

### 3. AQA: Topics in Sociology: Families and Households

**The relationship of the family to the social structure and social change, with particular reference to the economy and to state policies.**

#### **The Functionalist theory of Families and Households**

Functionalism is a **structuralist or systems theory** in that it believes that society and the way it is organised (i.e. its social structure/system) **is more important than the individuals who comprise it**. Functionalism examines the social institutions (such as the economy, education, media, law, family, religion) that make up society. It sees these social institutions as moulding and shaping the individuals who belong to them. Functionalists often assume that **if a social institution such as the family exists, then it must have a function or purpose – it must do something useful**. Generally, functionalist theories of the family see the family as making a very **positive contribution to both society and the economy**. They also share the view **that the family is beneficial to the individuals who constitute it**.

You will have noticed that the word 'functionalism' includes the word '**function**'. The essence or central focus of most functionalist theory is to work out **how particular social institutions such as the family function for the good of society**. Functionalism is therefore focused on working out the **role or purpose** of institutions such as the family. When functionalists talk about 'functions', they aim to examine the **usefulness or benefit** of that institution to society or the individual.

In contrast the word '**dysfunction**' refers to the possible '**harms**' that social institutions might do to society or individuals. For example, most sociologists would agree that domestic violence and child abuse are dysfunctions of the family.

When considering the Functionalist theory of the family, it is useful to divide the theory up into three approaches to family life;

#### **Approach 1 - George Peter Murdock**

**Murdock (1949)** argued that the nuclear family is such an essential component of society in important institution that **it is universal** – meaning it can be found **in virtually every society in the world**. He argued that the nuclear family functioned to **ensure social order** in society.

Murdock claimed that his universal nuclear family performs **four functions that benefit society because they reduce the potential for chaos and conflict and consequently bring about relatively well ordered, structured and predictable societies**. These functions are as follows;

- **The reproductive/procreative function** – the nuclear family provides new members of society, without which society would cease to exist.
- **The Sexual function** - the idea that sex should be confined to marriage contributes to social order and stability because families **regulate a potentially disruptive activity – sexual relations**. For example, engagements and marriages, and the fidelity expected by such social arrangements set out the **moral rules for sexual behavior in general**. For example, note how in the UK **fidelity or faithfulness is highly valued whilst adultery or an extra-marital affair are still generally viewed as deviant forms of behavior**.
- **Economic** - parents take responsibility for the **economic welfare** of their children by going out to work and earning a wage.
- **Educational** - parents **socialize** the next generation into **social values and norms that are shared by the majority of the society in which we live**.

However, Murdock's view that the nuclear family is universal has been criticised because although families do tend to exist in most societies, **his argument fails to take account of the increasing diversity** of modern family structures and relationships. For example, in many societies today, reproduction and sex are no longer exclusive to family and marriage. In some societies, households rather than families (for example, communes and kibbutzim) have successfully raised children. Finally, Murdock's idea of a family is an **ideological construct** in that it is **conservative**. He seems to suggest that marriage and heterosexuality are central to the concept of family and consequently **excludes alternative set-ups involving single, gay or surrogate parents as not 'proper' families**. For example, he dismisses **one-parent families as 'broken' nuclear families which are unable to effectively carry out family functions** and which are consequently responsible for many of society's social problems. This idea has been adopted by New Right sociologists. However, the biggest problem of Murdock's approach to the family is that it has badly dated and consequently **failed to take account of modern social trends** such as **the large-scale movement of women into the economy** and **mass migration** which has turned the UK into a **multicultural** society.

