

# **“A” Level Sociology**

## **Teaching Notes for Students**

### **Module: Family Life**

#### **Unit 2: The Family and Industrialisation**

## Introduction

In the two previous Teachers' Notes in this section of the course we have looked at:

- a. The various ways we can define the concept of "**family structure**" (in terms of such ideas as **nuclear, extended, single-parent** and **reconstituted** family structures).
- b. Various theoretical interpretations of the relationship between family groups and the overall structure of society (**Functionalist, Marxist** and **Feminist** views).

In these Notes we can develop the above ideas by trying to understand the **relationship between family structure and changes in the overall structure of society**. In this respect we will be looking primarily at the way **economic changes** (considered in terms of the general **process of industrialization**) have affected the structure of the family.

### Changes In Family Structure: Industrialization and Urbanization.

We can begin by noting that, as we have already seen, the **structure** of the family - like any other social structure - is **defined** in terms of the **social relationships** from which it is constructed. For example:

The nature of the relationship between men, women and children within the family.

The nature of the relationship between different generations of family members.

In this respect, two aspects of family structure need be of general concern here:

1. Firstly, the family considered as a social institution:

For example, whether it is extended or nuclear in structure

2. Secondly, the family considered as a social group:

For example, the nature of gender relationships within the family.

This second aspect is one that needs to be examined in some detail and this will be carried-out in subsequent Teachers' Notes. For the moment, therefore, we will be primarily concerned with an examination of the **family as a social institution**.

We have previously seen how the family, as both a **social institution** and a **social group**, does **not** exist in isolation from other institutions in society. **All sociologists**, from whatever theoretical perspective, recognize that the **interconnections** between institutions means that **changes in one sphere of society will produce changes in another sphere**.

For **example, economic changes** relating to the institution of **work** will produce **changes** within the **family** (in terms of both its basic **institutional organization** and in relation to particular **role relationships** within the family).

To understand the nature of these interconnections, it would, therefore, be useful to look at two things:

1. The relationship between **economic change** (the process of **industrialization**, whereby **Britain** moved **from** being a predominantly **agricultural society** to one in which **factory forms of production** came to dominate) and the **family** as an institution.
2. The precise nature of changes within the family group, focusing primarily upon male - female relationships in terms of their economic, political and ideological content. As I have just noted above, this aspect of family life will be considered in detail at a later point.

In terms of the relationship between economic change and changes in the family as an institution it should be evident that we are talking here about the idea that there is some sort of "**fit**" between the way in which the family performs certain functions (both for society and its individual members) and the demands made upon it by various forms of economic organization.

For **Functionalists**, this **fit** tends to be expressed in terms of the way in which the institutions of work and family **harmonize** to fulfil certain mutual needs and purposes, both in terms of sub-system needs and social system needs.

For **Marxists**, this **fit** tends to be expressed in terms of the way in which the **economic** system **dominates** all other **institutions** in society. In Capitalist economic systems, for example, the family group is considered in terms of the way it helps to **reproduce the social conditions** under which both capitalism and a capitalist class can flourish.

Previously, we've looked at this fit between institutions in terms of the general "functions" the family performs within a socio-economic context. Now, therefore, we will be concentrating on the general question of the relationship between family structure and economic change - in basic terms we will be examining the ideas that:

- a. The predominant family structure in modern industrial societies is a nuclear one.
- b. This type of family structure is best-suited (fits most neatly) to the demands upon family life made by industrial forms of economic production.

In order to do this, we need to look briefly at:

1. The concepts of Industrialization and Urbanization and
2. The way in which **British society** has changed over the **past 200 - 300 years** (since we will use our society as a model for the purposes of examining the above relationships).

### **Social Change and the Family as a Social Institution**

Over the **past 200-300 years**, **British society** has changed dramatically in terms of the way it is **organized, economically, politically** and **culturally**. The simplest way of expressing the extent of this change is to think in terms of the "**Industrial**

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**Revolution**" - the process whereby the **major** form of **economic production** **changed** from being **predominantly agricultural** (based around the farming of land) to being **predominantly industrial** (based around the application of machinery to the production process).

As I suggested above, two related concepts are relevant here:

### 1. Industrialization.

As I've just noted, this is a process whereby **machines** were extensively applied to the **production process (mechanization)**, resulting in the development of **factory-based** forms of economic production. In turn, the process of **industrialization** heralded the development of the **mass production** of **consumer goods**.

