BACK TO STUDY: ESSAY WRITING

EXPECTATIONS

• Answer the question
  – (understand purpose & focus of task)
  – (keep all points relevant to task)

• Present a logically structured argument

• Express a well-reasoned position / perspective

• Demonstrate your understanding of concepts

• Use relevant sources of ideas and evidence

• Reference these sources correctly

• Write clearly

AN ASSIGNMENT QUESTION (ESSAY):

In the last 20 years, rates of divorce have risen significantly in Western countries. Critically analyse some of the different explanations given for this phenomenon. In your discussion you should consider what implications these explanations might have for social policy. (1000 words)
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PROVISIONAL PLAN

Introduction (100 wds)

Problem of rising divorce

Explanation 1 (Type?) (130 wds)

Summarise
Evaluate

Explanation 2 (Type?) (130)

Summarise
Evaluate

Explanation 3 (Type?) (130)

Summarise
Evaluate

Implications of explanations. (What types of solutions do they suggest?)

Implications of Explanation 1 (130)
Implications of Explanation 2 (130)
Implications of Explanation 3 (130)

Conclusion (100 wds)

ELABORATED PLAN

Introduction
Problem of rising divorce
Australian Bureau of Statistics figures
Argument of essay - that socio-economic explanations are the more comprehensive.

Explanation 1 (Type - legal)
- Summarise
  - Bilton et al. - Changes in divorce rates can be best explained by changes in legal system.
- Evaluation
  - Problem is that this type of explanation does not consider why laws have changed in the first place. More underlying explanation needed.

Explanation 2 (Type - socio-economic)
- Summarise
  - Nicky Hart - Changes in divorce rates can be best explained by fundamental changes in society (mainly economic changes).
- Evaluation
  - This explanation cannot account for all cases of divorce. But is more probing than narrow legal explanation.

[Implications of explanations, i.e what types of solutions exist?]

Implications of explanation 1 (legal)
If rises in divorce are a consequence of liberal divorce laws, obvious way to stem rise is to make divorce less obtainable. However - not a genuine solution, also a solution not favoured by Australians.

Implications of explanation 2 (socio-economic)
If marital conflict can be traced to changes in the capitalist system and economic circumstances of family, there is a need for social policies that support disadvantaged families. However, governments reluctant to fund social welfare programs.

Conclusion: (key point: Which explanation is most helpful?)
Restatement of argument - socio-economic explanations provide the more useful framework. Also the need for a historical perspective - family instability is not unique to the present.

QUESTION:
In the last 20 years, rates of divorce have risen significantly in Western countries. Critically analyse some of the different explanations given for this phenomenon. In your discussion you should consider what implications these explanations might have for social policy. (1000 words)

THE ESSAY: A FINAL DRAFT?

A major change in the Western family is an increased incidence of divorce. In the past, divorce was a relatively rare occurrence, but in recent times it has become more commonplace. This increase has often been explained by changes to marriage law, but the more meaningful understanding can be found in a socio-economic explanation. Both legal and sociological explanations for the phenomenon have significant implications for social policy, especially in relation to how the problem of increasing marital instability might be dealt with.

One explanation for rising divorce has focused on changes in laws relating to marriage. It has been argued that there has always been a degree of marital instability, and that changes in the law have now provided unhappily married couples with 'access to a legal solution to pre-existent marital problems' (Bilton, Bonnett and Jones, 1987, p.301.) The problem with this type of explanation, however, is that it does not consider why these laws have changed in the first place. It could be argued that reforms to family law, as well as the increased rate of divorce that has accompanied them, are the product of more fundamental changes in society.

If rises in divorce are thought to be the consequence of liberal divorce laws, the obvious way to stem this rise is to make them less obtainable. This approach, one imagines, would lead to a reduction in divorce statistics; however, it cannot really be held up as a genuine solution to the problems of marital stress and breakdown in society. Indeed it would seem to be a solution directed more at symptoms than at fundamental causes. In fact, restricting a couple's access to divorce would, in some cases, serve only to exacerbate existing marital problems (Johnson, 1981). In those cases where violence is involved, the consequences could be tragic. Apart from all this, returning to more restrictive divorce laws seems to be a solution little favoured by Australians generally (Harrison, 1990).

A more comprehensive explanation of the increase in divorce focuses on broad societal changes. Marital breakdown may be the result of economic changes that have affected the family (Hart, cited in Haralambos, 1995). One example of these changes is the raised material aspirations of families, which Hart suggests has put pressure on both spouses to become wage earners. As a result, women have been forced to become both homemakers and economic providers, and the contradiction of these two roles has led to conflict, and marital breakdown.

Yet, Hart's explanation cannot account for all cases of divorce. Marital breakdown also occurs in families where only the husband is working (Kilmartin, 1987). It is also worth pointing out that, whilst we may appear to be living in a time of increased family instability, research suggests that, historically, instability may have been the norm rather than the exception. Single parent and step families were more...
common in the past than is assumed, although the disruptive influence then was not divorce, but the premature death of one or both parents (Bell and Zajdow, 1997). Nevertheless, the attempt to see changes in family relations as a result of broader social forces would seem to be more probing than one that looks only at legislative change.

A sociological explanation suggests challenging implications. Writing from a Marxist-feminist position, Hart (cited in Haralambos, 1995) traces marital conflict to changes in the capitalist economic system and their effect on gender roles. It is difficult to see, however, how such an analysis might be translated into practical social policies. This is because the Hart program would appear to require in the first place a radical restructuring of the economic system. Whilst this may be desirable for some, it is not achievable in the present political climate. Hart is right however, to suggest that much marital conflict can be linked in some way to the economic circumstances of families. This is borne out in many statistical surveys which show consistently that rates of divorce are higher among socially disadvantaged families (McDonald, 1993). This situation suggests then that social policies, with associated funding, need to be geared to providing support and security for these types of families.

It is difficult to offer a definitive explanation for the growing trend of marital breakdown, and it is even more difficult to find solutions that might ameliorate the problems created by it. Clearly though, the most useful answers are to be found not within a narrow legal framework, but within a broader socio-economic one. This context suggests that in studying the modern family, one needs to employ a historical perspective, including the possibility of looking to the past in searching for ways of dealing with problems in the present. (786 words)*

References


*NB: this essay is shorter than 1000 words so that it can fit onto 2 pages as an example
ACADEMIC WRITING STYLE

Here are three versions of a sentence. Think about the degree of academic authority implied in each. Is the writer of the sentence ‘present’ in each version?

*I agree with Johnson’s idea that restricting a couple’s access to divorce would only serve only to exacerbate existing marital problems*

*Johnson (1981) argues that restricting a couple’s access to divorce would only serve only to exacerbate existing marital problems.*

*Restricting a couple’s access to divorce would only serve only to exacerbate existing marital problems (Johnson, 1981).*

WORKSHOPS DURING SEMESTER 1, 2014

Learning Development holds workshops on many aspects of academic writing, thinking, reading and presenting.

Workshops begin in week 2 of semester.

Room MC146 (top floor, McMullin building):
- 11:15am-12:45pm on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday
- OR 4:15pm-5:45 on Monday

For details, go to the Learning Development Blackboard.