**Approach 2 – the work of Talcott Parsons.**

Parsons (1965), an American sociologist, was the most important contributor to the functionalist theory of the family. His theory of the family examined how the social and economic change associated with industrialisation and modernisation shaped family structures and relationships. He argued that **most pre-industrial societies** are composed of relatively small farming or hunter-gatherer communities. Land and other economic resources were commonly owned or rented by **extended families**. For example, it was not uncommon to live with and work alongside extended kin on the land either tending herds of animals or raising crops. Parsons claimed there was **a functional 'fit' between extended families and the social or cultural requirements of pre-industrial societies in that such families performed a range of functions which were beneficial to both societies and the kin that made up such families**. In this sense, the pre-industrial family was a **multi-functional** unit. The extended family, therefore, functioned:

- to meet the basic needs of extended kin through **the production of food, clothing and shelter**. They would trade or barter with other family groups for those things they could not produce or make themselves. In times of poor harvest or famine, the extended family rallied around to provide a subsistence living.
- To **educate children in whatever skills that the family specialised in**. These skills were not highly specialised and were probably limited to hunting, gathering, growing particular crops, soldiering and providing the community with basic services such as baking, brewing, metalwork, shoeing horses and so on. **Most of these skills were shared and passed down through generations from parents to children**. They skills were **ascribed**, for example the son of a pig farmer was likely to become a pig farmer himself. However, this socialisation rarely extends to literacy or numeracy because these skills are rarely required in the social context in which these families live.
- To take **responsibility for the health of its members in the absence of a system of universal health care**. However, the high infant mortality rates and low life expectancy of the pre-industrial period suggest that this was probably a constant struggle.
- To take **responsibility for the welfare of disabled and elderly members of the family**. For example, the relatively few family members who did make it into old age would be cared for by extended kin, in exchange for services such as looking after very young children.

- **Extended kin in the absence of a criminal justice system often pursued vendettas to seek revenge for perceived slights.** If a family member was unlawfully killed, blood feuds between extended families could last for three or four generations. For example, the War of the Roses in England in the 15<sup>th</sup> century was a conflict between two extended families, as represented by the Houses of Lancaster and York.

Parsons argued **that extended families were very effective for the needs of pre-industrial society but he claims that they were too unwieldy and impractical to continue in societies that experienced industrialisation and the urbanisation that inevitably followed the industrial revolution. Parsons claimed that the extended kinship network was generally unsuitable in meeting the needs of an economy based on manufacturing industry.**

Consequently, Parsons argued that **the extended family evolved into the smaller and more streamlined isolated nuclear family** in order to **function in a way that effectively met the needs of an industrial-capitalist society.** He argued then that the industrial revolution brought about five fundamental social changes to the family.

1. The new industrial-economy demanded **a more geographically mobile workforce.** The responsibilities and duties that underpinned extended families (for example, members of such families felt a strong sense of obligation to remain near to their extended kin and to defer to their elders) did not suit these modern economic demands. Members of extended families were consequently reluctant to move to the urban areas in which factories and textile mills were being built. **Nuclear families, on the other hand, because they were smaller, were more geographically mobile than extended families.** Parsons, therefore, argues that as industrialisation spread **nuclear families broke away from their extended kin to move to the growing urban centres to take advantage of the jobs and wages offered by the new factories and textile mills.** In the UK, in which the world's first industrial revolution occurred, this resulted in a mass migration from rural areas to cities. Most of this urbanisation occurred between 1700 and 1830 when the proportion of the UK population living in cities and towns increased from 15 per cent to 34 per cent. We can see similar trends in countries which have experienced rapid industrialisation during the past 20 years. For example, in 1982, China was still a mainly rural society and only one in five Chinese people lived in cities.

However, the massive and rapid industrialisation and urbanisation that has taken place in China over the past 20 years now means that just over 50% of [China's](#) population now live in cities. It is predicted that 75 per cent of the Chinese population will be living in cities by 2030.

