

AQA A LEVEL SOCIOLOGY

FAMILIES & HOUSEHOLDS

REVISION GUIDE



THE FUNCTIONS OF FAMILIES & HOUSEHOLDS

Specification: sociological explanations of the relationship of the family to the social structure and social change, with particular reference to the economy and to state policies

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Identify, outline, explain, analyse and evaluate the concepts of:

- Family
- Household

Identify, outline, explain, analyse and evaluate:

- Functionalist views on the functions of families and households
- Marxist views on the functions of families and households
- Feminist views on the functions of families and households
- New Right views on the functions of families and households

What is family?

There is not one clear single definition of “family”. It tends to be used either in a broad sense (all the descendants of a common ancestor, as in a “family tree”) or in a narrower sense, of parents living together with their children as a “unit”. As a useful sociological concept, we tend to use the narrower definition, only bringing in wider family such as cousins and grandparents when they live together or are involved in everyday family life (such as childcare). However, while definitions often refer to relations “by blood” or marriage (kinship), in practice families require none of these things. A single parent with adopted children is clearly a family, as is an unmarried couple with adopted children. What about couples without children? If they are a family, and therefore families do not require multiple generations, then is a household comprising of unrelated friends a family? If not, what stops it from being one?

What is a household?

A household is more easily explained: a group of people who live together, regardless of whether there are any kinship ties. Most of these are families, but (depending on your definition of family) many are not: flatmates (such as students), people living on their own, multiple-occupancy homes for migrant workers, etc.

Functionalist views on the functions of families and households

Functionalists argue that all institutions in society have important roles to play in the smooth and functional running of society, and the family is no different. They argue that the family has important functions both for society *and* for individuals. The classic functionalist statement on the roles of the family comes from **George Murdock (1949)** who looked at families across the world and found four functions that were common to all of them.

Educational	Children are taught the norms and values of society (also known as primary socialisation)
Economic	The family provides an economic function to all its members by pooling resources and ensuring all have what they need.
Reproductive	Produces the next generation of the society.
Sexual	Ensures that adults' sexual relationships are controlled and stable.

Talcott Parsons (1951) updated Murdock's theory. He argued that in modern, Western societies, the state provided education and could perform an economic function (through welfare provisions) but that the family still had two **irreducible** functions:

Primary socialisation	Similar to Murdock's educational role, Parsons agreed that families taught children social norms and values. However, he argued that it specifically taught children the norms and values associated with their family and/or community, while other institutions, such as schools, the media, religion, etc. taught children the universal norms and values of wider society. Parsons called this first process primary socialisation and the latter secondary socialisation .
Stabilisation of adult personalities	Parsons also argued that families helped to prevent adults from behaving in disruptive or dysfunctional ways, instead encouraging them to conform to social norms, especially at times of stress. The family provides emotional support to its members. Parsons famously described this in his warm bath theory . This was the idea that when a man came home from a hard day at work, he could relax into his family like a warm bath and it would take away the stress and refresh him for the next day's work.

Evaluating functionalist views of the functions of families and households

- A standard criticism of functionalist views of the role of the family comes from **conflict theorists** like Marxists and feminists who argue that this paints too rosy and idealistic a picture of family life. Families are certainly not like that for everyone. Many people have negative experiences of family life, and indeed they can cause stress as well as relieve it.
- Conflict theorists also question whether the roles families perform really benefit the whole of society or really just benefit powerful groups within it. In particular, feminists argue that families exist largely for the benefit of men.
- The Marxist-feminist Fran Ansley offers a different perspective on Parsons' warm bath theory when she describes women in the family as **takers of shit**. By this she means that men coming home from work may have their stress relieved by the family, but only by dumping it on their wives.
- Furthermore, these theories are outdated and suggest families are all traditional nuclear families with men going to work and women in domestic roles. We will revisit this part of the discussion in a later section.

Marxism

The traditional Marxist view on families is that they perform a role not for everyone in society but for capitalism and the ruling class (the bourgeoisie). As is often the case, there are similarities between the functionalist and Marxist case: they both think that families perform important functions for the society as it is currently constituted. The difference is that Marxists disagree with the way society is currently constituted. Instead of seeing a consensual society which works to benefit all its members, they see a society based on class struggle, which works to benefit a rich minority.

Engels (1884)	Zaretsky (1976)
Engels argued that family had a clear economic function for capitalism, by ensuring that wealth remained in the hands of the bourgeoisie. Family relations, based on clear legal contracts, facilitate inheritance and therefore when rich people die it is their children who keep hold of their wealth.	An interesting variation on Parsons' warm bath theory, Zaretsky argued that family life gave proletarian men something they could control and a space where they could be the "boss". This provided a clear function for capitalism because it meant that workers would tolerate the powerlessness and frustration of being exploited at work because they had this private domain where

state took over many of the roles of the family listed by Murdock, leaving the family with the two irreducible functions previously referred to.

