

Role of the family in reproducing social inequalities



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The family is a core social institution serving various functions in society, ranging from fulfilling the biological need to ensure the continuity of the human race, to providing people with a sense of identity and belonging. One of the key roles that families play is in socialization, where parents are responsible for educating their children on societal norms and acceptable behavior, ensuring the stability and healthy functioning of the society. However, during the socialization process, certain ideas may be passed down to children that result in the production of social inequality in society. These inequalities are commonly seen in terms of racial biasness, sexuality and gender norms and social class inequalities which I would be discussing about through this essay.

Parsonian functionalism theory gained popularity in the 1950s and 60s, defining the family as a universal social institution that is responsible for stabilizing the society. This is done by introducing new members into society and educating them about the norms and values of that society (Connolly, 2014). Through this process, individuals learn about the existence of unofficial 'hierarchies' in society where certain social groups are viewed more favorably and enjoy greater privileges than others, whether in terms of their race, gender or sexuality to name a few examples. Eventually, these socially constructed hierarchies start to be viewed as normal social arrangements and individuals learn where they stand in society (Collins, 1998). Stereotypes will be formed against people of another social group, which will be passed down to children during the socialization process, consciously or not. Social inequalities will thus be reinforced in societies as the imaginary hierarchies continue to persist throughout generations,

benefitting those at the top while discriminating against those at the bottom levels.

This is how racial bias is still so prevalent in some societies with diverse racial makeup such the US. In the US, people of colour are common viewed as being less intellectually developed and less civilized than the Whites who are portrayed as more matured intellectually and more civilized adults. Such ideas would influence the decisions made by individuals involving race, for example the Whites tend to show great approval for policies that push for racial purity, separating the African-Americans and other people of colour in areas such as schools or neighbourhoods (Collins, 1998). The people of colour, knowing the negative stereotypes people have of them, would also tend to avoid interaction with the Whites to prevent racial conflict. This is evident from the interview response of an African-American women who after hearing racial remarks being made against her son at a White boy's birthday party, started to encourage her son to play and form friendships with African-American children instead to protect her son from racial harm (Lareau, 2000). As children grow up in the midst of such racial stereotypes, they will see how their parents and society act in response to them and develop similar ideas as well. Moreover, with the lack of interaction with other racial groups to correct such ideas, it is not surprising that these racial stereotypes continue to perpetuate society as they are passed down from generation to generation, thus reinforcing social inequality in society.

Racial inequality has also been perpetuated through state control of births. This is done through several ways, such as forced sterilization or the use of eugenics. A prominent example of this would be how then President

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Roosevelt called for the maintenance of racial purity in his 1905 speech, encouraging the native-born white women to have babies with other white men to prevent the suicide of the race while calling for birth control for the Black people (Davis, 2003). This racism in birth control suggested that the Blacks had a 'moral' obligation to control their births, while there were no similar harsh implications on the Whites. showing the inequality in treatment.

Eugenics movement also gained popularity in America in the early 20th century, with the Eugenics Society announcing that more than 26 states had enforced compulsory sterilisation laws and thousands of 'unfit' people had already been sterilised. Majority of these people deemed 'unfit' were the Blacks with about 5000 out of the 7686 sterilisations conducted since 1933 being done on them (Davis, 2003). Many were also tricked into undergoing sterilization, such as in the case of the Relf sisters. These state-enforced birth controls clearly reinforced the idea of racial inequality in society as particular groups that were deemed inferior were always the ones being targeted for the benefit of other groups. Negative views of those groups being 'dirty' or 'polluting' the society will also develop since the state is directly targeting them, causing them to face discrimination in the society.

Another issue that shows how family reproduced racial inequality is that of immigration. This issue is of particular interest to Ireland as it had progressed from a country of emigrants to one of net immigrants. The main issue arose due to the groups of pregnant African asylum seekers, who came to Ireland and subsequently gave birth, giving their child rights to Irish citizenship which they hoped will provide their child with a better future

while growing up. However, the African mothers faced much discrimination in Ireland, being publicly demonized and having to deal with verbal and physical assaults by others. There was much fear among the Irish that these African babies will serve as “ anchor babies”, encouraging future migrations from Africa. They feared that this introduction of Africans into Ireland will disrupt the national and racial identity of Ireland, seeing them as “ polluting” entities (Shandy, 2008). Thus, discrimination against these children was also evident, for example the immigrant parents who were interviewed in the study conducted by Shandy in 2008 mentioned that there was generalized racism among kids in schools which can be seen by how the Irish children refused to play with their children. With such racist ideas present in the children from young, it would be hard to change their mindset and result in negative ideas about the Blacks to perpetuate as they grow up, translating into their actions and how they will treat them in society. Hence, it can be seen how the migration of a family, due to parents in search of a better future for their children, can lead to racial discrimination and unequal treatment for them if the immigrant country is not welcoming of them.