2. Another social change brought about by industrialisation was the opportunity **to improve oneself materially. This is known as social mobility.** In pre-industrial society and in extended families, social mobility and status was **ascribed.** For example, the head of the household to whom all other members of the family were expected to defer was usually the oldest male. However, **Parsons claimed that ascription was not suitable as a means of allocating roles in an industrial society.** This is because **such societies need to ensure that the most skilled and talented occupied the most important occupational roles if they are to be economically successful.** Parsons claimed that industrial societies needed to be **meritocratic** in order make sure that the most skilled and talented are allocated to jobs in which they will be most effective.
3. Parsons believed that **members of nuclear families were more independent as individuals and less prone to the sorts of social pressures from extended kin and community that might have made them less adventurous in their social ambitions and choice of jobs or location.** Parsons argued that the **ascribed roles that were part and parcel of the extended family were likely to come into conflict with the roles required by a competitive industrial-capitalist economic system in which jobs and status were allocated on the basis of ability and qualification rather than being passed down and/or inherited.** For example, **the social stability of a family and community may be undermined if junior members of an extended family wielded more economic power than the traditional head of the household.**
4. A key difference between rural extended families and urban nuclear families was that the latter had experienced a separation between home and workplace as they had become wage-earners in the factory system. They were no longer in a position to grow or rear their own food, build their own homes or make their own clothing. **Consequently as industrialisation extended its influence over society, specialized agencies gradually took over many of the functions of the pre-industrial extended family.** Parsons refers to this process as **'structural differentiation'** and argued that it was often accompanied by a social process that he called **'functional specialisation'**.

This meant that more effective specialist institutions evolved to produce the goods and services previously provided by extended families. **Members of urban nuclear families therefore became dependent on outside agencies – businesses – which evolved to meet many of their needs.** For example, processed canned and frozen food was mass-produced in factories and sold in stores that eventually developed into supermarket chains. Other products which had traditionally been produced by extended families such as clothing, furniture and even homes were produced by businesses which specialized in these commodities. In this sense, **Parsons saw the nuclear family as largely losing its most important economic function, that of production.**

5. Industrialisation also encouraged **the development of the modern bureaucratic state as society and the economy grew more formal and complex.** For example, the development of a monetary system resulted in **people entering contractual relationships in which they were expected to engage in an official legal exchanges such as money for goods.** Bureaucratic government increasingly took on the responsibility of regulating such relationships. **The state also increasingly took over the functions of education, health, welfare and justice** which prior to industrialisation had largely been the responsibility of the extended family. Parsons suggests this process of structural differentiation meant that the **multifunctional extended family effectively disappeared and was replaced by the isolated nuclear family which focused on performing two crucial functions: (a) the primary socialisation of children and (b) the stabilisation of adult personalities.**

### **(1) The primary socialization of children**

Parsons believed that the family should bear the main responsibility for the **socialization of children into the core cultural values of industrial-capitalist societies such as**

- achievement
- competition
- equality of opportunity
- respect for private property.

According to Parsons them , the family is an important **agent of primary socialisation** and plays an **effective role in bringing about value consensus, conformity, social solidarity** – the main foundation stones of **social order** in society.

Parsons viewed the nuclear family as a **'personality factory'** whose manufactured products were young workers and citizens committed to the rules, patterns of behaviour and belief systems that make positive involvement in economic life and good citizenship possible. In this sense, Parsons saw the family as a **crucial bridge connecting the individual child/adult to wider society.**

## **(2) The stabilization of adult personalities**

Parsons argued that the second major specialized function of the family is **to relieve the stresses of modern-day living for its adult members.** He observes that modern-day workplaces are very hectic, competitive and stressful places.

Members of a nuclear family no longer have extended kin easily available for advice and guidance to help them cope with modern-day living. However, Parsons saw this as an opportunity for spouses and children in the nuclear family to positively reinforce their relationships. He claimed that the nuclear family could act as a **'warm bath'** – he suggested that **immersion in family life could relieve the pressures of work and contemporary society just as a warm bath soothes and relaxes the body.** John Pullinger claims that Parsons viewed the nuclear family as a **'retreat'**, especially for the male breadwinner, **'from the competitive demands and formality of the workplace, so as to provide replenishment within a haven of emotional security.** Moreover, it caters for the **therapeutic needs of adults to act in childish ways in order that they might relax** – such affective, childlike behavior would not be acceptable in the outside world but nonetheless requires release. The nuclear family, therefore, provides a context in which stressed adults can relax and release tensions, thus helping them cope with their busy working lives. Moreover, this emotional support, security and the opportunity to engage in play with children, acts as a safety valve that prevents stress from overwhelming adult family members. As a result it both stabilizes the adult personality by de-stressing the individual and strengthens social bonds within the family as well as stability in wider society.

