

Both Murdock & Parsons' ideas are now dated which is not surprising because they were writing in the 1940s before the advent of social changes such as the feminisation of the workforce, the rise of male unemployment, the easier availability of divorce, the decline in both the birth and fertility rates, the rise in immigration and so on

Functionalism sees the nuclear family containing a married couple with a male breadwinner and a female caretaker as the ideal family form. It sees all other family types as either 'broken' or as a 'perverse' and inferior version of the nuclear family despite the evidence that other family types can be just as beneficial to its members as the nuclear family.

Evaluating the Functionalist Theory of the Family

Young & Wilmott believe that Parsons has exaggerated the speed of family change. They note that extended families did not disappear after industrialisation. Their study of 1950s Bethnal Green suggests that working-class extended families survived well into the 20th century.

Functionalism paints a very rosy picture of family life and ignores the dysfunctions such as child abuse and domestic violence. Family life therefore is not always beneficial for individuals.

Feminists argue that the nuclear family generally exploits & oppresses women – they are overwhelmingly responsible for childcare & housework even when they have full-time careers;

Marxists see the family as benefitting the ruling class rather than society as a whole – the future labour force is produced free of charge, the current male workforce is maintained in a healthy condition by women and children are socialised into values and norms which means they will grow up to be conformist and uncritical citizens and workers.

Interpretivist sociologists criticise functionalists for viewing children as 'empty vessels' or 'blank slates' that are filled up by parents with values etc. Interpretivist sociologists argue that socialisation is a two-way process in which children can also influence the behaviour of parents, e.g. peer power.

Postmodernists point out that functionalist theory (like New Right theory) is a conservative ideology which attempts to define what is the 'right' and 'wrong' way of organising family life. This devalues other family types and fails to acknowledge that family life today is now characterised by choice and diversity in how we organise our families. All types of family arrangements have equal value.

The historian, Michael Anderson claims that industrialisation actually led to more extended families as kin shared wages and housing in urban areas in order to mutually support one another.

Ronald Fletcher does not believe structural differentiation led to a loss of functions in the family. He argues that the nuclear family still carries out education, welfare and health functions, and is helped by the State, e.g. parents generally teach their children to read and treat them for minor illnesses or injuries.