

The AQA specification: 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 exam requires that you are able to:

- ▶ Understand and evaluate the functionalist perspective of the family.

Introduction

In general, the functionalist perspective is seen as a **structural theory** because it claims that the social structures in society (eg, religion, family, education, media and the law) perform a number of 'functions' which shape and influence our behaviour. We will now examine the functionalist view of the role that the family performs in society, and with regard to its own members.

Functionalist perspective on the family

Positive function. Functionalists argue that for society to be stable and function effectively (eg, without disorder, conflict and tension) individuals must share the same norms and values (**value consensus**) and that this is achieved with the help of the **family**. The family helps perform certain functions such as **socialisation**, for example by teaching its members to share the norms and values that are accepted by society. This brings **social order** and thus creates a society in which people can exist harmoniously, instead of one of with conflicting values and norms which can lead to disorder and instability. Therefore, functionalists view the family as playing a **positive** role in society.

Murdock: the four functions of the nuclear family

George Murdock (1949), a functionalist, carried out a cross-cultural survey which examined a total of 250 societies of various kinds, from hunters and gatherers to large-scale industrial societies. He concluded that the nuclear family is so important that it is universal: it exists in all societies and therefore must serve essential functions for society and the individual. He claims the family performs four important functions, which are:

Economic. The family as a collective resource is able to satisfy the economic needs (eg, security, food, home and money) of its members more effectively than a single individual living alone.

Sexual. The family allows the adults to fulfil their sexual needs, thus preventing deviant sexual behaviour (eg, rape). The family (husband and wife) also socialises its members (ie, children) in the accepted template for appropriate sexual relationships (eg, loving, marital and heterosexual rather than homosexual or promiscuous).

Reproduction. The family provides a stable environment for producing and looking after children, which is essential for society to exist.

Educational. The family teaches children the values and norms of acceptable behaviour in society.

Parsons' 'fit theory'

Talcott Parsons (1955) studied American families in the 1950s and developed a 'fit theory' of the family. This theory claims that the structure of the family changes over time to suit ('fit') the type of society that exists at that time. He argues that the extended family was normal in pre-industrialisation times, as it ideally suited this type of society, whereas the nuclear family is more suited to industrial society. His 'fit' theory is expanded in more detail below:

The family in pre-industrial society

- In pre-industrial society, the **extended family** was the norm and was a **multi-functional unit**: it carried out many functions, such as caring for elderly grandparents, educating children and farming the land to provide food for its members.

The family in industrial society

- The demands of industrial society brought about changes to the family structure, with the extended family becoming a smaller **nuclear family**. This was ideally suited to an industrial society because:
 - A nuclear family is **geographically mobile**. Industrialisation emerged in many different places and brought new opportunities for work. It was easier for the nuclear family to move for work than for the whole of the extended family to be uprooted (eg, think how difficult moving elderly grandparents would be).
 - A nuclear family allows for **social mobility**. Industrial society allowed social mobility - an opportunity for a person's social status to rise through their merit (ability and hard work) - whereas in a pre-industrial society, where the extended family was the norm, the status of the son would have been **ascribed** (fixed) by his father. For example, the son would continue to work in the family cattle-farming business. The change from extended to nuclear family prevented conflict between parents and their upwardly mobile children, which could threaten the stability of the family.
- Industrialisation also meant that the modern nuclear family lost some of its functions (to other specialist institutions such as schools and health services) and now performs two essential functions which Parsons refers to as **two basic and irreducible functions**. They are:
 - **Primary socialisation of children** – the process that takes place during the early years of childhood when children are taught society's values and norms.
 - **Stabilisation of adult personalities** – the pressures of living and working in a modern industrial society to achieve success (wealth and social status) can threaten to destabilise the personalities of both husband and wife (mental health). Parsons suggests the family helps to stabilise their personalities when there is a sexual division of labour in the family. He proposed that the female is ideally suited to perform the **expressive role** – providing for the caring, nurturing and emotional needs of the children and husband – while the man is more suited to play an **instrumental role** – being the breadwinner who provides for the economic needs for the family.
- Functionalists see the nuclear family as the 'ideal' and most 'natural' type for society. They see divorce, the decline of marriage and alternative family types as threatening the stability of society.



