

To what extent do contemporary sociologists see the modern family as a haven from...

[Family](#)



Until recently, sociological studies of the family have concentrated upon the role of the family within society. Contemporary sociologists however have shown an increasing interest in the emotional relationships within the family unit. This is an important issue in sociology when looking at the role of the family, as the family is the only institution in society providing affection and emotional support. There is no other specialised unit that does this.

Most sociological perspectives view the family as a haven, compensating individuals for the harsh, cruel and potentially psychologically damaging reality of the outside world. The view that the family is a haven is mainly from a functionalist perspective. Marxists agree to a lesser extent whilst feminists certainly oppose such views. There are traditional views on the family like that of Talcott Parsons', and critics of this view who view the family as a prison, such as Morgan, and feminist Anne Oakley.

Perhaps the most famous theory of the family is the view held by functionalist sociologist Talcott Parsons. He argues that the family performs two roles, the primary socialisation of children, and the stabilisation of adult personalities therefore agreeing with the idea that the family is a haven from the outside world. He states that people have an inborn need to be loved and cared for and now traditional communities and kinship networks of the early 20th Century have given way to isolated nuclear families, people are more dependent on the emotional support within that family unit.

Other functionalists support this view. Goode, for example, saw the family as being a place where a person could be treated as an individual compensating for the stresses of a non-personal modern society. Fletcher

argued that a conjugal family was important as it depended upon emotional factors such as intimacy, closeness and intensity. Although the marriage rate is descending, the number of people choosing instead to cohabit has increased. Few Marxists view the family as being a haven. Those that do, make a similar argument to functionalists.

Hunt and Hunt, in their study "panacea for Capitalism" constructed the argument that love, and family, provides a panacea, a cure-all, for the harsh realities of a capitalist society. The family, being an institution that changes in response to other sections of society, would change with the development of capitalism, thus the family becomes more important to its members as capitalism develops. Dorothy Smith, also a Marxist views the family as a haven in which to be free from surveillance, a place to organise our own lives without having to follow rules laid down by someone else.

Marxists who view the family as a haven argue that this is a challenge to capitalist society. The family is also viewed as a prison. Functionalist sociologist Morgan concentrated upon the dysfunctions of the family and found that two factors prevented the family from being a haven: Class differences within society means those who are well off can enjoy and take full advantage of what society has to offer. Those further down the social scale often find society opposing their interests. Life ends up as a struggle, which in turn leads to stresses and strains within the family.

Morgan also argued that even within the family inequalities exist. Family members have their own interests and aspirations. " For whom is the family functional? " asks Morgan. It is usually the male head of the household who

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is well served by the functions of the family. Marxists also state that the family should not have to be seen as a haven from a capitalist society, that capitalism takes creativity and affection out of society, and steals away opportunities for personal growth. Barrett and McIntosh studied this in their work "The Anti-social family".

They developed the concept of familialism, the ideology that the family is a small, isolated, conjugal unit where the husband is the breadwinner, the wife a domestic goddess and the children as happy, smiley and well behaved. What advertisers term "the cornflake family" has been put upon a pedestal and advocated as the normal and proper way to live. Barrett and McIntosh argued that this could make the family a prison in that any member who does not "fit in" will be repressed, and that individual can in turn become psychologically damaged.

Likewise, families who do not fit this ideology are seen as deviant and troublesome. Feminism tends to oppose the view of the family as a haven, choosing instead to see the family as a prison. The family is where women are oppressed and repressed. Within the family the woman is seen primarily as the housewife and mother, and in this environment men are given the control over women's sexuality and fertility. Within the family, gender roles are taught at a very young age and this spills out into society as a whole, reinforcing gender inequalities.

According to feminists, the family is where women are placed under the threat of physical and mental abuse. Anne Oakley conducted a study, *The Housewife and Housework*. She views the family as a prison because of the

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nature of housework and its lack of status. Housework is monotonous, repetitive and relentless. It's a job that goes un-rewarded, unpaid, unseen and unappreciated. Men are able to escape this routine, and children are able to escape also. Domestic labour is seen throughout society as the feminine role. Leonard looks more at the ideology of the family and how women are socialised to accept their role.

Women's magazines and television programmes are all geared towards romance and domestic issues like cooking. Leonard argues that the family is a prison and completely unequal in that the husband offers the minimum level of support to his wife and children whilst she provides a lifetime of unpaid housework, years of child rearing and exclusive sexual services. Marriage therefore does not turn out anything like the romance promoted by the media. Feminism has helped highlight many issues facing women within society, but perhaps one of the biggest issues feminists have highlighted is that domestic abuse and violence.

This puts more emphasis on the family being a prison because those people living within this environment are far from the safety of a haven. There has been much difficulty in researching this because many women are too afraid to speak out. In conclusion, to a large extent, functionalists view the family as a haven because it provides stabilisation of adult personalities in order to cope with day-to-day life. However, if a family is dysfunctional then this can make the family a prison.

Marxists do not see why the family should be seen as a haven, but agrees that the family is a panacea from a capitalist society, and at best a challenge

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to capitalism. Feminists on the other hand do not view the family as a haven in any way. They see the family as a place in which there are inequalities that cause the oppression of women. Indeed the family is also an environment that can be far from safe, where women, and children are at risk from abuse. Sociologists do recognise that families do vary and what may be seen as a haven by some may be far from the reality for others.