

# The functionalist view of the family

Family



Functionalism was the dominant branch of western Sociology until the 1960s since when it has been increasingly criticised by sociologists favouring different sociological perspectives. Functionalists argue that societies consist of inter-related social institutions such as schools, mass media, political systems, the Church and the family each of which contribute positively to the maintenance of stability of society as a whole.

That is: these institutions are said to be functional for societies as a whole it is assumed by functionalists that societies operate in the interests of all of their members so that there is no reason for fundamental conflict in society. Instead there is a high degree of consensus that societies are organised efficiently and relatively fairly. Functionalists talk about society being like a human body. The systems approach has been used by Functionalists to explain how social change occurs in society.

Functionalists see the family as the basic and most vital institution in society, just as one could see the heart and the brain as the most vital organs of the body. Functionalists sociologists would say the effect of increasing numbers of working wives and mothers been to cause changes in family life. A new situation has come about, in which activities in the home are shared so society has entered into a new stable state. The organic analogy incorporates the ideas of a system to emphasize the inter-relatedness and mutual dependency of the major institutions of society.

They therefore, see the family as changing and responding to the needs of society. Drawing on the example of Irish families in rural areas in the 1940's, they argue that most pre-industrial families existed in a patriarchal extended family structure. This usually meant that the landholder dominated his wives

and children; while even his adult sons and their wives lived and deferred to him. Functionalists therefore argue that the nuclear family developed as a result of industrialization. Talcott Parson (1902-1979) 'The warm bath theory' Parson believed that the family benefits individuals and society.

He uses the idea of 'the warm bath' theory to represent the home and the family. The husband worries about work, money, putting food on the table for the family and takes the strains and stresses home. The husband's home and family act as a 'warm bath' washing away his troubles so that he is refreshed and ready to deal with another day. Functionalists always see things from a positive perspective and they have consensus, which is a positive theory and one that believes in harmony across society (a functionalist relationship with the world), however, most of what functionalists believe is completely unrealistic in this day and age.

In most families husband and wife go out to work. In some cases the wife goes out to work while the husband stays at home as a house husband. We have single parent families, same sex families and many women are now very career minded not wanting to start a family straight but rather think about their career first. Many couples don't want to marry and some don't want to have children or unfortunately are unable to have children. All of this from a functionalist perspective would be 'socially unacceptable'.

Feminists would argue that the family is bad for women. Girls and boys learn their different gender roles within the family through socialisation. Girls copy their mothers, doing housework and playing with girls toys, whilst boys copy their fathers, doing DIY, teaching them from an early age that their role is to go out and work. They then learn that this is how male and female roles

should be. Feminists believe that the family is male dominated - the term for this is patriarchal. Feminists believe that the functionalist view is very oppressive to women.

A famous sociologist George Peter Murdock (1949) defines the family as: " a social group characterised by common residence, economic cooperation and reproduction. It should consist of adults of both sexes with at least two who maintain a socially approved relationship, which has created one or more children of their own. Therefore Murdock's definition is based on the nuclear family - a stereotypical two-generation family made up of a heterosexual couple with dependent offspring. This definition was popular with right-wing sociologists who suggested that this is the ideal type of family to which people should aspire.

Some would now argue that Murdock's idea of the family is dated, oppressive towards women, racist and socially isolated. Society is changing all the time and therefore not stereotypical. Same sex relationships, although not always fully accepted by all, are more socially accepted, women now go out to work and don't necessarily want or feel the need to have children. Marxist perspective, however, differs greatly to that of the functionalist perspective. Marxist approach equals conflict between rich and poor. Marxist believe that society works in a way to keep the rich really rich and keep the poor the poor of the society.

For example private schools - only people who can afford it get the best education resulting in them having a better life. Karl Marx (1818-1883) believed that contemporary society has reached the stage of capitalism. Within capitalism, there is a ruling class, or ' bourgeoisie', that owns the

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industry and commerce. All other people who work for a wage, no matter how prestigious or well-paid are members of the working class or proletariat. The bourgeoisie construct relations of production to their own benefit, including concepts of private property, wage labour and the justifications of wide inequalities of wealth.

The majority of the population accept the inequalities of the system of the way that dominant institutions, such as religion and education, justify the prevailing economic and social situation. Marx describes this majority as suffering from 'false consciousness. However, there is always a degree of conflict between some groups in society who are aware of their exploitation and bourgeoisie. Marx saw these people as being 'class conscious. Class consciousness manifests itself in terms of strikes and political protest, all examples of class conflict.

The New Right Perspective of the family supports the functionalist perspective of the family but completely ignores different families. ? Murray sees the Nuclear family as superior to other family structures because he believes that the socialization and role models required to develop these attitudes are often lacking in female headed, low income families. Whilst the functionalists stress the positive roles the family plays in society, and may well stress the nuclear family as preferred, the New Right definitely stresses the nuclear family.

For them, two parents of each sex in a monogamous married relationship with their biological children is the ideal. They take the functionalist argument that bit further, because for them it is this particular form of family structure that will produce stable adults from their children, and so public

policy should support the nuclear family (with taxation benefits for marriage, for example) and aim to reduce abortion, single parenting (especially families without fathers), and reducing the need for women to go out to work when there is a child to nurture.

Having looked at the functionalist perspective of the family and comparing this with others it has shown that, apart from the feminist and Marxist perspective, the New Right perspectives has similarities to that of the functionalist perspective but all have very dated and some having very unethical qualities.

Functionalist sociologists have claimed optimistically that modern capitalist societies are essentially democratic, meritocratic and based upon consensus and that nuclear families contribute both to the happiness of their individual members and to the continued stability of societies as a whole, for example via the socialisation of the young and the stabilisation in Parsons' variant of the theory.

However Functionalist theories have also been heavily criticised and even if we do not accept these criticisms in every single respect it does seem fair to conclude that Functionalists have overstated the extent of consensus in society and the significance of nuclear families relative to other family forms and understated the widespread existence of asymmetrical, patriarchal relationships within many nuclear families and the extent to which the existence of nuclear families helps to sustain capitalist and/or patriarchal power structures in the wider society.