Evaluation

- ✓ **Traditional nuclear family plays an important role in socialisation.** There is research evidence to support the functionalist theory that the nuclear family is the ideal type for society. Research evidence suggests that the traditional nuclear family plays an essential role in the healthy social development of children and that other forms of family, such as single-parent families, do not do so well in socialising their children into the accepted norms and values of society.
- ✗ **Feminists critique.** The functionalist theory of the family has been criticised by feminists as they see family life as being unequal, with the man benefiting more than the woman. The role of the woman is mainly responsibility for the domestic duties of housework, child-care and looking after the husband's needs, while the husband enjoys more time for leisure pursuits. This suggests the role of woman in the family is one of oppression and exploitation, which feminists find unacceptable.
- ✗ **Dark side of the family.** The functionalist theory tends to 'idealise' the family and ignore the 'darker side' of family life. For example, domestic violence and mental illness such as depression, eating disorders, schizophrenia and child abuse, can all be due to the family, as suggested by feminists and clinicians such as psychologists and psychiatrists.
- ✗ **Postmodernist critique.** Postmodernists argue that functionalist views, such as those of Parsons and Murdock, are outdated and no longer valid. This is because their theory was based on an American middle-class society of the 1950s and therefore not applicable to a modern multicultural society, which has a diversity of family and household types (eg, single-parent, homosexual and cohabiting). Therefore, postmodernists claim that it does not make sense to talk about the traditional nuclear family as being the normal or best family type, or the only family type that performs essential functions in society.
- ✗ **Parson's expressive and instrumental roles are outdated.** Some sociologists argue that Parsons' traditional gender roles performed by men and women (instrumental and expressive) in the family are outdated, since Parsons' theory was based on circumstances in the 1950s. The result of feminisation in the 1970s has been a change in social attitudes towards, and trends in, family arrangements. For example, in many families, the woman is also now a wage-earner and often prioritises her career over the role of a housewife. This has meant that both men and women interchangeably play expressive and instrumental roles and suggests that Parsons' view of the traditional gender roles within the family is no longer valid.
- ✗ **Family has lost its importance.** Some sociologists have questioned the importance of the function the family plays in today's society. This is because some of the functions that the family performs are now being taken over by other institutions. For example, many working parents send their pre-school children to day-care centres such as nurseries and playgroups, which play an important role in helping young children to acquire the correct social skills, values and behaviours for society (ie, socialisation).



Practice exam questions

AS level exam questions

1. Define the term 'primary socialisation'. [2 marks]
2. Define the term 'expressive role'. [2 marks]
3. Define the term 'instrumental role'. [2 marks]
4. Define the term 'nuclear' family. [2 marks]
5. Define the term 'ascribed status'. [2 marks]
6. Using **one** example, briefly explain how the family is losing its functions. [2 marks]
7. Outline **three** functions that functionalists see the family performing. [6 marks]
8. Outline **three** criticisms of the functionalist view of the family. [6 marks]

AS & A level exam questions

1. Outline and explain **two** reasons for the rise of the nuclear family. [10 marks]
2. Applying material from **Item (...)** and your knowledge, evaluate the contribution of functionalist views to our understanding of the family. [20 marks]

A level exam questions

3. Applying material from **Item (...)**, analyse **two** reasons for the rise of the nuclear family. [10 marks]

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The exam requires that you are able to:

- ▶ Understand and evaluate the Marxist perspective of the family.

Introduction

Marxism is known as a **conflict theory** because it sees capitalist society as consisting of two main social classes. The two social classes in society are:

- **Ruling class (or bourgeoisie):** people who own the means of production, (eg, factories, shops and land) whose aim is making money. This group of people is often referred to as the **capitalist class**.
- **Working class (or proletariat):** people who work for the ruling class in return for a wage. Members of the working class are often paid far less than they deserve and are therefore seen as being exploited by the ruling class in order to maximise the latter's profit.

Marxism suggests that in a capitalist society the relationship between the two classes is unfair. The working class demands to be paid more for their labour, the ruling class wants to keep wages to a minimum to maximise its profit and thus a conflict of interest occurs between the classes.