According to Parsons, this social change precipitated a clear change in the family from extended families with many functions, in the pre-industrial society, to privatised nuclear families with fewer functions in industrial society.

Why nuclear families have a functional fit with industrial society

Nuclear families allow for:

- **Geographical mobility** (families can move to where the work is)
- **Social mobility or meritocracy.** Parsons argues that individual status in pre-industrial society was **ascribed** (you were born into a particular status) whereas in industrial society people could **achieve** a new status through hard work. In extended families, social mobility can lead to inter-generational conflict, but this is less of a concern when families are “privatised” as small independent units. Both these forms of mobility are facilitated by the **isolated** nature of the nuclear family.
- **Specialised roles.** In nuclear families, in industrial societies, men and women have separate specialised roles (according to Parsons). He writes about men being **instrumental leaders** and women being **expressive leaders** and this being the most effective division of labour for industrial society. We will return to this in the section on gender roles.

Evaluating Parsons on industrialism and the family

- The principle difficulty with Parsons theory is that historians do not agree that the changes in the family described by Parsons actually match what really happened.
- Peter Laslett (1972) conducted research into pre-industrial families in his famous work of social history *The World We Have Lost*. He found that the most common family form in the pre-industrial communities he studied was not the extended family but the nuclear family. People may well have lived close to extended family and worked together, but in terms of their households, most were made up of parents and children.
- Furthermore, Michael Anderson (1971) looked at households in Preston in the midst of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation (using the 1851 census) and found a significant increase in the number of households made up of extended families. A rational response to moving from rural areas into the city was to move in with family. This helped economically, but also socially as – unlike the rural communities they had moved from – these were neighbourhoods where people did not know each other and so kinship connections were very valuable.
- Parsons is criticised, then, for being an armchair theorist. His theory seems quite logical, but had he engaged in extensive empirical research into the question he may well have found evidence that undermined his theory. Indeed, if his data had replicated the findings of Laslett and Anderson, he might have had to turn his theory entirely on its head.
- Having said that, the common family form when Parsons was writing was certainly the privatised nuclear family and there certainly were more extended families in the past. So family structures and roles had changed and the major social change of the era was industrialisation, so it does not seem unreasonable to make a connection. However, it would seem that Parsons had failed to detect the precise nature of the relationship.
- In truth, what this array of research and evidence would appear to show is that there has always been rather more family and household **diversity** than Parsons’ theory would suggest.
- There are also strong criticisms of the way Parsons presents the nuclear family as ideal (and an ideal which society evolves towards) and also the of Parsons’ explanation of gender roles (which will be discussed in more detail in the appropriate section).

The “March of Progress”

An alternative functionalist approach comes from Wilmott and Young (1973). It is one of several “march of progress” theories that come from functionalists that look at how society develops and modernises over time. They established four stages of family development relating to the process of industrialisation.

Stage One: The pre-industrial family	The family works as a unit of economic production. There is no separation between work and home. Families live with or close to other family members and work together.
Stage Two: The early industrial family	Families move into towns and cities and home and work are separated as men go out to work. Women perform a domestic role. While pre-industrial extended families have broken up as a result of this, kinship networks remain very important and women especially rely on support from other female relations. Wilmott and Young suggested that while female relatives bonded, men were excluded from the home and spent time in the pub instead.
Stage Three: The symmetrical family	The modern nuclear family has less gender segregation than the early industrial family with men and women both in employment and both contributing to domestic chores. Also the family has ceased to be a unit of production and has become a unit of consumption . Families tend to be smaller, because children remain dependents rather than becoming financial assets. The family has become more isolated from kinship networks and so families spend more time together and generally there are joint conjugal roles as opposed to segregated conjugal roles .
Stage Four: The asymmetrical family	Wilmott & Young suggested that the family would become asymmetrical, with men increasingly spending their leisure time outside the home and without their partners (for example spending long periods of time on the golf course). Wilmott & Young conceded that this fourth stage did not really occur.

One important factor in family change, for Wilmott and Young, was something they called **stratified diffusion**. They suggested that the sort of cultural changes in family life described here began initially among those with higher social status, and these practices diffused down the social strata and became the norm. This was why they predicted Stage Four, because they saw evidence of rich families becoming increasingly asymmetrical, with couples spending more time apart and particularly rich businessmen spending their leisure time apart from the family. However, there does not seem to be much evidence to suggest that stratified diffusion as occurred in this case.

Evaluating the March of Progress

- Some sociologists dislike the value judgement inherent in the idea of a march of progress: that the family has got better as it has developed. In rural areas, some families still occupy “stage 1” and some would suggest this is just a different family form rather than a better or worse one.
- There is lots of feminist research to suggest that the “symmetrical family” is a myth, as we will discuss in the section on gender roles.
- The modern nuclear family is presented in an idealistic way, which runs counter to many people’s experiences of family life.

