

# **A-Level Sociology**

## **Teaching Notes**

### **Family Life:**

**The Nature and Extent of Changes Within  
the Family Group (2)**

1. In the first section of these notes we looked at a number of broad, historical, developments in relation to family life and, whilst it's evident that changes have taken place within this social group, it is by no means clear that there is a general sociological consensus about either their nature, extent or causality.

2. Willmott and Young, Bott and Shorter have argued that contemporary family life is characterised by increasing levels of gender role equality.

- Fletcher whilst not as positive as the above writers about role equality, does admit that changes have taken place.
- We've also looked at aspects of gender role relationships and the division of labour in the home (domestic labour considered in terms of conjugal roles and so forth, as well as in terms of wider relations of power and authority).

3. In this section we can develop the above in terms of gender and power relationships by looking at feminist critiques of what are termed "malestream" views. Instead of family role symmetry we can look at the concept of patriarchy.

4. It is important to be clear about what we are - and what we are not - discussing:

- We are not looking at the way gender differences are created in our society. For our purposes here, we can assume that these gender differences do exist.
- We are, however, looking at the way in which each gender has come to be associated with such things as;
  - Different capabilities (both "natural" and social),
  - Different roles within the family.

We will focus on the ideology of gender role association, rather than with the ideology of gender creation itself.

5. In terms of gender roles within the family, we can note a number of ideas:

- Firstly, when we talk about "social roles" we are talking about behaviour that has to be learnt (through a process of socialisation). This idea applies as equally to the role of a football referee, police officer or architect as it does to the roles of mother, father, child, husband and wife.
- In legal terms, the position of women in our society is comparable with men. Culturally, we should not confuse "legal equality" with "status equality".

6. Women in our society still assume primary responsibility for domestic labour (which includes child care). We could argue this simply reflects a basic division of labour in our society ("someone" has to work to provide economically for a family, whilst "someone" has to assume responsibility for domestic labour).

- However, the fact that this holds true even when a female is in paid employment should at least sensitise us to the fact that something other than a "natural" or "fair" division of labour is taking place.

7. We can sum-up the above by suggesting that:

- Women in our society have legal - but not necessarily status - equality with men.
- The "female role" remains primarily that of "wife and mother" (that is, a traditional family role) even when a woman has paid employment.

**Explanations for the way in which gender roles are performed.**

## A. Biological Differences:

1. Females have responsibility for the gestation of children. This is a basic - and important - biological difference between the sexes.

- In procreation terms, male involvement is restricted to either, "I was on the job for hours" - if you believe men, or, "Two minutes - is that it?" if you believe women.
- The female, on the other hand, carries and nurtures a baby for nine months...

2. Many writers have taken this basic biological difference between the sexes and used it as the basis for an analysis of gender roles within family groups.

3. Three basic variations - considered in descending order of emphasis on the relationship between biology and culture.

- "Biological" explanations should not be confused with wholly-genetic explanations of human behaviour. The science of genetics deals with the way in which human characteristics (such as eye and hair colour) are inherited. It involves the idea that various characteristics are imprinted in our genetic make-up and these things cannot be consciously changed, although it is, of course, possible to selectively breed genetic characteristics
- No genetic scientist has ever discovered a human gene that affects an individual's behavioural (as opposed to physical) characteristics. No gene has been discovered which predisposes an individual to crime, domestic labour, sexism or racism.
- The "biological theorists" we are about to look at all recognise that biology alone does not determine behaviour. The influence of an individual's cultural background and socialisation all play a part in explaining human behaviour.

### A1. Sociobiology

1. This perspective developed in the late 1960's / early 1970's from the attempt to apply biological principles of selection and evolution (as they applied to animals) to human behaviour (human beings are, biologically, just another type of animal...).

2. Sociobiologists such as E.O.Wilson ("On Human Nature") and Tiger and Fox ("The Imperial Animal", 1972) in America and Desmond Morris ("The Naked Ape") in Britain, argue males and females are "biologically programmed" ("biogrammed") with different characteristics and predispositions.

- Males and females are biologically predispositioned to perform certain cultural roles better than others.
  - Females are predispositioned towards passivity, nurture and caring (which makes them suited to a child-rearing role).
  - Males are predispositioned towards aggression (which makes them suited to a "hunting-orientated" role - "work" in industrial societies).

