

A-Level Sociology

Teaching Notes

Family Life:

**The Nature and Extent of Changes Within
the Family Group (4)**

A. Symmetry or Patriarchy?

1. Marxist feminists stress the nature of economic arrangements / relationships as central to an understanding of male / female relationships and inequalities

2. Radical feminists (amongst others) focus on the concept of "patriarchy".

- This concept can be defined as male control of - and power over – women: A "patriarchal ideology", for example, is one where the dominant ideas in society stresses the desirability of males dominating females in all areas of social life.

3. One of the main points of difference between Marxist and Radical feminists is over the relationship between the concepts of patriarchy (of central importance to radical feminists) and social class (of central importance to Marxist feminists).

- Heidi Hartmann ("The Unhappy marriage of Marxism and Feminism", 1981) argues that patriarchal concepts and ideas predate class factors in the explanation of female subordination to men. Patriarchal assumptions about the nature of male / female relationships underpin the kinds of relationships which developed under Capitalism. The validity of this idea is evidenced by pre-Capitalist systems (such as Feudalism), where we find that women were clearly subordinated to men.
- Hartmann argues,
"...through the control of women, men learned the methods of domination and hierarchical organisation and then applied these techniques to the Capitalist mode of production."
- The concept of patriarchy is considered to be more-significant than the concept of class in the explanation of male domination of women because:
 - a. Patriarchy pre-dates Capitalism.
 - b. Because patriarchal forms of gender exploitation existed, men could dominate women under a different form of economic production (Capitalism).

4. Mayes ("Gender") notes the relationship between patriarchy, capitalism and class thus:

"Patriarchy pre-dated capitalism, but was threatened by industrialisation which afforded a free market for labour in which men and women came into direct competition for jobs. The response was to confine women to low pay, low status, jobs which, in turn, increased their dependence upon men".

5. Hartmann ("Capitalism, Patriarchy and Job Segregation by Sex") relates the concepts of class and patriarchy back to the role of family life in relation to social structure by noting:

- Women provide cheap, expendable, pool of labour:
Patriarchy: Increases their dependence on men; increases male control.
Capitalism: Cheap labour ("Reserve army") when required.
- Women perform unpaid domestic labour:
Patriarchy: Benefits and assists male workers.
Capitalism: Provides free services to Capitalism. Cost of reproducing labour borne by male wages.
- Privatised nuclear family becomes market place for products of Capitalism:

Patriarchy: Ideology of domesticity increases dependence on men.
Capitalism: Women do low-paid, insecure, work to secure consumer goods.
Working women open up new areas for Capitalists (fast food, domestic appliances, etc.).

6. Basic argument, therefore, is that women are doubly exploited:

- a. In the workplace (in terms of social class and patriarchal attitudes)
- b. In the home (in terms of patriarchy).

B. Is the Modern Family Symmetrical or Patriarchal?

1. The significance of the concepts of class and patriarchy can be seen in relation to the sociological debate about whether contemporary family life in Britain is either broadly symmetrical or broadly non-symmetrical (patriarchal). Different sociological perspectives interpret the same evidence differently.

- Functionalists tend to see symmetry / increasing equality.
- Marxists / feminists tend to see continuation of patriarchy.
- Methodologically, this debate illustrates the importance of the concept of ideology and, by extension, the way in which a writer's "ideological framework" conditions the way in which empirical evidence, for example, is interpreted.

2. In many respects, the concept of "symmetry" is not always used in a particularly precise way - and it is consequently open to various forms of interpretation.

For example, when we think about "symmetrical conjugal roles" within the family, does this mean that such roles are:

- a. Complimentary and unequal?
- b. Complimentary and equal?

3. Let's look at these two meanings of "symmetry" as they might apply to family life.

- Assuming the aim of participants within a family group is to maintain this social group as a viable unit in society, this maintenance is carried-out in various ways:
 - a. Culturally - in terms of the socialisation of children.
 - b. Economically - in terms of the provision of various necessities of life that allow the family group to function as a group.
 - c. Psycho-socially - in terms of the different emotional needs of individual family members, for example.

4. The way this aim (and these needs) can be met might involve "complimentary and unequal" family roles:

- a. One partner might be responsible for economic provision.
- b. The other partner might be responsible for cultural provision.
- c. In combination, the performance of these two basic roles might serve to meet the third ("psycho-social") need and so forth.

- This is a form of symmetrical family relationship since two people perform separate - but important - social roles aimed at the objective of allowing the family group to be maintained.