- Removing the so-called **couples' penalty** was an approach to ensuring that the benefits system did not include a perverse incentive for couples to break up in order to receive more benefits.

However, they also introduced policies that acknowledged and facilitated more modern notions of family life, for example:

- **Shared parental leave.** Both parties in the coalition were keen for parental leave to be able to be shared equally between men and women, rather than it being assumed that women would take an extended period off work while men would only be entitled to two weeks.
- **Equal marriage.** 9 years after the Civil Partnerships Act, the coalition government brought in same-sex marriage. There was clear support for the move from both parties in the coalition, although there was a lot of opposition from traditionalists on the Conservative backbenches and also in religious organisations. The Church of England established a special exception, and it is illegal to conduct a same-sex marriage in a Church of England church. While it is theoretically possible for any other religious organisation to host a same-sex marriage, it was also written into the legislation that religious organisations could choose not to, without being in breach of the Human Rights Act or the Equality Act.

Evaluating the coalition government, 2010 -2015

- There does not appear to be a consistent thread of social policy relating to families during the period of this government. While the main focus of the government was on reducing public spending (to cut the deficit) there clearly were some high-profile pieces of social policy.
- The introduction of same-sex marriages while leaving the option of civil partnerships on the table has created a new, rather unusual inequality in UK law: same-sex couples can choose a civil partnership or a marriage, but the former is not available to heterosexual couples. While civil partnerships were introduced to be marriages in all but name, there are those now who campaign for the option to choose them, seeing them as a useful legal arrangement without the historical and cultural baggage of marriage.
- Surprisingly few fathers are taking advantage of additional parental leave beyond the two weeks they were already entitled to. Only 2% of couples share parental leave and even before the option was introduced, only 40% of fathers used the 2 weeks they were entitled to. This does raise a range of questions attitudes to family and parenthood in the UK today.

Social policy today

In 2015 the Conservative Party was re-elected with a small majority. They lost that majority in 2017 but continue to govern as a minority government, with the support of the Northern Irish party the DUP. The government is mainly focused on the issue of the UK leaving the European Union, but there has been some social policy relating to families. For example:

- **Married couple's tax allowance.** The government has brought back a tax allowance for married couples with only one member who pays tax. While on the face of it, this is an old-fashioned return to social policy promoting the traditional nuclear family, it does not quite fit that bill. First, the married couple's tax allowance applies to all married couples (regardless of gender and sexual orientation) and civil partnerships. Second, it does not matter which member of the family is the "breadwinner" and which performs a more domestic role, so it would benefit families with a househusband, for example. Finally, because the tax-free personal allowance for all workers is now £11,500, someone could be working substantial part-time hours and still not pay income tax, and therefore their partner would still be eligible for the married couple's tax allowance, so it no longer assumes a traditional housewife role.

- **Child tax credits restricted to two children.** Child tax credits are only available for two children (and the equivalent for those on universal credit). Some ministers have specifically suggested this is designed to change behaviour and discourage people on low incomes from having too many children, although it is also clearly a cost-saving measure.

Both the coalition and the Conservative governments have made a number of changes to the benefits system that embeds the idea that children are the responsibility of their parents until they reach their mid 20s, which is quite a significant shift.

Links to core themes

- Social policy inevitably links with **power** as only those with power are able to get their policy made into law. As such, the nature of policy and who is likely to benefit from it tells us something about who holds power and what they choose to do with it. That, in turn, links with theoretical perspectives, as Marxists and feminists would expect to see power wielded in the interests of the groups they identify as powerful, while postmodernists would expect to see a more complex picture.

Possible exam questions

Exam Hint:

Item C

Social policies can directly influence family life, such as determining when people can get married, and to whom, but it also can have an indirect influence through welfare and tax policies that might influence people's life choices.

Applying material from **Item I** analyse **two** ways in which social policy has changed family life in the UK (10 marks)

Exam hint: there are some quite clear hooks in this item, but they need further development and to be analysed with plenty of good sociology.

Item D

Some sociologists argue that social policy has had a significant (and sometimes very negative) influence on family life. However, while some direct legislation clearly impacts families, some question the extent to which policies to do with taxes or benefits really impact people's choices in terms of starting and maintaining a family.

Applying material from **Item D** and your own knowledge, evaluate the view that recent social policy has had little impact on the contemporary family in the UK (20 marks)

Exam hint: There is a lot in the item – go item mining! Which sociologists are being referred to? What sort of direct legislation clearly impacts families? Which tax and benefit changes are claimed to impact families? Use the item! Watch out for “recent” and “contemporary”: they are not looking for policies from the 1960s and 70s.