3. Basic argument is:

- Human beings evolve genetically. The "meaning of life" involves the ability - or "imperative" - of an individual to pass-on his / her genes to the next generation.
  - For males, this is achieved by impregnating a female and because males play no further part in the reproductive process itself, it is in their biological interests to impregnate as many females as possible (since this increases the chance of their off-spring - and genes - surviving). In crude terms, since males produce many millions of sperm over their lifetime, they have an almost unlimited opportunity for reproduction.
  - Females, on the other hand, have relatively fewer opportunities to ensure genetic survival because:
    - A healthy female only produces 3 - 400 fertilizable eggs during her lifetime.
    - Pregnancy involves 8 - 9 months when she produces no fertilizable eggs. At most, therefore, a female could produce 30 or so children in her lifetime.
  - Males can never be certain that a child being carried by a female is their child. Therefore, it makes "biological sense" to impregnate as many females as possible. In sociobiological terms this not only accounts for "male promiscuity" (which is clearly seen as "natural"), it implicitly holds that this is both normal and desirable behaviour.
  - Females can only be sure of passing-on their genes by ensuring that the child they produce survives (females have fewer opportunities to pass their genes on to the next generation. It makes "biological sense" for them to care-for their off-spring).
4. Biological imperatives ("commands") are translated into cultural arrangements and hence relatively fixed - and "natural" - gender roles and relationships.
- It is "natural" for women to take-on a nurturing role and "natural" for men to take-on a non-nurture role. In this respect, males and females enjoy a form of "symbiotic" relationship (that is, although each plays separate roles these roles are complimentary and supportive of each other). This is because:
    - a. Males can provide females with the resources needed for life (food, clothing, shelter etc.).
    - b. Females, in return, nurture the male's child, helping to ensure that both it - and the male's genes - survive.
5. Gender roles are "biologically programmed" because this arrangement mutually beneficial. Gender roles are not biologically determined since both males and females can choose not to fulfil their "biologically allotted" roles. However, any behaviour that attempts to "go against the grain" of biologically-predisposed lines is generally a less efficient (and potentially biologically catastrophic) way of organising human cultural relationships.

6. Criticisms:

- No empirical evidence of the existence of "biogrammers" (or "biological programming") has ever be found. Stephen Rose "Not In Our Genes", 1984) argues:
  - a. Sociobiologists have little real knowledge of genetics and the mechanisms by which genetic inheritance takes place.
  - b. "Biograms" are a convenient fiction that allows sociobiologists to hide the fact that their "explanation" of human gender roles simply rationalise cultural differences in male / female power relationships.
- The evidence produced from animal studies is partial and highly selective. Not all females are "coy / passive" and males "aggressive / dominant" in the animal world.
- Human beings are not simply "evolved animals". Consciousness is not merely something tacked-on to a basic biological nature but is fundamental to our ability to create and recreate our social worlds.

**A2. Functionalism:**

1. Some Functionalists explain the persistence and functionality of clearly-defined gender roles in terms of the way in which biology relates to cultural organisation.

- G.P.Murdock has argued that female gender roles are generally linked to the family (involving domestic labour, child-rearing and so forth) because of the female's biological role in child-bearing. Biology is seen to play two distinct parts in this respect:
  - a. Firstly, through the process of child-bearing the female develops an emotional attachment to her child (this is not genetically or biologically-determined, of course, but it might be understandable).
  - b. The traditional division of labour in relation to gender roles as a "practical social arrangement" that reflects biological differences. Traditional gender roles develop practically and normally out of the biological partnership.
- Talcott Parsons argues biological factors fit the social requirements of industrial societies (especially in the separation between the home and work). The mother's close biological relationship with her child means she is best-placed to supervise the vital socialisation function carried-out through the family structure. Mothers, through the biological fact of bearing a child, develop an affective orientation towards it which makes the female best-suited to carrying out a child-rearing role.  
There is no necessary biological imperative present  
Cultural gender roles simply develop out of biological gender roles.

