

A Level Sociology Knowledge Organiser

Theories of the family and social policy

(Miss Cantwell)

Feminist theories

The family transmits patriarchal ideology and serves to oppress women. Family maintains gender inequality, through traditional roles and male dominance/power.

Liberal: family is becoming more equal (eg. Domestic division of labour) need change in attitudes and laws.

Marxist: male domination result of class inequality need to overthrow capitalism.

Radical: men are source of oppression, need women to live separately from men.

Difference feminism: generalisations cannot be made about the position of women in the family, experiences may be based on sexuality, ethnicity, class etc.

- × Ignores class inequality in families
- × Ignores positive functions of the family
- × Radical feminists ignore building evidence suggesting family is more equal (symmetrical)

Functionalist theories

Murdock: nuclear family is universal institution, present in all societies, 4 functions (sex drive, reproduction, socialisation, economic needs).

- × Other family types can perform functions
- × Murdock ignores patriarchy in families and how these functions can oppress women

Parsons: 'functional fit' theory, the nuclear family meets society's needs, nuclear family has 2 basic functions (primary socialisation, stabilisation of adult personalities), other functions taken over by institutions (e.g. education, healthcare)

- × Marxists - children are only socialised to accept the values of the ruling class
- × Marxists - emotional support is an 'illusory function' - it only benefits capitalism
- × Functionalism does not reflect reality of family life, ignores dysfunctions
- × Ignores diversity of families today – ignores importance of fictive kin

Marxist theories

The family meets the needs of capitalism. Family maintains class divide and capitalism in society through:

- 1) Reproducing **labour force** (families reproduce children to be exploited in the workplace/capitalist life)
 - × But... not all families have children to be exploited in society
- 2) **Inheritance of property** (nuclear families allow certainty over paternity and transmission of wealth to heirs)
- 3) Promoting **ruling class ideology** (promotes hierarchy – children learn to accept it)
 - × But... feminists would argue the family promotes patriarchal ideology instead
- 4) **Being a unit of consumption** (media targets families – profits go to capitalist business owners)
 - × Focuses on nuclear family, ignore family diversity – not all families benefit capitalism
 - × Ignore gender inequality within families – feminists believe families may promote patriarchal ideology
 - × Is too deterministic – not all children in families passively accept ruling class authority
 - × Do not recognise positive functions of the family

Postmodernist theories

The family meets the needs of the individual – no idea family type, people construct families that meet their needs.

Individualisation thesis – traditional social freedom to decide which family structures to create to meet individual needs. Postmodern family increasing – ambivalent and undecided. Life course analysis shows fluidity and impact of choice

- × Nuclear may still be seen as ideal type
- × May exaggerate freedom and choice

Impact of policies on families

Sociological views of social policy

Functionalist: Social policies/laws benefit everyone in society, help the family to perform functions. E.g. benefits allow parents to perform economic functions, sure start helps socialisation.

New Right: Policies/laws undermine traditional nuclear family, make people dependent on welfare state. Murray argues the effects are fathers abandoning their children, more teenage pregnancies and boys growing up without male role models. Almond is critical of policies such as the gay marriage law which encourages non-nuclear structures.

Feminists: Policies/laws reflect patriarchal ideas, reinforce women's dependence on husbands, maternity leave reflects view that mothers should look after children. Hilary Land argues that policies assume families are traditional patriarchal nuclear families (e.g. maternity leave)

Marxist: Policies/laws benefit capitalism e.g. low pensions and raising the pension age means old workers are maintained at low cost. Argue policies to help working class have only been gained through struggle and are often abused by middle classes with cultural capital (e.g. sure start)

Donzelot: He sees policies/laws as a way for the government to control families. He argues that this promotes 'policing of the family' as professionals have the ability to influence families through the policies they introduce.

Personal life perspective

Family life is complex and more diverse, believe in **connectedness thesis** - more freedom to construct families that meet their needs but they are still influenced by their family history, their expectations of society and factors such as class, ethnicity and gender. Importance of **fictive kin**

- × View is **too broad** – ignores importance of nuclear families and focuses on only personal relationships.

New Right view

Nuclear family is cornerstone of society and is the most appropriate way to raise children, but is **declining**. Negative effects for society: loss of traditional values, increase in crime, welfare dependency and underclass.

- × Blame individuals for their position
- × Ignores positive impacts of family diversity

Policy/Act	Impacts
Divorce laws (1969, 1984)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↓ nuclear families ↑ reconstituted/one-parent ↑ welfare dependency
Civil partnership act (2004) and gay marriage laws	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↑ same-sex families ↑ same-sex adoptions
Abortion act (1967), contraceptive pill	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↓ family sizes ↓ in the birth rate ↑ freedom for women
Welfare benefits (e.g. JSA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↑ in the underclass / welfare dependency ↑ economic security in families
Married persons tax allowance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↑ in married couple/nuclear families Reinforcing patriarchy (feminist view)