

FUNCTIONALIST VIEW OF THE FAMILY

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Functionalist view of the family/2/2/98/P.Covington/Yellow 1995 Family Disc

My family is my hobby

respondent from Goldthorpe's study of Luton Car workers, 1968

Important Writers

Talcott Parsons
George Peter Murdock
Herbert Spencer
Emile Durkheim
Ronald Fletcher
William J. Goode

Some Conclusions on the issue of is the Family Universal

As we can see from our examples there is **evidence** to suggest that **some societies** have very **different arrangements** for carrying out the **role of family**. Certainly, **many societies** have the **nuclear family** as the most **common grouping**. Yet even, here what is considered normal in one society is considered deviant in another.

There is evidence to such that organizations that are arguably not families are capable of performing the **family's functions**. Perhaps the best example is the Kibbutz.

Many sociologists now consider the whole question of whether the family is universal as a **non-issue**. What is more important is to explore the **diversity of families**. From this perspective the family is socially created, it is not simply a natural unit created by biological necessities. Rather it is influenced by social factors, the cultural norms of society, the prevailing economic system, and even the particular family in what point it has reached in its life cycle.

If you want to see further examples of the different types of family, *Haralambos* looks in particular at the **New World Black Family**, which according to Murdock's definition is not a family because it does not contain an adult of each sex. These families tend to consist of a woman and her dependent children. They are matrifocal.

Whether a family is regarded as universal thus depends upon how the family is defined. Clearly, though lots of groupings have been tried.

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The Development of Functionalism

The development of the functionalist perspective in sociology has been linked with the discipline of anthropology, which is the study of small-scale, non-industrial, tribal societies.

Since the 19th C, anthropologists have carried out detailed studies of tribes with the aim of describing their total way of life, a method of research known as ethnography. Implicit in their work is the idea that society can be compared to biological organisms such as the human body. In the 20th C Functionalist sociologists in their study of industrial societies have adopted this analogy.

Basic Ideas

Functionalists talk about society being like a human body. 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.

The following example explains this. A pebble thrown into a pond causes ripples that can affect the whole pond as a 'system'. Fish and marine life are disturbed, but after a time things settle down and the pond reverts back to its former self. Note that the pond in its new state has not been dramatically altered by the pebble, but it is a slightly different 'system' than previously. This point is relevant to the way that Functionalist sociologists explain change in society.

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 (the pebble in the pond) has been to cause changes in family life (ripples). A new situation has come about, in which activities in the home are shared so society has entered into a new stable state (the calm pond).

Evolutionary theory is also linked to functionalism. Durkheim for example talked about society evolved from pre-industrial societies to industrialized ones. For example...

Exercise One

If possible work in pairs. Choose another change in the family in recent times (for instance, rising unemployment among young people and analyze this change from a Functionalist perspective). Write up your account.

The Evolutionary Approach and the Family

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Tied in with the evolutionary approach of societal development is the belief that societies' institutions such as the family will evolve. Functionalists say that the modern nuclear family has evolved from earlier forms and its structure is most appropriate for and beneficial for an advanced industrial society.

This has thus been linked to the universality of the family. Studies of pre-industrial societies show the 'savagery' of the past, and the postindustrial family gives clues of what they can look forward to.

The nuclear family has evolved, according to the Functionalist perspective because it is best suited to an industrial society, its smallness of scale makes for ease of geographical and social mobility, and it provides a haven for its members. It fits the needs of an advanced industrial society, in the same way that larger extended families fitted the needs of an agricultural society.

What does a Functionalist Society Look Like?

Functionalists believe that society is based around the assumption that there is co-operation and agreement and there is a tendency towards balance between the various parts of society. Functionalists then tend to assume that the family has functions that help this occur. The family is thus studied in relation to...

- × How does the family maintain the social system? What functional pre-requisites or basic needs does it meet?
- × What is the relationship of the family to other institutions? For example how does the family integrate its members into the economic system?
- × What function does it perform for the individual family member?

Bell and Vogel, Nuclear Family and Social System

As I have explained in recent Functionalist handouts on culture, these thinkers see each social institution in terms of its role within its own social subsystem (family and Kinship) and in terms of its relationship to society as a whole.

Exercise Two

I am going to use Vogel and Bell's table from their 1960 work to illustrate this in the next exercise. Match the following statements to the appropriate subsystem.

- Economy
 - Polity – federation
 - Community
 - Value systems
1. Wages
 2. Conformity
 3. Leadership
 4. Group participation
 5. Goods
 6. Loyalty
 7. Acceptance of standards.
 8. Identity

Exercise Three

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Look at the following list of functions ascribe them either to the nuclear family (functionalist) or the extended family of the past.