Other than race, another aspect that inequality is propagated by family is in sexuality. The nuclear family has traditionally been viewed as the ideal family type, defined as a family unit consisting of the parents and their children. The married couple has always been assumed to be a heterosexual couple, as it was not till more recent times that same-sex marriages were legalised and wider definitions of the family were accepted to include same-sex parents. This idea of an ideal family type has also been reinforced by states. A good example to show this would be how the ex-British Prime

Minister, Margaret Thatcher spoke about children having the right to be brought up in a 'real family', with the 'real' family being defined as one with a heterosexual couple as the base (Jackson, 1993). This definition is even more explicitly laid out in Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act which writes that local authorities should not 'promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'. Thus, this implies that lesbians or gays couples do not make up 'real' families but rather are just pretend. As the general public internalise such ideas of what is an ideal family, they start to discriminate against these homosexual couples as they are seen as deviant from the norm and thus must be wrong. Homosexual couples will have to deal with harsh judgements made against them and perhaps even verbal or physical abuse, showing the unequal treatment of them in society.

Moreover, the law often discriminates against these same-sex couples as many states do not legally recognise them, thus denying them of the same rights that heterosexual couples have when starting a family. Marriage commonly only acknowledges heterosexual monogamy, viewing it as the socially legal foundation of family life, thus a homosexual couple in many states, however long established, have no recognised relationship to each other. This means that the individuals will not be defined as each other's next-of-kin as in the case of a legally married couple, and have no automatic rights in relation to each other (Jackson, 1993). The same-sex couple will also face difficulties in many other aspects, for example in obtaining legal custody of children, owning property, receiving social welfare and so forth. Thus, it can be seen the family discriminates against same-sex couples due

to them not fitting in the ideal of a nuclear family, resulting in them being viewed negatively by society and not having their equal rights in law, contributing to social inequality.

Gender inequality is also reproduced through the family. The image of a supposedly 'normal' family is always presented as one with a husband who is the breadwinner of the family and a wife that is the domesticated dependent housewife. As the man is traditionally the one who goes out to work and brings back the money to support the family, the man is naturally viewed as the dominant one with the controlling power in the family. This power can come in the form of taking charge of the domestic finances, for example in dictating the amount of housekeeping money the women gets and how much pocket money he gets to keep (Jackson, 1993). This makes the woman dependent on the men and reduces the rights they have in the family.

The power that the men have over women in the family is also demonstrated in other forms, such as in controlling the birth rights of the women.

Traditionally, the concept of 'voluntary motherhood' (Davis, 2003) was a laughable one as wives were seen to have no right to refuse to satisfy their husband's sexual urges, showing how powerless they were in the family. It was not till later with the rise of feminist movements that the idea that women could refuse to submit to their husband's sexual advances emerged. Another example that clearly demonstrates the unequal rights the women has in the family is the suffering of women in domestic violence. Research has consistently showed that it is the woman who is more likely to be the victim of violence by their partners, with the UN also recognising that

interpersonal violence is highly related to gender, with women being the victims much more commonly (O'Keefe, 2018). The UNDeclaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 1993 also accurately names the 'unequal power relations' between the genders as the reason for the discrimination against women by men, with them using violence to force the women to remain subordinated. Thus, these examples clearly show how family reproduces gender inequality as the women are seen to have less rights than the men in a household.

Inequalities in gender roles in the family is also evident. Traditionally, women are primary in charge of domestic work due to the sexual division of labour which makes housework their responsibility. This is especially the case in Ireland traditionally as women's role as mothers had been greatly emphasised, with the 1937 Irish Constitution mentioning the special contribution of women 'within the home' to Irish society. While the men do contribute to household chores as well, the contribution between men and women in the family is greatly unequal, for example the women put in considerably more hours into household chores as compared to the men and men have more control on when to make contributions to the household than women do due to the nature of chores they engage in (Hochschild, 1989). For instance, men tend to do chores such as taking out the trash or changing the car motor oil which are tasks that are only done occasionally and can be put off if needed. However, the women are usually in charge of tasks such as cooking and cleaning which have to be completed within limited times for the functioning of the household. Thus, inequality in gender roles can be seen in the division of household chores in a family.

