

What family type is more logical? essay

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Macedo Professor Albert Einstein Sociology 101 Although the family is universal, domestic life does not assume a uniform pattern of social organization in all societies. Family types differ as much as the separate cultures in which they exist.

As products of Western culture we can scarcely imagine life in the polygamous families of the Australian aborigines, in the arranged-marriage system of classical China, or in the patriarchal pattern of Old Testament families. Hence, different societies have different types of families. Which among the various family types met its society's needs? What family type is more logical? The Definition of the Family Before we can proceed with our investigation on which family type is more logical, we need to define this institution as exactly as we can. Generally speaking, social scientists divide into two camps when they define the family. The functional camp defines the family by what the group does, while the substantive camp focuses on what the family is, in organizational terms. Definitions Based on Family Activities Families come in more varieties than the legendary Heinz soups – a fact that makes them hard to define.

Social scientists seek a definition which will cover typical as well as extreme family types. The functional approach to defining the family concentrates on essential family activities which distinguish this social institution from others. Once a unique set of activities is identified, all groups carrying on these functions can be defined as families.

George P. Murdock was one of the early leaders in developing the functional definition of the family. In his classic study, *Social Structure*, he listed four

universal functions of nuclear families: procreation, sexual relations between marriage partners, cooperative economic activities, and the socialization of children. More recently, Ira Reiss eliminated the first three functions as unique to the family, and laid greater stress on the last item, the socialization of children. Accordingly, he defined the family institution as "... a small kinship structured group with the key function of nurturant socialization of the newborn." The organization of this " kinship structured group" is open-ended, emphasizing the socialization function. A single mother and child, a single father and child as well as several generations living together, would all qualify as families as long as the group participated in the nurturant socialization of the newborn (Reiss 29). Definitions Based on Family Organizations Substantive definition of the family focus on patterns of social organization and the roles existing within this organization.

Thus, the family is seen as a specialized social group, and its corresponding social roles are fixed to positions created by its unique organization. One definition typical of the sustentions approach is that: " A family system exists in any society in which the related positions of mother, father and children are recognized and shared notions" (Bell and Vogel 2). Note that this definition does not mention group activities.

Instead, it emphasizes several interlocking social positions. These positions – mother, father, and children-form the organization. A group constituted on the parental role will remain a family, whether or not similar functions are performed by other individuals or social groups (Zelditch 64). A Working Definition of the Family Few definitions of the family are purely

functional or substantive. Rather, they combine aspects of both. As one classical theorist of functionalism observed long ago, activities require an organizational structure, just as an organizational structure gives rise to a related set of social activities (114).

Structure and function, organization and activity, cannot be radically separated. Thus, in our definition of the family we are trying to provide some balance between functional and substantive traits to avoid the one-sidedness which often distorts definitions. As a basic working definition, then, the family may be regarded as a kinship-structured institution, found in many different forms, but normally composed of an adult male and female, along with their children, who live together in a more or less permanent relationship approved by society as marriage, the minimal functions of which entail procreation, affectional intimacy including sexual relations, status placement, and the socialization of children. Theoretical Analysis to the Study of Family Definitions do not stand alone. They represent important elements set within broader theoretical analysis. Every field of study must have a theoretical perspective in which to interpret the bits of information gathered in its research.

These theoretical approaches are important for the study of family, as well as the viewpoints on the question we are trying to answer. Partly because of concerns about the effects of social change on family and partly because the family is confronted with a number of problems, most research in the area of family has been problem oriented. It has been estimated that for every 100 studies investigating families only 1 has been of a positive nature whereas

99 have been concerned with problems (Corfman 1). Hundreds of studies have yielded a steady supply of facts. Until relatively recently, in fact, family research was long on facts but short on theory. Recently, however, the field of family has generated theories of its own in addition to using existing theories to good advantage in explaining contemporary family life and expected trends (Burr 19). In a recent review of family theories, Hollman and Burr (80) suggest that there are three kinds of theoretical analysis currently judged to have a major impact on our understanding of issues of family.

These theoretical schemes are: the symbolic interaction analysis, social-exchange analysis, and the general systems analysis. Symbolic Interaction Analysis Many family theorists believe that symbolic interaction may be the most influential theory, because of the number of research projects employing this approach (Klein and Miller 97). Three concepts are prominent in the analysis of the symbolic interactionists: symbolic meaning, role, and reference group. According to Herbert Blummer, a leading figure in the symbolic interactionist school, people relate to social objects and events largely in terms of the meanings of those objects or events.