1. Large number of kin and children.
2. Machine intensive
3. Productive unit
4. Industrial society
5. Small, few children, male breadwinner
6. Low technology
7. Labour intensive
8. Agricultural society
9. High technology
10. Consumptive unit

George Peter Murdock

We have already touched upon what Murdock believes to be the 4 basic requirements

- × **Sexual:** sexual access provides sexual gratification for both partners, This strengthens the family as the strong emotions sex engenders helps unite the two. Not only this but it helps strengthen society as the disruptive effects that would result is there was a free for all helps to unite people.
- × **Economic Function:** specialization of labour occurs whereby each specializes in a particular task. This he claims provides 'rewarding experiences' for the spouses working together.
- × **Reproductive:** helps to reproduce society
- × **Educational:** passes on the culture of the society.

The Reality of the Above Situation: The Sex Function

Families are **functional** for both **society** and **individuals**. The sexual function provides a good example of this. Husband and wife have the **right of sexual access to one another** and in most societies there are **rules that forbid or limit sexual activity** outside marriage. This provides **sexual gratification** for the husband and wife. It also strengthens the ties between them. Yet it also **helps society**, the rules that **limit sex** within the family **prevent disruption** that would occur if everyone were allowed 'free play' of these emotions. The family thus provides '**control and expression**' of the sexual function and thus helps both society and its individual members.

The Economic Function Murdock argues has a similar function. **Division of labour**, and **specialisation**, leads to **co-operation** in the family. This fulfills the economic function, and provides 'rewarding experiences' for the spouses working together, 'which cements their union.....'

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Talcott Parsons(1902-79)The American Family; its Relations to Personality and the Social Structure, 1955

Introduction

Parsons is regarded as a key contributor to Functionalist views on the family in the 20th C. As well as being associated with the **march of progress** and **evolutionary approaches**, his work has also been linked to the notion that the **functions of the family** have changed with the **progress of industrialization**. Parsons 1902-1979 offers a positive view of the family. Their view can be linked to the more recent approaches of the New Right, particularly with their emphasis on the benefits to society of the stereotypical nuclear family of married parents raising children. Other theoretical perspectives are more negative on this family type.

In simple terms, Parsons presents us with a modern, **stripped down family structure**, appropriate for an **advanced modern industrial society** such as the USA. As societies advance and industrialize, the family correspondingly **adapts and evolves**. In the past there was strong emphasis on the **economic and maintenance needs of family members**. As societies industrialize and become more complex, with an increasing **division of labour and specialization** of tasks, so **agencies outside the family** have **taken over responsibilities**, a good example being the education of the young. Welfare benefits for the elderly, the sick and unemployed have supplanted the economic and maintenance functions of the family.

Why the Change to Nuclear Families?

Functionalists such as Parsons point out that modern industrial societies need a **geographically and socially mobile workforce**. Work and occupational structures in such societies **alter rapidly** with **changing technology**, so that upward social mobility tends to occur between the generations.

The pattern in the post war period for **sons and daughters** of those in **traditional manual working class occupations** to enter more middle class, white-collar work such as teaching and medicine, banking and law. So in a social sense the younger generation could be seen to be **drifting apart** from the **older generation**, thus loosening ties with the **extended family** and making the **nuclear family** of parents and offspring more of a **focal unit**. **Higher incomes** and **raised standards** of living mean that there is **less necessity** for the financial support of older relatives.

Geographical Mobility

Similarly, according to Parsons, there is a need for the family to be **geographically mobile**. He was writing in the context of a large country like the USA where the average family might move long distances during the working lifetime of its main breadwinners as he seeks promotion and improved opportunities.(Note that in Parson's work, set in the 1950's America, the husband/father is the 'natural breadwinner'. This would clearly be problematic if an extended family of several generations was concerned.

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The Changing Functions of the Family

Parsons also pointed to the changing functions of the family as society advanced, suggesting that the modern nuclear family has been stripped of many of its former functions. Tradition functions included....

- ✓ Reproduction – the bearing of children
- ✓ Stable sexual relations within monogamous relationships
- ✓ Economic maintenance – providing necessities for all family members, i.e. food, clothing, and shelter.
- ✓ Socialization and education of the young.
- ✓ A sense of identity and belonging within a stable community.

The Modern Family: Fewer Functions but Two Basic Irreducible Functions.

With the rise of state welfare systems, schooling, and other features related to modernization, the family now has to fulfill fewer functions for its members.