In addition, these gender inequalities continue to persist in society as parents pass down such ideas to their children during the socialisation process. As children learn by observing, watching the domestic practices in their family allows the children to gain an image of appropriate gender behaviour (Leonard, 2004). Parents also tend to allocate their children different household chores in an imitation of their own gender roles and what they expect their children to be responsible for as adults in the future. The effect of placing such gender roles on children is that girls tend to start doing household chores at an earlier age and put in more hours on them as compared to boys (Duckett et al., 1989; White and Brinkerhoff 1987; Zill and Peterson 1982). Girls also tend to be responsible for cooking, cleaning and washing while boys tend to be responsible for doing household repairs, gardening and taking out rubbish, in a similar fashion to the gender roles of the parents. Thus, as the children grow up, they will internalise these assumptions about the gender roles within the household and accept the inevitable differences between the sexes. This results in the gender inequality in household to be passed down and continue to be present in society.

The family also maintains inequality in social class due to its role in wealth accumulation and inheritance. This function of the family is highly advocated by Marxist theorists, who see the family primarily for the reproduction of capitalism in society and transmission of class through legitimate heirs, enabling for the concentration of wealth within the family (Connolly, 2014). This means that wealth will always be concentrated within the few rich families in society, resulting in the formation of an income gap.

Moreover, it is difficult for the poorer families to close this gap due to barriers such as the marriage bar, which defines the standard of living a couple is expected to obtain before they are willing to get married (McLanahan and Percheski, 2008). This standard may differ for everyone, depending on their expectations of life after marriage, and can include things such as owning a house, a car, and having a stable income. Naturally, wealthier people who are used to having a higher standard of living would set a higher marriage bar. This results in marriage becoming increasingly concentrated among people within the same social class as only they are able to fulfil each other's standards for marriage. This union among the families of higher social status means that the wealth will always remain among the same few families, while the families of lower social class will have difficulty rising up to the upper social levels due to the barriers, thus widening the income inequality between those at the top and the bottom of the social class in society.

Moreover, the social status of the family would also affect the future success of the children due to the difference in the amount of economic and social capital they can provide their children with. For instance, families with greater wealth will be able to invest more heavily in their children's education, such as sending them to private schools, hiring private tutors for them or signing them up for enrichment lessons. These help their children to gain an advantage over their peers and perform better academically, thus landing them in higher-paying jobs in the future, helping to maintain their higher social status. These families of higher status will also be able to derive substantial social capital from family, friends and neighbours who are

similarly highly educated or influential, allowing their children to draw upon such contacts in the future (Gillies, 2005). This is evident in the education system in Ireland, where elite schools give preference to siblings and children of past and current pupils, admitting them automatically rather than recruiting on the basis of meritocracy (Courtois, 2018). Thus, the school will admit generation after generation of students from the same pool of applicants with high status, allowing them to benefit from the more superior education the elite school has to offer and the glory that comes with graduating from such schools.

In comparison, children from lower social status are at an disadvantaged end due to them not having the same social capital that the others have. For instance, poorer families or single-parent families are more prone to financial instability and thus will not be able to invest as heavily into educational resources for their children. Moreover, they will be denied the chance of receiving privileged education in elite schools in certain societies simply due to them lacking the influential social capital from their family. This means that those of lower status are constantly in a disadvantaged position to improve themselves and thus likely to remain in the same social class. This is supported by research that shows that people who come from middle income or affluent family backgrounds have greater chances of intergenerational mobility as compared to those who grow up in the bottom fifth of the income distribution (Isaacs 2007). Thus, the future social status of children is highly determined by their family background, making it hard for them to move out of their social class and thus perpetuating social inequality in society.

In conclusion, the family reproduces social inequality in society in terms of race, sexuality and gender and social class through its role in socialization, reinforcing sexuality ideals and gender roles and wealth accumulation. With that said, society is constantly changing to reduce such inequalities, for example, with people become more educated and open-minded, stereotypes against races and sexualities are decreasing and fixed ideas about gender roles are gradually changing as well. Hence, the influence of family on reproducing social inequality is evolving with the times.

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