Marxist perspective on the family

Marxists reject the view that the nuclear family performs an important function for all of society, as functionalists suggest. They see the family as benefiting the capitalist class (ie, capitalism), which helps contribute to the inequality between the classes. The family does this by:

- **Allowing wealth to be passed on.** Friedrich Engels (1884) analysed the family historically to see how it had evolved over time, tracing it from the times of our earliest human ancestors, when humans were promiscuous and the family did not exist, to its present form, that is, a **monogamous nuclear family**. Engels argues that the monogamous nuclear family developed at the same time as ownership of private property (when men could buy and own their own property) and the emergence of inheritance. Upon his death, a man had to ensure that his property was inherited by (passed on to) his own children. The only way he could be certain that he was the 'father of his children' was by making the woman his property (ie, marriage) and restricting her sexual freedom (to ensure paternity). The monogamous nuclear family appeared as the most appropriate solution for this. This ensured that the rich could pass on their wealth to their family members and in this way the social class system was reproduced from one generation to the next.
- **False class consciousness.** Eli Zaretsky (1976) sees family life as a distraction from the exploitation of capitalism. The expressive role of the wife, that is, providing emotional support, security and comfort, helps distract the man from the oppression and exploitation of his work environment. Therefore, the

working-class family helps maintain a 'false class consciousness' since the man is not aware that he is being exploited.

- **Ideological function.** David Cooper (1972) sees the family as serving an ideological function (or as an ideological conditioning device) because it teaches values that are ideal for capitalism. The family teaches children to accept certain attitudes, such as respect for and obedience to authority, punctuality and hard work. Such values help to lay the foundation for the obedient and submissive workforce required by capitalism.
- **Consuming goods.** The family serves the interest of capitalism by being one of the largest consumers of the products it produces, often through the power of the media. For example, advertisers encourage families to be in competition with each other ('keeping up with the Joneses'), and exert pressure to keep up with the latest consumer trends (eg, in mobile phones, trainers, televisions and cars). Children are also heavily targeted by advertisers to use their 'pester power', which refers to children's ability to persuade their parents to purchase items they might not otherwise buy. This ensures the continuation of the production of goods, enabling the capitalists continue to make a profit.



Evaluation

- ✗ **Too much emphasis on the negative side of the family.** Marxism tends to focus on the negative aspects of the family and ignores the happiness that family life can bring. The fact that the family can bring satisfaction (intimacy, security and emotional support) to both males and females is made clear by the fact that the family remains popular in many contemporary societies.
- ✗ **Nuclear families are still the best option.** Marxist theory has yet to establish a viable alternative family type that would benefit society. It could be argued that the nuclear family is presently the best type of family for the child's social and cognitive development.
- ✗ **Nuclear families are less common now.** Marxist theory may no longer be valid because it is based on the traditional nuclear family. In contemporary society, there is diversity and variation in family structures and living arrangements depending on ethnicity, social class and sexuality. For example, Marxism assumes that the breadwinner in the family is the man and that the housewife is the woman. This arrangement is now less common, so it is hard to see how the expressive role of the female helps distract the man from exploitation (the ideological function) by capitalism.
- ✗ **Marxist ideas are difficult to test.** Some Marxist concepts are hard to investigate by means of a research study to check their validity. For example, Marxists claim that the family helps maintain a 'false consciousness'. This concept would be very hard to operationalise (in a way that can be tested and measured). How would a researcher investigate this to discover if false consciousness is occurring in the family?



Practice exam questions

AS exam questions

1. Using **one** example, briefly explain how the family benefits capitalism. [2 marks]
2. Outline **three** ways in which Marxists say that the family benefits capitalism. [6 marks]
3. Outline **three** criticisms of the Marxist view of the family. [6 marks]

AS & A level exam questions

4. Applying material from **Item (...)** and your knowledge, evaluate the view that the main role of the family is to serve the interests of capitalism. [20 marks]

A level exam questions

5. Applying material from **Item (...)**, analyse **two** functions that the family performs for capitalism, according to Marxists. [10 marks]