2. Criticisms:

- Why are males and females locked-into the reproduction of traditional gender roles? It describes how this might occur but neglects a possible power dimension.
- Power is a significant variable (even in Functionalist terms) since the non-family roles played mainly by men give the most power (since females, when performing explicit family roles are dependent upon men for their physical survival).
- What these types of "functional / practical" types of argument tend to neglect is:

- a. Men might rather enjoy their powerful role and seek to perpetuate it by consigning women to less powerful roles.
- b. Women have to be socialised into adopting specific gender roles. The fact that a great deal of time and effort is put into this socialisation process hardly squares very neatly with the "biology / practicality" argument.

3. Radical feminists explain the persistence of traditional gender roles in two ways:

- Men are the real oppressors of women. Ideologically, radical feminists distanced themselves from "the enemy" by arguing that, psychologically, males and females are different. They reverse traditional perceptions of "male aggression" being a positive social trait and "female passivity" being a negative social characteristic.
- Female traits of nurture, affection, conciliation and so forth are considered more socially-desirable / valuable. Women, far from attempting to ape and compete with men should organise themselves around their own psycho-biological virtues...
- Friedl ("Women and Men", 1975) argues gender roles have been analysed in terms of how women's biological role constrains their physical behaviour. When pregnant, a woman is less able to do various social roles (in traditional societies, these would include things like hunting and fighting). Men take these roles and thereby control social resources. Females become dependent on males for their survival. According to Friedl's argument, this kind of relationship has become institutionalised in modern industrial societies.
- Friedl's analysis suggests the main "problem" is the way gender roles are institutionalised. This links neatly with the second main form of explanation, since the process whereby gender roles are culturally produced and institutionalised is the main theme of this perspective...

## **B. Socio-Economic ("Cultural") Differences.**

1. Explanations concerning the nature of gender relationships in this category focus on the way in which economic factors in any society (the organisation of work, different modes of production and so forth) shape gender relationships.

- Stress is placed on the way the family as a social institution relates to Capitalist forms of economic production (analysis of other forms of production can, of course, be carried-out, but we'll use Capitalism as an example for convenience).
- Attention is focused on the way the development of Capitalism (and industrialisation) moved the production process away from the home and into the factory (and, in so doing, contributed to the progressive removal of women from paid employment).

2. We can understand all of the above a little better if we think about two things:

a. Paid work involves the production of something ("goods" or "commodities" such as cars, furniture, food and so forth). For Marxist Conflict theorists the relationship between Capital (those who own the means of production) and Labour (those who sell their labour power for money) is considered to be an exploitative one.

In basic terms, the Labourer (by which is meant anyone who sells their labour power in return for something - manual workers, professional workers and so forth) is paid money that does not reflect the true value of their labour power, since Capitalist owners are able to sell commodities at a profit - they "add value" to the price of the actual creation of a commodity and keep the profit (what Marxists call "surplus value").

b. Some forms of paid work do not directly involve the production of things (for example, lawyers, doctors and accountants), but they are important because they represent services which allow / help others to be productive.

3. Domestic labour falls into this "service category" because it helps the production process by providing / performing necessary services (such as child care) that are useful for the reproduction (or continuation) of Capitalism.

- For example, if a labourer had to both work and look after children at the same time, it would be difficult to do both simultaneously.

4. There are, of course, differences between the services provided by people like accountants, waitresses, bank clerks and the like and domestic labourers - the main one being that the former receive payment whilst the latter performs for free. The "pay" of the domestic labourer is "in kind" - love and affection from their children and partner, security and so forth. Depending upon how you view this idea, this may - or may not - appear to be a fair exchange between "equals".

- The main difference between payment in money and payment in kind is that the former allows the recipient some form of control over how that payment is spent (or "exchanged") - it can be used to buy social resources such as food, shelter and clothing, whilst payment in kind cannot be used in this way. Payment in money gives some choice as to how he / she spends it, whilst payment in kind does not.
- The paid worker has power because they can decide what resources to buy and this gives them some level of control over the distribution of these resources.
- Although we could see the relationship between a paid worker and an unpaid domestic labourer as being "equal" (the former provides the means of subsistence for a family group whilst the latter provides the services that allow the worker to make money), it is an illusory equality because paid employment - however exploitative - gives the wage-earner a measure of social power; power that can be translated into relations of domination and subordination within the family group.

