(e) Discuss the suggestion that the family has become more symmetrical (24 marks)

AO1 Skill Knowledge and understanding = 8 marks

AO2 Skill Identification, analysis, interpretation & evaluation = 16 marks

According the recent media hype, the 1990’s have given birth to the phenomenon of the ‘new man’. This suggests that men are now doing more housework and childcare, while women are increasingly selling their labour in the labour market, and consequently contributing economically to family life. Willmott and Young predicted that the family, are becoming symmetrical. They claimed that the family has evolved from an institution based on patriarchy, to one characterised by equality and democracy. This essay will claim that, although relations in the family may have change the ‘new man’ and symmetrical family are nothing but an exaggerated myth.

Willmot and Young argue that the family has changed from that of an industrial form, traditional Nuclear family to that of a modern form, symmetrical family. The Nuclear family is defined by specialised division of labour whereby the adult male sold his labour in the labour market in exchange for a wage, while his wife became primarily responsible for childcare and housework. In comparison the symmetrical family is an institution where partners play equal roles. This suggests that the family has evolved from having gender-segregated roles to joint-conjugal roles.

 Willmott and Young’s suggestions can be supported by the changes in the occupational structure. Over recent years there has been a decline in. Over the recent years there has been a decline in the traditional industries, such as mining, and a rise in office based jobs such as administration. Many women have taken up both part-time and full-time paid positions in offices. These changes in the occupational structure demonstrate that women are no longer confined to the home and are playing a more active role in providing for the families needs.

However according to Rapport et al, even though more women are taking up paid employment, there is no indication that the family is becoming more symmetrical. They argue that the women’s career is often seen as secondary to her role as housewife and mother, and that’ s why the wife’s working house revolve around family commitments. Delphy describes how the modern family is far from symmetrical; she argues that family life is still based on patriarchy and inequality. Women who have careers are often blamed for problems in the family. Recent evidence claims that working women are to blame for their children’s poor academic performance or behaviour. This does not show that the family is symmetrical. Women are still made to feel uniquely responsible for their children’s welfare and emotional development while working men tend to escape from such criticism

Oakley carried out a survey of 40 housewives and found that housework is still regarded as a woman’s job. According to her findings, women spend on average over 70 hours a week performing household chores. Evidence demonstrates that women who work full time are still predominantly responsible for housework. However many argue that Oakley’s research is flawed as she had a small sample in her research; therefore it is not appropriate to generalise so widely.

 However Delphy and Leonard found that women, even those in full-time employment still do the majority of the housework. They found that men did not take over the domestic chores as they saw it as an attack on their masculinity. Delphy and Leonard also claim that when men do perform housework, they see it as ‘helping’ their wives and do not take any personal responsibility for it.