He argues that families have two '**basic and irreducible functions**' In this study of the USA family he suggests that a wider range of **specialized** institutions are carrying out more and more **specialized functions**. He refers to this as *functional differentiation*. Thus the family and the kinship system which were important in a whole range of areas in pre-industrial society is becoming **increasingly specialized** focusing on a few **essential functions**. For example, in many **small scale communities** the role of **caring for elderly** relatives is the **responsibility** of their **relatives**, but in the most **modern world** it is the **task of hospitals** and **social services** to do this.

He believes that however specialized the family becomes it will always **retain** the **functions** of.....

- **Primary Socialization of Children:** this is the socialization that occurs within the family before school. There are two basic processes in primary socialization for Parsons. The family needs to mould the child's personality to fit the needs of society. This is achieved by **internalization of the society's culture** and **the structuring of the personality** . This first stage he believed cannot be replaced. As a result of these this socialization children shared norms and values are established, and the central values of society are drilled into the poor child. For Parsons you will remember these are the 'Value Consensus' of **independence and achievement motivation**. Families he argues 'produce human personalities' in an almost factory like manner. They are essential for doing this.
- **The Stabilization of Human Adult Personalities:** Once the personality is produced adults need **emotional security** and a source of release from the **stresses** and **strains** of modern life. The emotional support of partners, and the chance for parents to indulge in **childlike behaviour** with their children helps to provide this **security** and **release**. It helps to prevent stress from overwhelming the individual and threatening the stability of society. This is the warm bath theory: the husband arrives home from a stressful day at work and sinks into the 'warm bath' that his family provides.

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The Isolated and Private Nuclear Family

The functionalist approach to the family presents an image of the family that involves...

- ✓ Isolation from wider kinship groups
- ✓ Ideas concerning rising incomes and standards of living
- ✓ The support from the nuclear family from the welfare state.
- ✓ Distance from kin because of the mobility required by labour markets in industrial societies.
- ✓ The provision of childcare by non-family agencies, such as playgroups, nurseries, and eventually school.

Associated with this view that the family is isolated is that the privatization of the family. This presents the modern family as home-centered, inward looking unit which has little contact with neighbours and community. Those who were once work mates now become colleagues, a more neutral relationship, and the dominant emotional and effective focus becomes the family. The private world is centered on home, and or many their world revolves around this. A survey of car workers in the 1960's presaged thissee quote at head of handout....Similarly, in the 1980's, homes were described by The British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher (ugh) as *Entertainment Centres* and *A little bit of heaven here on earth*.

Today's houses are full of products such as TV's, videos, CD players, multi-media computers and similar gadgetry which means that the family need never to go our for entertainment. Fewer adults visit pubs regularly, as drinking and eating have become increasingly home centred activities.

Summary

Parsons presents a model of the family that has been stripped of its earlier functions and has evolved into a small social unit that provides its members with comfort and security in an increasingly bureaucratic and impersonal world. This also 'fits' the needs of advanced society because the small, flexible family can move geographically and socially with little hindrance from large kinship networks.

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William J. Goode

William J. Goode added to the Functionalist view in a study of family trends throughout the world entitled *World Revolution and Family Patterns*, 1963. His basic thesis was that there is a worldwide trend towards a monogamous nuclear family structure. In response to claims that there is a diversity of family forms including polygamy, clan and extended families, social rather than biological fatherhood's. Goode argued that there was a universal trend towards the Western model of the nuclear family because like Parsons, he saw this an integral part of the global expansion of industrialization.

Ronald Fletcher

Ronald Fletcher, was broadly in agreement with the Functionalist approach, disagreed with the view that the functions of the family in advanced societies had diminished.

He listed the following modern functions of the family...

- Regulating sexual behaviour
- Providing a responsible basis for procreation and the rearing of the young.
- Caring for dependent members, whether young or old
- Acting as the earliest and most powerful socializing agency
- Teaching family members the roles they play in society, and helping them accept rights, duties, and obligations linked to those roles.

Such functions were still part of family life which meant that family was still a core social institution.

Criticisms of Parsons and Murdock

- × This looks to be a very positive view of the family. Feminists and Marxists may disagree!
- × Parsons picture is of a typical middle class USA family. This may not be representative!
- × Functionalist fail to consider the validity of other family structures i.e. Kibbutzim
- × They do not consider the diversity of family types. Even in one society, there are variations based upon class, religion, ethnicity, and religion.
- × There may be a two-way interaction. Rather than just being filled with culture, children may not accept all the guff.
- × Interpretative sociologists tend to argue that Functionalists concentrate too much on the importance of the family to society and ignore the importance and meanings of family that individuals perceive.

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