

*Evaluate some of the ways in which the movement from pre-industrial to industrial society has been used by sociologists to explain changes in the family.*

Around 1800, a period of change began to occur. Before this period, people often lived in extended families, i.e. land and other resources would be split between numerous kin besides the conventional nuclear family unit (mother, father, children), e.g. cousins. Home and workplace were basically one and the same, with very few people going out to find work and neighbouring families trading goods with one another. Family roles in work were simply ascribed rather than achieved, passed down generation to generation - with no other chance of mobility unless a family member died or moved away for some reason - and each family seemed to have a particular speciality, e.g. pig farming. These extended families all worked together for each other and cared for one another from birth to death. However, the advent of an *industrial* society brought an end to all that. Instead of a more pastoral existence, the emphasis shifted to factories offering work connected by goods produced through machinery and a process of urbanisation occurred.

Functionalism is the theory that social events can be best explained in terms of the functions they perform, i.e. the contribution they make to the continuity of society. It is what is known as a *structuralist* theory, which means that it is not the individual that matters so much as the social structure or organisation of society. In functionalism, different institutions are studied as to how they bring about *social order* and do things like encourage socialisation, like parents teaching their children the difference between good and evil, or education providing people with skills and qualifications required to get a job.

A key functionalist thinker named Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) believed in a "theory of fit". In 1953, he said that societies change, like pre-industrial to industrial, via a process of *structural differentiation*. Whereas previously an institution may perform several functions, as society develops these become separated out into different institutions. His view was that the pre-industrial to industrial change brought some important changes to the family: the family became reduced in size as they moved away from their extended kin; because of this, the nuclear family became the norm and greater emphasis was placed on conjugal relationships; and that several functions of the family like production and education were taken by other institutions like factories and the state, respectively. Parsons reached the conclusion that the nuclear family was more orientated towards the modern world.

Although largely people agreed with Parsons' view, there were some dissenters. In 1971, Michael Preston studied the town of Preston and its 1851 census. His discovery was contrary to Parsons as the latter claimed extended families no longer lived together - however, Anderson found that a quarter of Preston households in 1851 actually did contain extended families. This was mainly because of the hardship and uncertainty of the time; these additional family members acted as a *mutual support system* in the midst of unemployment and poverty. A pair of social historians named Laslett and Wall studied parish registers in the 17th century and their results also work as a counterpoint to Parsons. They found that pre-industrial families were often nuclear families anyway due to short life expectancy, and that the average size of this family remained constant at 4.75 persons. As well as asking whether Parsons and other sociologists had bothered to include non-family members of households in their calculations, Laslett and Wall also concluded that while the average size of households decreased, the average size of the family did not.

In 1957, another pair of sociologists, named Young & Willmott, came up with a theory that also contradicted some of Parsons' ideas. They believe the change happened over a longer period of time rather than being sudden. Their research in Bethnal Green (East London) in the 1950's found that even then extended families were living together because of emotional attachment and obligation, and again, acting as a mutual support network. In 1973 Young & Willmott published a study claiming that the extended family declined in the 1960s with the advent of council housing after extensive slum clearance. Also, welfare and benefit systems introduced by the government in the 1950's lessened the need for a mutual support system. Therefore, the nuclear family only became the social norm in the latter half of the twentieth century. They also believe that the family went through three important main stages (and is possibly in a fourth right now): the first is the pre-industrial family, which they believed was revolved around primogeniture (where the eldest son inherits everything); the second is the family during the period of industrialisation, which again, they found were actually women-centred extended families; and then the third stage was the *symmetrical family*, which were definitely nuclear families and in which the husband and wife shared joint/equal conjugal roles. The fourth stage they discussed, which they believed we could be in right now, is the *asymmetrical family*. This is where roles are becoming less equal in the nuclear family as men are putting more emphasis on work than they are their family and/or domestic responsibilities.

But then again, Young & Willmott had their detractors as well. A sociologist named Finch made two important points. In 1989, he first said that that family members may feel a sense of obligation to kin beyond the nuclear family (encouraged by government policy, values, etc.). Then in 1993 he proved that 90% of people (that he had questioned) had given or received help from relatives, and that 60% share a house with an adult relative at some point of their own adult life. Oakley disagreed with the idea of the symmetrical family as, in her opinion, women still

do much more housework than men - their roles are still not equal. She said their claim was "based on inadequate methodology", i.e. the question they asked was too vague. She said that if men help in anything, it is more likely to just be childcare than housework. She rejected the "March of Progress" idea as few families she found could be described as egalitarian (upholding equal rights). She also stated that the housewife role was too oppressive: that it was exclusive to women, that it creates economic dependence on husbands, that housewives have a lower status in society because they don't work, and that housewife takes priority over any other roles women may wish to take.

Some other sociologists have criticised Young & Willmott's idea of the symmetrical family. One was the Lancaster Regionalism Group, whose study in the North West of England proved: children also made a worthy contribution to domestic work; that there is a gendered division of labour, i.e. certain duties were given to certain genders; that when asked it was found that in 81% of households, women had last cleaned the toilet; that only 42% of men found the current domestic division of labour unfair; and finally, they also considered the change in values against changes in behaviour. Edgell (1980) also found there was no evidence for joint conjugal roles in the 38 middle-class couples, although 45% of these couples had shared responsibilities when it came to caring for their children. Edgell also critically introduced the idea of which partner makes what decisions - he found that husbands made all the decisions relating to large sums of money (moving, finance and car).

From all these sources, as disagreeing as some of them are, we can tell that the family is resilient - it adapts over time and is flexible enough to fit the society and circumstances it is faced with. We are still in this period of transition right now - although we have many sources to prove Young & Willmott wrong about whether the family is symmetrical or not, this does not necessarily mean that the symmetrical family is a myth. It may not fully exist as Young & Willmott claim, but it is beginning to as we are already in a period of transition towards it.