

Examine the functions performed by the family for individuals and society

According to many different sociologists the family performs many different and important functions for society and individuals, I will be looking at the views of functionalist, the new right, Marxist and the different type of feminist and identify their theories and opinions on the functions performed by the family for individuals and society.

Functionalists believed in a theory that the family is a positive institution. They hold the view that meets well with the needs of an advanced industrial society for a geographically and socially mobile workforce. Functionalists highlight the ideal family type in a modern society, as the nuclear family. The view of the nuclear family comprises of a breadwinner husband and dependant wife and children.

Functionalists believe that society is like a biological organism like a human body for example and like the organs of a human body all the parts of society including family work together to make society run efficiently. As well as this functionalists believe that the family is both positive and useful for individuals and society, Talcott Parsons, functionalists, believes that one of the functions of the family is primary socialisation which is teaching the next generation the norms and values of society another function is the stabilisation of adult personalities and helps adults cope with the world by getting love and support from the family members, Parson's describes the family as a 'hot bath' that relaxes the adults of the family.

Another functionalist, George Murdock argues that the nuclear family is both universal and essential for the well being of society. Murdock believes that the nuclear family teaches the next generation the socially acceptable way of having sex, the acceptable way of having kids, it has an economical function in society meaning it buys good companies and also that family has an educational function by socialising children into society's culture and its norms and values.

However functionalism is criticised for idealising the family, for ignoring conflict and abuse within families, ignoring gender inequality within families, ignoring the rising divorce rates and ignoring growing family diversity.

A very different interpretation of the family is given by the New Right.

The New Right believes that the nuclear family is the bedrock of society and the New Right ideas heavily influenced social policy while the Conservative Party were in government in the 1980's and 1990's and there are also elements of New Right thinking in aspects of New Labour's policies.

According to the new right the family is seen as the central stabilising feature of modern life, it promotes decency, manners, respect for property and the law, self reliance etc keeping with the functionalist views on the roles of society. New Right thinkers believe that the nuclear family has been undermined by social policies such as divorce legislation and welfare benefits; divorce is seen as "too easy" and benefits "too generous". The New Right is alarmed by the growing numbers of single mothers and the breakdown of the family is seen as the cause of rising crime and New Right thinking has had some influence on social policy – specifically making it harder for people to get benefits.

However The New Right fails to acknowledge unequal relationships in families (exploitation of women) also The New right model of the family has been seen as intolerant and not inclusive – gay relationships, reconstituted families, unmarried parents and especially single mothers are all condemned by the logic of New Right thinking.

Marxist believes that the bourgeois nuclear family emerged with capitalism, it is patriarchal – it is designed to guarantee and perpetuate male power through the inheritance of property and therefore serves the interests of capitalism. Marxist believe the family socialises children – thereby reproducing both labour power and an acceptance of capitalism, Women's domestic work is unpaid which benefits capitalism. The family acts as safety valves for the stresses and frustrations of working class men and the family as a unit of consumption buys the goods and services provided by capitalism. A Marxist called Zaretsky claimed the family "props up" capitalism and the family is one place where male workers can feel they have power and control. This helps them accept their oppression in wider society.

However Anthropologists have suggested that the emergence of the nuclear family didn't actually coincide with the emergence of capitalism and also The Marxist view ignores family diversity. It sees the nuclear family as being simply determined by the economy.

Marxist Feminists see the principle source of division in society to be class – the exploitation of women is essential for the continuation of capitalism, they believe the function of the family is producing and

nurturing the next generation workers at no cost to the capitalists – housework is unpaid labour and suggests that the family and women soak up male working class frustration instead of it being channelled against the capitalist system.

Radical feminists believe that Patriarchy is central source of division in society, essentially men exploit women as husbands, partners, sons, brothers, this exploitative relationship is reflected in the family in which women do all the work for the benefit of men. Radical feminists also believe the family is an exploitive institution, the notion of ‘family’ excludes those who pursue different lifestyles and men will always exploit women and the family is the source of domestic violence

Conclusion

To summarise functionalist and the new right believe that the family has a positive influence on both society and the individuals of the family, functionalist say the family teaches the next generation the norms and values of society and stabilise the adults personality and the new right follows these functionalist views. However Marxist and feminist have a negative attitude towards the family, Marxist say the family serves the interests of capitalism and feminist say that the family oppresses women and keeps men in power.

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