5. Willmott and Young, however, have argued that the concept of "symmetry" has a more-precise meaning ("complimentary and equal"). We can use an example to look at why the above might be important in terms of family life:

- In the classroom, both I as a teacher and you as a student have the same basic objective - namely, to help you to pass an exam.
 - The "division of labour" we have established to help you achieve this goal (in basic terms, who does what and when do they do it?) is fairly straightforward:
 - a. I teach you things.
 - b. You learn from me.
 - This is, in one sense, a form of symmetrical relationship. We are both working towards a desired objective, albeit in different, complimentary, ways.
 - Our relationship might be complimentary (symmetrical) we do not enjoy a symmetrical relationship in Willmott and Young's terms because there is no real question of equality in our relationship. All the important decisions - what to teach you, how to teach you, what happens when you mess around and so forth - are mine (and don't you ever forget it...).
 - Whilst we may or may not negotiate these things (I give up a little of my power to you), ultimately the power of decision-making is mine, all mine...
 - A more useful question to ask in relation to the above is that of whether or not a symmetrical relationship along the lines proposed by Willmott and Young is actually possible, given the fact that I am in control of a major social resource (power) within the classroom? This is an important question not just in relation to education, but also (for our purpose here) in relation to family life.
 - In educational terms, one important source of inequality in our relationship is the level of knowledge that I possess and which you do not possess.
 - For your part, you tolerate the imbalance of power in our relationship because you want the knowledge I possess (which, in turn, gives me more power - unless, of course, you decide to leave College...).
6. If we translate this into family life, an important source of inequality is clearly the economic input ("money" in non-jargon terms) into a family group (because money is necessary for the family to function as a social group).
- The person who contributes this resource (whether male or female) is always going to be more powerful - even if they choose to behave in ways that stress equality in their relationship to others within the family group. This follows because, at root, the powerful individual chooses to share their power with others, whilst the powerless individual is dependent upon the "good will" of the powerful (the person who has the power to give will also, of course, have the power to take away...).
7. For many feminists, therefore, family life cannot be considered "symmetrical" in the way that Willmott and Young argue precisely because "equality" is only something that can be given by the person who provides economically for the family group.
8. Like the family as a social institution, questions of "equality" within the family group cannot be easily divorced from the wider social context within which a family group exists in any society. In this respect, the Marxist Feminist Michelle Barrett's concept of "dependence" is useful here, since if - in power terms - individuals or institutions

are dependent for their continued existence on other individuals / institutions then symmetrical relationships along the lines of Willmott and Young's definition will be impossible to establish / maintain.

9. The main reason for this is to be found in the concepts of both class and patriarchy - males tend to be economically dominant in our society and this economic dominance is translated, through patriarchy, into dominance within the family. In this respect, the patriarchal concept involves the idea that, within the family group, there is a clear (if not always clearly stated or clearly understood) hierarchy of need:

- a. Economic provision
- b. Cultural provision.
- c. Psycho-social provision.

- As I've noted earlier, the first facilitates the second and their combined relationship facilitates the third (or not, as the case may be).

In short, those who are economically subordinate (which, in our society means predominantly women) are dependent, ultimately, upon those who are economically dominant.

10. For many feminists - Marxist, Radical and Liberal - this is a fundamental inequality and its basis exists, to a greater or lesser extent, in the concept of patriarchy.

C. Conclusion

1. Writers such as Willmott and Young have argued that contemporary family life in Britain is becoming increasingly symmetrical. Whilst there remains some forms of role segregation, modern families place great emphasis upon both joint conjugal roles and an overall equality in terms of such things as decision-making within the family group. There are two main objections to the above:

a. Empirical evidence suggests that this is not a valid description of family life in general. Role segregation appears to be the norm in most families and there is little evidence to suggest that this situation is changing.

b. Many feminists have questioned the idea that it is possible, given the nature of both social class and sex-class (patriarchal) relationships in our society, for symmetrical role relationships based upon "equality" to develop in any meaningful way within family life.

2. Social class differences in the way people experience family life (both males and females) are important - especially in relation to the way in which economic dependence affords women greater control over their lives and relationships with men within the family group.

- Whilst this has clearly changed the way males and females relate to one another on the basis of power within the family group, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that patriarchal ideologies and practices are a significant factor here.

For example, even in family groups where the woman is in paid employment, they still have primary responsibility for the performance of most domestic labour tasks. This holds generally true irrespective of social class and points

to the influence of patriarchal assumptions about the nature of male / female roles both within and outside the family group.

- Women still see their primary roles as being those of "wife and mother" and this is perpetuated through a variety of social controls, ranging from the socialisation process through physical violence to marginalisation in the wider economic sphere (low pay, low status, jobs, for example).

3. The fact that, without exception, women in industrialised societies have primary responsibility for child care and domestic labour is not the result of "genetic" or "biological" imperatives ("commands that cannot be disobeyed"). Rather, it is the result of the ability of males to exploit female biology, in terms, for example, of the way in which work, family life and so forth are socially organised.

- There is no biological reason why men cannot perform child care / domestic labour roles, just as there is no biological reason as to why women cannot perform "traditional" male economic roles. The fact that this situation exists owes more to ideology (and entrenched male power) than biology. In this respect, "biological" arguments could be seen to be one aspect of the male ideological armoury used to dominate women.

4. Within sociology, there appears to be three main perspectives on family life and family relationships:

a. The "progressive symmetry" perspective adopted by writers such as Bott, Willmott and Young and some Liberal feminists.

b. The "class inequality" perspective adopted by many Marxist feminists.

c. The "patriarchal inequality" perspective adopted by many Radical feminists.

5. The above are fairly arbitrary categorizations, of course, and many writers have tended to adopt a "combination approach" (whereby, for example, some feminists stress both a "social class and sex-class approach" to the study of male / female family relationships).