

The gender division of labour sociology essay



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Functionalists put forward a structuralist view of the family and within that context, how they understand conjugal roles. Parson believed the gender division of labour was natural and desirable. He also suggested that men and women had biologically determined personality types. Parson suggested that the roles carried out by women were not inferior, just different. They complimented the role carried out by men. He believed that women were more expressive than men and children were best socialised when they live in a warm, caring environment. The expressive female was also essential to stabilise the adult male personality by meeting his emotional and sexual needs. As a result, the family benefits when women stay at home. Also, men are better at providing for their family because they have instrumental personalities. He also stated that in the industrial society, isolated nuclear families have become more dominant. These families have become isolated from their extended families because of commitments such as work demands. The conjugal pair therefore looked to each other to provide for their needs.

In recent years, Parsons' view has been supported by a number of groups, including New Right Conservatives. They believed traditional, segregated conjugal roles were best for the family and wider society. However, to their concern, they believe they have been threatened by family diversity and the changing roles and expectations of women, resulting in a number of social problems such as underachievement and delinquency. Therefore, suggesting that they see the family as a structure that influences the development and attitudes of its members.

Looking at Young and Willmott's analysis of the symmetrical family, they suggest that families today are more equal than before and have moved from segregated conjugal roles. This movement was through the result of a 'march of progress'. There are several reasons for this. The first is that women are in paid employment, giving them financial independence and leading to greater sharing of power and status within the family. Unlike before, there are also changing expectations of husbands and family life. Also, there is a change in the size of families today, which are smaller. This may be due to changes in lifestyle, contraception and abortion. With the loss of the extended family this meant that the conjugal couple depended on each other practically and emotionally, both contributing to the duties within the home and sharing decisions. As a result, marriage today is becoming an equal partnership.

Gershuny supports the view of Young and Willmott, that there is a greater equality. The foundation of his work over the past three decades is through the use of time use diaries. Gershuny sustains that 'the division of labour remains unfair, not because of the work itself, but because of its relationship to longer-term power structures within a society'. (The Guardian, 2008). Although there is some progress towards greater sharing, it is very slow. He suggested that it may take a generation for men to make an equal contribution, describing this as 'lagged adaptation'.

Post Modernists argue that the world is no longer predictable. Society has entered a postmodern phase where there is no dominant family type and where individuals have the opportunity to create family relationships that are more suitable for them. Families are much more diverse today. In today's

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society, home life is much better than it used to be. There are also an increased number of appliances in the home, making home life more desirable and more men are willing to stay at home and help with household duties and childcare. This is similar to Young and Willmott's view on changing gender identities, describing men as 'New Men', helping to emphasise a change in attitudes. Also, some women are content with staying at home, taking on parenting and housework duties.

In short, Young and Willmott's and others have argued that while conjugal roles are not completely equal they have become more equal. However, Feminists have criticised Parsons' image of society that too much emphasis is laid upon how social control within families can reduce the potential for underachievement and delinquency. Also, there is no evidence of the biologically expressive female. Critics of Young and Willmott suggest there is insufficient sociological evidence to clearly support their argument. Most evidence suggests considerable inequality, especially where women are in paid employment.

Feminists argue that the gender division of labour is culturally created and that there is insufficient evidence that conjugal roles have become more shared. They portray that the division of labour works to the advantage of men, leaving women in a position of inferiority in both power and work. Feminists believe the family is patriarchal because women must do housework without pay, which exploits and oppresses women because they are socialised to be dependent on men. According to Ann Oakley's (1974) research, women still felt that housework and childcare was their responsibility, even when they are in paid employment they still take on the

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responsibility of childcare and housework, this is known as the 'triple shift'. This also contradicts the argument of Young and Willmott that as more women take paid employment outside of the home men increasingly share the housework and childcare. They also disagree with the new rights view of separate roles and they disagree with the 'march of progress' view, stating that society has not changed and it is still unequal.

Feminists also reject the theory that there is 'one best' family type, they embrace freedom and diversity. They also see the traditional nuclear family as the main reason for women's oppression, suggesting that family ideology makes problems such as domestic violence worse, as women believe they should 'stand by their man' no matter what the outcome is. These women may blame themselves for being bad wives and see themselves as deserving to be punished.

Feminists reject Parsons' view that women were biologically determined and believe they are socially constructed. They blame the media for this construction of women, often portraying them as housewives, cleaners, domestic servants offering comfort and support for men and presenting them as a man's sex object to tend to his sexual needs, suggesting that these roles are natural and normal. This is therefore seen as an example of patriarchal ideology. Marxist feminists believe that female workers are taken advantage of at a higher level than males as they are seen as a source of unpaid domestic labour, benefiting capitalism.

Interactionism criticise both functionalists and feminists because both assume that social structure determines gender roles. Functionalists believe

that family meets the needs of the individual and the family and Feminists believe that family maintains patriarchy. Interactionism has a more micro theory focusing on relationships between individuals and outcomes rather than roles, including things like social class, ethnic, lesbian and gay differences.

In short, there is little evidence of sharing of power and the cultural dominance of men over women persists. Critics say that women have 'hidden powers' controlling the home and have sexual power. They also say that feminism has led to greater opportunities for women in education and the workplace and cultural change in female ambitions.

Based on the above arguments and evidence, there remains considerable disagreement within Sociology over the dispute of conjugal roles. While Functionalists believe that roles are progressively equal in modern society, Feminists maintain that there is very little empirical evidence to support this. For them, there remains considerable inequality. However, Interactionists and Post Modernists are critical of both approaches for a presumptuous view of conjugal roles and for ignoring the diversity of family and household structures and outcomes.