Parsons particularly saw **marriage as essential to the health, happiness and stability of adults in modern societies.** Parsons therefore viewed the family as a **positive and beneficial place for all its members** – as **'home sweet home'**, as a **'haven in a heartless world'** and a **place in which people could be their natural selves.**

Parsons argued that this **new nuclear unit provided the husband and wife with very clear and distinct social roles.** Parsons claimed that the male should be the **'instrumental leader'** – responsible for the economic welfare and living standards of

the family group and the protection of other family members. He is the wage-earner and consequently the head of the household.

Parsons claimed that **the female is best suited to being the 'expressive leader'** – this means that the mother and wife should be **primarily responsible for the socialization of children and particularly the emotional care and support of family members**. Parsons argued that **this sexual division of labour is 'natural' because it is based on biological differences**. However, Parsons did see the relationship between husbands and wives as complementary, with each **equally contributing to the maintenance of the family but in a qualitatively different way**.

In conclusion, then, Parsons argued that **extended families, with their emphasis on tradition, hindered progress and modernity**. In contrast, he argued that the nuclear family unit was superior because it was more adaptable to the needs of modern industrial societies. Parsons believed that **only the modern nuclear family could produce dutiful citizens and the achievement-orientated and geographically mobile workforce required to make modern industrial economies successful**.

## **Evaluating Parsons**

**Ronald Fletcher (1988)**, argues that Parsons was wrong to suggest that the nuclear family had undergone a **'loss of functions'**. Fletcher argues that the nuclear family continues to perform **three unique and crucial functions that no other social institution can carry out in most of the societies in which it is found**. These include: **satisfying the long-term sexual and emotional needs of parents; raising children in a stable environment; and the provision of a home to which all family members return after work, school and so on**.

Moreover, Fletcher argues that the nuclear family continues to perform the functions that Parsons believes it lost to the state. He observes that **most parents continue to take primary responsibility for providing their children with educational supports and daily health care**. Moreover, even after children have left home to marry or have moved away to work, **parents continue to provide welfare for their children and extended kin**. **Deborah Chambers (2012)** agrees and observes that **many nuclear families continue to 'opt in' to provide care or financial support to extended kin**.

Fletcher argues that the western governments never intended to replace the family and that **the role of social policy is actually to supplement the functions of the family**, for example by providing social, economic and educational supports such as

post-natal care, free health care from the cradle to the grave, and compulsory education.

Fletcher accepts that the nuclear family has largely lost its economic function of **production**, although many family-based companies continue to be successful. However, Fletcher argues that the family functions as a major unit of economic consumption because the modern nuclear family spends a great proportion of its income on family or home orientated consumer goods, such as the family car, garden paraphernalia, the latest electrical appliances for the kitchen and leisure use, and toys. **The consumption function of the family therefore motivates its members as workers to earn as much as possible as well as motivating capitalist entrepreneurs and businesses to produce and market what families want. In other words, the nuclear family is essential to a successful economy.**

Parsons has also been accused of **neglecting agency and free will**. Interactionist sociologists argue that Parsons **paints a picture of children as 'empty vessels' being pumped full of culture by their parents**. They claim that this is an **over-deterministic and passive view of children** which fails to acknowledge that in reality **socialization is a two-way interaction in which children have the power to modify their parents' behaviour**, for example, by taking part in family decision-making with regard to consumer spending, television viewing, use of social media sites and so on.