### 2. Urbanization.

In simple terms, this involves the notion that there was a **population movement away** from **small-scale, agricultural, settlements to larger-scale communities based upon towns and cities**. This is sometimes characterized as a **social migration from the countryside to the towns** (which themselves started to arise as industrialization gathered pace with the establishment of factories).

The basic point to note, in this respect, is that since our society has clearly undergone a **change in social relationships** as they apply to **economic production**, it follows that the **family** as an **institution** must also have experienced various **changes** (since any changes in the institution of work - the way in which it is basically organized, for example – **should**, logically, also produce changes within other social institutions as the latter adapt to reflect such changes).

What we have to discover, therefore, is:

1. The **type** of changes (if any) that the family as an institution has gone through over this period.
2. The **nature** of the **relationship** between **economic change** (the introduction of Capitalist forms of economic production) and the **family** as a social institution.

Before we do this, you should be reasonably comfortable with the basic ideas that underpin Functionalist explanations of social systems and social order. The following section outlines some of these basic ideas (if you are comfortable with such ideas, you can skip them and go straight to the "**Fit Thesis**" section on **page 7**).

### Functionalism: Some Basic Principles.

For a social system to exist, a solution to the problem of making people feel that they belong to a social collective ("society") has to be found. This is because people are both conscious beings (aware of their social and physical environment) and social animals (that is, they form relationships with one another).

Our consciousness creates the ability to form co-operative relationships (which means that the social world can be potentially organized to raise the living standard of everyone in society); but it also creates a potential problem, namely, how to ensure that people do not simply act in their own individual self-interest. This problem is resolved by what **Parsons** ("The Structure of Social Action") has called the "**functional prerequisites**" of social existence.

There are four basic "**functional prerequisites**" for any social system:

**1. Economic organization** - that is, the ability to organize co-operative relationships in order to produce and reproduce the necessities of life (food, clothing, shelter, etc.).

Parsons calls this prerequisite **adaptation** to the environment.

**2. Political organization** - that is, the ability to organize co-operative relationships so that decisions can be made about how society is to be organized and run.

Parsons calls this prerequisite **goal maintenance**.

**3. Ideological organization** - that is, the ability to organize co-operative relationships so that people can see and believe that they share things in common with other people. In this respect, societies have to develop some form of common value system so that the values people develop as basic guide-lines for their behaviour are broadly similar.

Parsons calls this prerequisite **integration**.

4. In addition, a fourth functional prerequisite becomes essential because societies have to find ways of **managing potential conflicts** - for example, when the values that a person holds as a mother come into conflict with the values that they hold as an employee. In short, some way has to be found to either prevent deviance or hold deviance in check.

Parsons calls this prerequisite **latency** (or the ability to motivate people, punish deviance and so forth).

We can remember these functional prerequisites (fundamental problems that have to be solved) by using the simple **mnemonic "GAIL"**:

[**G**]oal attainment.

[**A**]daptation.

[**I**]ntegration

[**L**]atency.

If we think about these prerequisites, it is evident that as people attempt to solve the problem of adaptation, for example, the economic relationships they form will start to create a **pattern of shared, stable, behaviour** and we call this pattern of behaviour a "**social institution**".

The family group, for example, represents a particular form of social institution. Just as "society as a whole" must find ways of solving the problems noted above if it is to exist and function, Parsons argues that the same is true of each institution in society.

As an **institution** arises in society - to fulfil a particular set of **needs and purposes** - it is evident that it does so on the basis of its relationship to all other institutions in society. Each institution (family, work, government, religion, education and so forth) is related to all other institutions either directly or indirectly. Each **institution** evolves a set of **values** (and associated **norms**) that are related to the particular ways in which Parsons' functional prerequisites are solved.

If every social system and social institution has to find ways of solving these basic functional problems, it follows that the way in which people choose to solve them will result in the development of some form of overall system of values (beliefs about the way things ought to be). The collective term for this system of values is a "**culture**" and because different groups of people will choose to solve these problems in slightly different ways, it follows that different societies develop different cultures (the culture of French society, for example, will be different to the culture of English society).

In the above respect, therefore, we can see the way in which the **culture** of any society (or the culture of any social institution) develops **automatically** from the **need** to **solve** various **problems** of social existence on an institutional level of analysis.

