

Critically examine the Functionalist idea that the nuclear family exists for the benefit of everyone

The Functionalist sociologist, Murdock (1949) defined the family as a social group characterised by common residence, economic co-operation and reproduction. He claimed it must include adults of both sexes of whom maintain a socially accepted sexual relationship, and own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults. Murdock's definition focuses on the Nuclear family stereotypically made up of a two-generation family: heterosexual couple with offspring. This definition of the family is popular among right wing sociologists who believe it is the ideal type of family unit that people should aspire to have. They argue this because they believe the nuclear family is the best type of family for the individual and for society. This is why they encourage it and regard it as the most beneficial family structure. They believe that it is the nuclear family unit by which the process of socialisation is transmitted at its strongest with the most benefit for society.

However, functionalists tend to see the family as harmonious but this is simply not the case in society today. Feminist criticise the functionalist view on the nuclear family by arguing that the nuclear family doesn't suit everyone within the family unit and is more damaging than it is beneficial. Sociologists use the term 'the dark side' to refer to the negative side of the family that challenges the functionalist idea of the 'happy family' with accounts of child abuse domestic violence and divorce rate. Feminists, such as Elliot (1996) point out that there is a 'dark side' of the modern-day family. The "dark side" of the family is found in the patterns of abuse and family violence that often occur within it. Feminists argue it is based around the principles that the family contains a large amount of psychological harm for women, women do the majority of housework, even today, women do the majority of emotional work and there are lots of instances of sexual and domestic abuse of women in the family context. Elliot states that male dominance is the key cause of abuse of both women and children within the family. She suggests that this is based on two linked factors, that male dominance is supported by physical force and that men simply 'cannot help their actions'. Elliot argues that the nuclear family, as a construction of masculinity puts women at constant risk of sexual harassment, that male sexual fidelity is all but impossible, and that children are at risk of sexual abuse unless men are regularly 'serviced'. This implies that the dark side of the family is, in fact the most dominant factor of family life which is most common in nuclear family units. The 'dark side' of the family does not benefit anyone and is extremely damaging to society as a whole and individual families.

Secondly, Functionalists believe the family structure allocates people to family and occupational roles which make the best use of their talents and abilities. Parson's argued that mothers were essential in playing the major role in the process of nurturing and socialization in families. He argues that mothers are 'biologically' suited to looking after the emotional and cultural development of children and play the 'expressive leaders' of the family, dealing with the domestic and nurturing side of the family life.

However, feminist sociologist, Beechey (1986) states that in society, the family is often seen as natural, and goes without any real questioning. It is also the thought that families seem to require different things from men and from women. We are seen to

need and to want to live in families, they are seen as the best way to bring up children, and women are seen to have the main role in this childcare. Beechey and other feminists see this as an ideological view of the family. It is untested and it allows male dominance to continue. Men are seen to benefit from the family more than women. This is because it means women cannot compete on a level playing field for jobs or promotion opportunities as their first priority is childcare allowing a male dominate, capitalist society to continue to be reproduced, so consequently, the nuclear family functions to benefit capitalism and consequently, the upper classes and not the whole of society.

Furthermore, feminists argue that the nuclear family provides reproduction of male superiority in the household. The nuclear family structure emphasizes the role of men as the instrumental leader and women as the expressive leader. It is also useful to men as it provides an emotionally supportive retreat for men who may be frustrated after their treatment in the workplace. This only reproduces gender inequality in family life that functions to serve a patriarchal and capitalist society and ultimately continues to benefit men.

Thirdly, Functionalist sociologist, Parsons argues that the Nuclear family unit meets the correct way to socialise children by internalizing the shared norms and values of a functionalist ideal society. Parsons saw the Nuclear family as the only way of 'producing children with the correct values and norms'. Functionalists believe that the Nuclear family is the only way to transmit to each generation the rules, culture, values, norms and accepted behaviour that allow society to function harmoniously. However, Radical feminists argue that the nuclear family mainly focuses to benefit men because gender-role socialisation results in males and females subscribing to a set of ideas that largely confirm male power and superiority. They argue that the nuclear family is the main reason for the patriarchal ideology is transmitted through the process of socialisation to children. This, in turn, encourages the notion that the sexual division of labour is natural and for the benefit of all society. This then results in the exploitation of women because the patriarchal ideology mainly views women as sexual objects or mothers/housewives. Radical feminist, Firestone (1979) argues that male power is based upon natural biological physical strength. Family life serves to benefit men as it is designed to allow men to benefit from the care work provided by women. This inequality is supported by the use or the threat of male violence against women and the nuclear unit reproduces this patriarchal ideology that is not for the benefit of all of society, especially not women.

Additionally, Feminists argue that primary socialization of children ensures the inheritance of male dominance and female submission is reproduced generation after generation. This is due to children seeing the male figure as the masculine, economic earner and the female as the nurturing, loving, domestic role. This ensures the transmission of gender-role socialization with males and females 'agreeing' to the set of ideas that largely verify male power and superiority. They argue that this is at its extremist inside the nuclear family.

Finally, functionalist sociologist, Parson's argues that the nuclear family meets the needs of the industrial society. He argues that because of the decline of the extended family, due to industrialization, the nuclear family emerged. Parsons argued that nuclear families were formed as people moved away from their extended kin in the countryside in order to take jobs opportunities brought about by industrialization in

the towns. Parsons concluded that only the nuclear unit could effectively provide the achievement-orientated and geographically mobile workforce required by modern industrial economies. However, Marxist-Feminists strongly disagree with Parsons' claims that the nuclear family meets the needs of industrial society. They argue that the Nuclear family benefits a capitalist society and therefore bourgeoisie at the expense of the working class. Marxist-feminists focus on the contribution of domestic labour, i.e. housework and childcare, to capitalist economies. They argue that such work goes unpaid but has great value to a capitalist society. Moreover, capitalism exploits women and men and a capitalist society benefit majorly from this. Marxist-feminists, Barrett and McIntosh (1982), claim that the family serves the needs of capitalism; patriarchy in the home allows capitalism to continue in wider society. The exploitation of women and the care women provide men in the home allows feelings of alienation and exploitation from work to be reduced, allowing society to go unquestioned. Equally, women are needed by capitalism to raise the next generation of workers. Furthermore, radical-feminists argue that the main effect of industrialization was that women were generally excluded from paid work and independent income and redefined as mothers and housewives dependent on the male breadwinner. Men came to dominate the workforce and political and cultural power whereas women were confined to the family. Radical feminists therefore argue that the nuclear family meets the needs of men rather than the needs of all members of society.

In conclusion, Functionalists have many strong views on the role of the family in society. Their main view is that the nuclear family unit supports and maintains order in society and is therefore in place for the benefit of society and everyone in it. The Nuclear family ensures that the right cultural values and norms are socialised from one generation to the next and that those children grow up with the values that support a functionalist society. However, feminists argue that this is not the case, and that it is clear that the nuclear family is in place to reproduce a patriarchal society that is for the benefit of men only and furthermore, ensure a strong capitalist society that exploits the working class and benefits the upper classes. The nuclear family reproduces gender inequality and discrimination against homosexual and single parent families. Consequently, the nuclear family clearly is not for the benefit of everyone, but the selected few power group's i.e. men and the upper class.