**Historians** suggest that Parsons was far too **simplistic** in his interpretation of the impact of industrialisation on the family. They point out that the evidence suggests that **industrialisation follows different historical patterns in different industrial societies**. For example, until the 1980s, the Japanese experience of industrialisation stressed the importance of a job for life with the same company. Employees were encouraged to view the company and their workmates as part of a larger extended family and consequently duty and obligation were encouraged as important cultural values. As a result, Japanese extended kinship networks continue to exert a profound influence on their members and the isolated nuclear family failed to gain a significant foothold in Japanese culture.

Other social historians claim, that **Parsons confuses cause and effect**. For example, Parsons hypothesises that industrialisation resulted in the decline of the extended family and its replacement with the nuclear family. However, **this is not supported by the limited historical data that we have**. Social historians now hypothesise that **industrialisation was able to take off so quickly and effectively in some societies because nuclear families already existed in large numbers**, so people could move quickly to those parts of the country where their skills were in demand. Similarly,

**studies of urban areas undergoing industrialisation suggest that the need for the extended family was actually strengthened by migration to towns and cities.** For example, **extended kinship networks probably functioned as a mutual economic support system for migrants.** It is very likely that migrants sought out extended kin when they arrived in an urban area and that such kin pooled their wages in order to share the high cost of rents and to help out kin who were sick, disabled and elderly. Moreover, in European countries such as the UK, social surveys indicate that the extended family continued to exist well into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Parsons presents a very positive picture of relationships within the nuclear family, but evidence suggests that living in such a unit can sometimes be very dysfunctional or harmful to its members. As **David Cheal (2002)** notes, **functional relationships can easily slip into damaging relationships, and love can often turn into hate in moments of intense emotion.** He notes that ‘we have to face the paradox that **families are contexts of love and nurturance, but they are also contexts of violence and murder**’. (Cheal 2002, p. 8).

Feminists are critical of functionalists for ignoring the ‘**dark side of family life**’. They point out that in many societies, **most recorded murders of women and children, assaults and abuse of children, sexual or otherwise, take place within the family unit.** For example, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW) estimated that of all women who were the victims of homicide globally in 2012, **almost half were killed by intimate partners or family members,** compared to less than six per cent of men killed in the same year. The UNCSW also observed that forty-three per cent of women in the 28 European Union Member States have experienced some form of psychological violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime. Feminists are particularly critical of functionalism which they describe as a **patriarchal ideology that justifies sexism, misogyny and gender inequality** in its insistence that family roles are somehow biological in origin, and that males and females are somehow more ‘naturally’ suited to being instrumental leaders and expressive leaders respectively. Feminists such as **Cordelia Fine (2018)** point out that there is absolutely no scientific evidence for such assertions.

### **Approach 3 – the work of Young and Wilmott.**

The British functionalists Michael Young and Peter Wilmott (1957) are often referred to as ‘**March of Progress**’ theorists because they see nuclear families as an improvement on the extended families which they argue preceded them in the UK. They carried out a number of surveys between the 1950s and 1970s and came to the

following conclusions;

**They found evidence that extended families were fairly common in working-class communities in Britain until the 1960s.** Most families, maintained strong relations with extended kin who would **mutually support one another**. Male relatives might help others find jobs or lend one another money. Female relatives would help other female relatives out with childcare and the care of elderly or sick kin.

However, Young and Wilmott (1973) found that most of these families had **evolved into a new type of nuclear family called the symmetrical family by the 1970s.**

there are many reasons for this progress;

- the movement of bright working-class people into universities and their movement away from the areas in which they were raised in search of work;
- slum clearance and the building of new council estates,
- the rise in wages and standard of living,
- women going out to work in large numbers and the appearance of dual-career and dual-income families
- improvements in technology which made the home a more attractive place for both men and women.

However, despite the fact that most people now live in nuclear units, most people are probably **members of dispersed extended families which means that although their extended kin (siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins) are geographically scattered, family members still retain** contact via digital technology platforms such as Facebook, Skype and email. There is also evidence **that extended kin still physically come together for special occasions or because they feel a strong sense of duty or obligation to help and support one another in times of family crisis**, for example, when children are born or when elderly relatives suffer debilitating illnesses.