5. Thinking about the above situation, if we view this in terms of there being competition for the control of social resources, we can see how it relates to gender roles (and how domestic labour comes to be associated with the female role).

- In our society, people are encouraged (through a variety of socialising mechanisms - the mass media, education, the family and so forth) to control social resources, not simply because these things are valuable in themselves, but more importantly because they confer power on the owner / controller.

- Thus, in terms of economic production:

A Capitalist control most resources (because of the fact of their economic ownership). He / she is able to take the largest economic rewards primarily because they have the power so to do.

A wage labourer, on the other hand, has control over lesser resources (primarily because they do not appropriate profits).

- Within wage labour, education, the relative scarcity of certain skills, your physical ability to work, etc. are resources that can be controlled and exploited:
- The accountant is able to command high wages because:  
A high level of education is required (control over the resource of knowledge). He / she is organised professionally to limit the number of people who are allowed to qualify as accountants (the scarcity of a desired resource makes it more expensive, because people are willing to bid against each other).
- The road-sweeper commands relatively lower wages because:  
He / she has little knowledge to control / sell - the qualifications required to be a road-sweeper in our society are minimal.  
He / she has little recourse to a "professional organisation" that regulates intake (although road-sweepers may be organised in Trade Union terms).

6. From the above, in gender terms, we can see that:

- Men are able to exploit biological differences between males and females.  
Through child-bearing, women are less-able to compete on equal terms in the labour market with men. Historically, with the non-availability of contraception women have been "physically incapacitated" for long periods of their potential working life.
- Biology is not the most significant factor. It is the social necessity of controlling resources that leads those most powerful to exploit those with least power.

The Capitalist exploits the wage labourer.

The wage labourer exploits the unwaged labourer...

7. How do the powerful convince the powerless that their relationship is not exploitative - a question that involves the concept of ideology.

- The Capitalist rationalises the exploitation of Labour by the ability to present their relationship as a "free and fair" one - in return for a "fair day's work" the Labourer is paid a "fair day's wage" (the "market rate" for his / her labour power).
- The process is simple to describe. Through various socialising mechanisms (control over the workplace, education system, mass media, etc.), Capital is able to dominate Labour ideologically and because the owners of Capital are both economically and ideologically powerful, the labourer has little choice but to submit - individually - to the terms and conditions laid-down by Capital.



- In gender terms, males are able to exploit females - through the mechanism of biology - and to present their relationship as in some way "symmetrical" (as somehow "different but equal").

8. In power terms, this arrangement is beneficial to men. Women, because they lack the power that comes through the control of major social resources (such as money) are individually powerless to change it (even if they wanted to). In this respect, differential forms of gender socialisation (ideology) play a powerful part in exploiting female biology to turn her from child-bearer to child-rearer.

9. To sum-up the difference between the "biological approach" and the "socio-economic" approach to explanations of gender roles, we can note Oakley's comments ("Sex, Gender and Society", 1972).

- She points out, the only necessary aspect of biological differences between the sexes is that it is the female who gives birth. The question of who will take responsibility for child-rearing is one that relates more to cultural (that is, environmental) factors than to any innate predispositions amongst males and females.
- Empirical evidence to support this contention is plentiful. Clarke and Hindley ("The Challenge of the Primitive", 1975) provide the following example:

"The Kgatla baby is under the care and supervision of a sister or cousin from the age of a few months until it is weaned...The baby is part of the community from the word go, whereas so many babies in advanced societies spend their first months cocooned in a pram...their view...interrupted from time to time only by the face of the mother looking down. The Kgatla mother was liberated to get on with her own affairs while the little girls were learning...the vital if not always welcome lessons of responsibility and co-operation...There are very few primitive societies where baby-care isolates the infant from its human environment in the way it so often happens in the West."

10. However, it remains true that the majority of examples of alternative social arrangements in relation to gender roles tend to come from societies that are basically pre-industrial. In industrial societies (such as our own) the sharp demarcation of roles along gender lines is evident.

- One reason for this is the way in which Capitalist forms of economic production are organised encourages males to exploit females on an institutional level, but we need to go further than this and look at the nature of this exploitation in terms of the concept of power.