On an individual level, societies also need to ensure that people recognize and respond to the values required to keep the system functioning, and for this reason a process of **socialization** is required (the process whereby individual members of society are socialized into an understanding and acceptance of both general social values and the values of the institutions of which they are members).

Although it is not relevant here to speculate about the exact process whereby people learn specific cultural values, it is relevant to note that we can outline the way people learn to conform to **broad cultural values** on the basis of their individual relationship to institutional structures and, by extension, the value system of society as a whole.

Parsons argues that we can identify **five basic groups** of general **value-orientations** that develop in relation to the way societies and institutions solve the problem of their functional prerequisites. Parsons called these "**pattern variables**" for two reasons:

1. Firstly because they represent patterns of general values and
2. Secondly because they vary from society to society depending upon the complexity of the institutional relationships that exist in society.

We will examine the concept of pattern variables at the appropriate point in these Notes.

Thus, to **summarize** the above:

- a. All social systems (and social institutions that give them their social structure), are forced to find ways of solving Parsons' four functional prerequisites if they are to exist and survive.
  - b. The way in which these functional prerequisites are solved creates a set of broad cultural values characteristic of a particular social system.
  - c. People are orientated towards - and socialized into - one of two broad patterns of social values, the nature of which depends upon the simplicity or complexity of a social system.
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### The "Fit" Thesis: A Functionalist Theory.

In order to help you understand the nature of the relationship between family structure and the process of industrialization it might be useful to look at a concrete **example** which can be **examined** both **theoretically** and **empirically**. One of the most basic sociological theories that we can examine in this instance is that proposed by a significant number of functionalist writers. These include:

- G.P. **Murdock** ("Social Structure", 1949)
- T. **Parsons** ("The Social Structure of the Family", 1959)
- T. **Parsons** and R. **Bales** ("Family, Socialization and Interaction Process", 1955)
- W. **Goode** ("World Revolution and Family Patterns", 1963).

The **basic argument** here is that as our **society** has **changed economically** over the past 2-300 years, so too has the **family** in terms of its **structure**. In particular, the family has **adapted**, in terms of the **functions** it performs and the **relationships** it supports, to meet the requirements of an industrial - as opposed to an agricultural - society.

This argument is generally known as the "**Fit Thesis**" because of the idea that we can see a **developmental "fit"** between the way both **society** and the **family** as an institution have **changed** and we need to understand the basic theoretical arguments involved in this theory before we can start to evaluate it. Specifically, therefore, the "fit thesis" involves the following ideas:

1. The **nuclear family structure** has developed into the **dominant** family structure in **industrialized societies** .
2. The **extended family** that was seen as the basic family structure in pre-industrial society, is **no-longer socially significant** in **industrialized societies**.
3. The basic relationship between the family and industrialization is one in which the **family** has progressively **lost** many of its **functions** as they have been taken-over by other institutions in society.

In this respect, according to someone like **Parsons**, for example, the **functions** performed by the **family** have become **more specialized** (but no-less important to society).

To understand the significance of these ideas, it would be useful to outline the **basic elements of functionalist theory** as they relate to the idea of a "fit" between the family and the process of industrialization and to do this we need to look initially at the basic way such writers have characterized the **difference** between the "**pre-industrial family**" (loosely defined in terms of **Britain**, for example, **as pre-17th century**) and the "**industrial family**". You should note, of course, that different societies industrialized at different times (Britain was the first).

#### A. The Pre-Industrial Family:

In terms of the fit thesis, this is usually characterized as being:

##### a. Predominantly extended in its basic form.

In this respect, the family group was characterized in terms of a **wide family network** and was considered to be "**multi-functional**", in the sense that it



performed a wide range of different functions (economic, social, sexual and so forth).

**b. Kinship-based.**

The **kinship group** was considered to be **co-operative economically**, insofar as the family group had a clear **economic function** (farming - albeit largely **subsistence** - and various related "craft trades" - brewing, baking and so forth). In this respect, **members of the extended family group** shared not only a **household**, but a **common economic and political position**.

In short, the **extended family** was seen to be **the major family structure** in **pre-industrial society** because the **family** was a **unit of economic production** (that is, people lived and worked within the family group itself).

In addition, in the **absence of a well-developed, highly-organised, State structure** of any overall significance in society, the family group was forced to take-on numerous functions (economic, social - looking after the welfare of relatives and so forth - educational and the like).

