you know of their perspective. (4 marks) (write your answer here).

Task 3- List the remaining reasons for the move towards a symmetrical family including an image to represent each reason.