Rather than being fixed, however, meaning is constructed and reconstructed in the daily interactions of persons. Symbolic interactionists use the term social role to mean a mutually recognized set of behavioral expectations for a person of a particular status. For example, mother and father are two status positions within the family's social organization. People behave in these roles according to generally accepted norms and expectations and in

response to others who are affected by their behavior. Nonetheless, social roles are not rigid prescriptions for social conduct, which people must obey willy-nilly. Interaction also includes an interpretative process through which people modify their role performance to fit particular situations (64-5). People acquire their individual role behavior through their contact with others in various reference groups. A reference group is any group which helps us define one or more of our social roles, and which helps us evaluate ourselves or form attitudes.

Familiarity with a reference group's point of view is critical for individual conduct, for it allows us to adopt the group's perspective, modify our own behavior, and "see ourselves as others see us." Symbolic interactionism is particularly well suited to the analysis of the family. This institution is a small group suitable to the microsocial focus of this theoretical analysis. Moreover, the family is the group in which we acquire our initial social roles, experience socialization, and form strong emotional ties.

Social-Exchange Analysis Social-Exchange analysis has grown in popularity in the past decade. It has been suggested that exchange theory has the potential to be the "grand, all-encompassing" framework that has so far been elusive (Blummer, 18). At the risk of oversimplifying a complex theoretical orientation, we can say that exchange theory basically emphasizes the concepts of rewards and costs in any interaction.

The sociologists Peter Blau (91) describes exchanges as "voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the returns are expected to bring and

typically do in fact bring from others.” Most studies on family decision making have used exchange theory as a basis for explaining how and why decisions are made (98). Each family has certain resources (money, talent, wisdom, affection) that may be used to reward desirable behaviors of others. Exchange theory has helped scholars understand a variety of family issues in which a clear focus on rewards and costs is evident. Critics of exchange theory point out, however, that not all issues lend themselves to such a clear analysis: many interrelationships appear to be based on highly complicated factors that are often beyond the conscious awareness of individuals involved (Zinn and Eitzen 353).

Analysis Structural functional analysis has been the dominant school of sociological analysis for most of this century (Zinn and Eitzen 83). Functional analysis assumes that social facts or events should be examined in terms of their effects on society (84). Functionalists would ask: What does the family do for society? What are the results, for society and individuals, of our kinship system? More so, this would also ask my topic question, what family type is the most logical? These questions clearly aim to determine how social life is influenced by such factors as cultural norms, organizational structures, and social processes.

Moreover, functional analysts tend to view society as a system made up of many parts that depend upon each other. Change in one segment of the social order may profoundly affect other units of society. Integrating such actions is viewed as a major system problem which citizens and leaders of social institutions must continually confront. Functionalists believe that the

sources of social solidarity are the cultural norms and values of a national group.

Norms not only shape basic social order, but also motivate individuals to fulfill social roles essential to a stable society. The question of social norms reveals an important feature of functionalism. Its focus is on collective social life and the beliefs, structures, and social processes that define the situation in which and individual acts. To be sure, members of a family are not seen as mere pawns moved about by more powerful social forces. Change can be undertaken by individuals. However, functionalists insist that society has impressive ways of exercising social control and that people usually conform to the norms and roles within the social order. Functionalism has penetrated so deeply into the social sciences that one must include this body of research to produce a comprehensive survey of the subfield of family (Zinn and Eitzen 103).

III. Major Family Types If “variety is the spice of life,” as the old saying goes, then family life is certainly well seasoned, for its variety is more than generous. Few institutions are as diverse as family patterns when they are compared across cultures and through history. We must be familiar with several family types to appreciate how present-day families differ from those of other societies, past and present. Family Types Based on Kinship

Structures: Nuclear Family and Extended Families A kinship system includes all of one’s relatives, whether by marriage (affinal relations – “in-laws” in American society) or descent from a common ancestor (consanguineal kin). A kinship system also includes rules governing such

related issues as inheritance, succession, sexual relations, and place of residence (Freedman 336). Quite clearly the kinship system is much broader than the immediate family. The varying numbers of kinsfolk in the operational family unit has given rise to two domestic arrangements – extended and nuclear families.

As the name suggests, the extended family unites two or more generations – the parents and at least one of their married children (419) – into a functional social unit. Generally, the fully extended family embraces three generations living together in one house or in immediately adjacent houses. More importantly, an extended family functions as an economic unit. The counterpart to the extended family is the nuclear family. It is far less complex, consisting of a married couple and their offspring. This basic building block for most kinship systems usually remains intact, even when it is integrated into an extended family pattern. In Western societies, the nuclear family usually is the residential, economic, and social unit that carries out the routine family functions.

Monogamous marriage is the basic social relationship underlying the nuclear family. This marital relationship is expected to be continuous, with exclusive sexual and residential rights for the partners. Husband and wife contribute to the nuclear family's household management, economic support, and child rearing (421). Family Types Based on Life-Cycle Functions: Families of Orientation and Families of Procreation Family rights and obligations differ significantly, depending on whether a family member is a child or parent. Two categories help distinguish families in relation to one's own

position in the life cycle. The family of orientation is the one into which an individual is born and which socializes the person. In this family we acquire our first role patterns, our basic identity, and our knowledge of language and cultural symbols. Our family of orientation nurtures us so that we can later participate in society outside of our immediate family circle.

A family of procreation is established when a person gets married and has children. Thus, a family of procreation for parents is a family of orientation for their children. Most people participate in both types during their lives. Yet, our rights, obligations, and social responsibilities differ markedly with our placement in either type of family (Zinn and Eitzen 2003). The Historical Development of the American Family Our analysis of the most logical family type should be complemented by an historical approach to family study.

Few events appear to have affected family life more than the Industrial Revolution, according to one school of thought. Traditional village life placed the family under rigid community controls. The industrial Revolution attracted large numbers of peasant youth to the cities, where they escaped repressive community supervision. An almost immediate result was the birth of romance; couples began to select mates on the basis of love. Maternal care increased when spouses generalized their love to include their children. Out of these changes arose a new pattern of domesticity in which the nuclear family found refuge in a home of its own. Other students of family life, however, suggested that the nuclear family industrialization.

The Puritan Family In the New World, the Puritans had already established a beachhead for the American family. They took strong steps to assure that the family could function properly. Puritan equalitarianism, concern for the children's welfare, and the tendency for the nuclear families to live alone, all foreshadowed the modern pattern that later developed more fully in the West (Elder 116).

Family Life on the American FrontierLife on the American frontier very nearly defeated efforts to establish a stable family system. The family was the only basic institution on the cutting edge of the frontier. Without the support of the church, government, and the civilizing effect of cultural norms, family life deteriorated seriously. Arriving pioneer farmers and the merchant – professional classes helped restore family stability (118). However, the American family hardly seems to have gained strength from its ordeal on the frontier.

The Rise of the Modern Middle-Class Family in American Life The rise of the middle-class family in the 19th century represented the triumph of urban, industrial society. Out of this atmosphere came the modern, American family. Founded on an equalitarian, companionate marriage system, it permitted mate selection on the basis of romantic attachment; children emerged as the objects of love and concern.

During this time, too, adolescence arose as distinct period separating childhood from adulthood. The central feature of adolescence soon came to be youth peer-culture participation (120). Toward the Postmodern American

Family Several commentators have recently argued that the

postmodern family began to emerge in the mid -1960`s. For their first time, the peer culture also became a counter culture. They result was youth`s earlier escaped from family controls as young people accepted their peer culture`s view of behavioral and moral norms. Changes in adult relations also have been suggested. It is still too early to tell if the postmodern era has, in fact, begun. But it is clear that the Western and American family system have undergone a long process of evolution.

In retrospect, the nuclear family of today is really a very recent development in the social history of family life (122). Although many members of our society live in extended families, the nuclear family has become the predominant form in the United States. What is the most logical type of a family, then, is a matter of personal morality and lies at the center of the contemporary “ family values” debate (Dedrick 90).

Today we find multiple family types in which individual members must attempt to chart their ways in unfamiliar territory. The old rules do not often suit the new lifestyles, but there are no new, uniformly accepted models to guide us toward warmth and intimacy while still allowing us to retain individuality. There are currently a great many types of families in the world that seem to function at least somewhat satisfactorily. This is apparently has always been true.

The standards against which so many critics of current family life measures the family`s deterioration seem to be derived from unrealistic ideals rather than from careful observations of historical social reality. Thus, many family-life specialists believe that a family can adapt to changing economic

conditions and changing values. But the strength of the family as an institution does not mean the divorce rate will decrease rapidly or families that experience severe stress due to unemployment, ill health, and the like will have an easier time remaining intact. Thus sociologists who do research on the family will continue to find that there is still a need for more information about family.

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