**B. The Industrial Family.**

In Britain, the initial process of industrialization occurred over a period of 150-200 years, dating very-loosely from the end of the 17th century. This change in the way this society was economically structured produced, according to writers such as **Parsons** and **Goode**, a change in family structure.

In simple terms, the **process of industrialization** created certain **pressures** for **social change** that resulted in the basic family structure becoming predominantly nuclear in form. The argument here is that the transition from a form of production based on agriculture (where people could live and work on the land) to one based around factories (to which people had to move) gradually **broke** the old **extended kinship ties** by:

- a. Demanding **geographic mobility** from the workforce - people had to be mobile in order to find and keep work in the new industrial processes.
- b. Creating **social mobility** - new opportunities arose for social mobility (after the emergence of a capitalist form of economic production) because of the various divisions of labour that were created by industrial forms of production.
- c. **Weakening nepotism** (that is, the favouring of people who are related to you) - the new industrial processes demanded efficiency and, to a certain extent, the ability to take opportunities for social mobility as and when they were presented.

As a result of the process of industrialization (and the **change** from a predominantly **feudal** to a predominantly **capitalist** form of economic production / political system), fit theorists (and Parsons in particular) have argued that the increase in "**institutional differentiation**" (for example, whereas the family was once a unit of economic production, this function was taken over by the factory) resulted in an **increase in institutional specialization**.



For **example**, once the process of industrialization and urbanization was underway, this began a process whereby some functions performed by the (pre-industrial) family where now **performed by other, better-adapted, institutions**. In this respect, specialized agencies began to takeover such things as the pre-industrial family's:

**a Economic function**

**Factories** now performed this.

**b. Educational function.**

**Schools** began to develop to carry-out the task of raising levels of literacy and numeracy required for factory work.

**c Welfare function.**

As we have seen in Britain, the **State** has taken over responsibility for the provision of many of the welfare functions formerly performed by family members.

For the moment it is convenient, for our purpose, to assume that the basic **dichotomy** between the **pre-industrial** and **industrial family structure**, conceptualised above, is **valid** (we will, of course, need to test its actual validity in a moment). **Assuming** it is valid, we can see how Parsons, for example, developed the contention that:

- a. The basic structure of the **family changed** from being **predominantly extended** to **predominantly nuclear** in form throughout the period of industrialization.
- b. The process of **industrialization** was the **fundamental cause** of this change.

In this respect, **Parsons** argued that the "**economically-isolated**" **nuclear family** (that is, a family unit that was not a unit of economic production - it's important that you do not confuse the idea of "economic isolation" with "social isolation", since it is evident that nuclear families do maintain various levels of contact with wider kin) **evolved** because it was a **functional** form of family structure **for industrialized societies**. In this respect, Parsons maintained that the **nuclear family** basically performed **only two specialized functions**:

- a. The **socialization of children** and
- b. The **emotional support of adults** within the family group (something Parsons termed the "**stabilization of adult personalities**").

Having established this idea, we can now look briefly at the reasoning behind Parsons' contention noted above. Thus:

1. **Parsons** argued that the pre-industrial family was extended in form because:
  - a. **Agriculture** is the dominant form of economic production in **pre-industrial** societies. This is significant because this form of productive process **is labour-**

**intensive** (since, of course, there were no machines available to mechanize the production of food) and therefore required large numbers of people.

b. In the **absence** of any viable system of **communications** (roads and railways, for example) and transport, it meant that there was **little or no geographic mobility** around the country.

Furthermore, the fact **that pre-industrial Britain** was **feudal** in structure meant that the **majority** of the population (the **peasantry**) were **tied** by **feudal bonds** to particular **feudal lords** - they couldn't, in effect, have moved around even if they had wanted to (and given the general dangers involved in moving around a countryside that was barely, if at all, policed it is highly unlikely that people would move around extensively unless they were forced to).

On the basis of the above, therefore, the family and kinship group were, a basic, necessary and functional element in this form of (non-industrial) production.

2. **Parsons** argued that the **industrial family** was **nuclear** in form because:

a. **Industry** is the **dominant** form of **economic production** in modern, non-agricultural, societies. In this respect, its fundamental characteristics are:

It is based around **factory** forms of social and economic organization.  
It involves a **separation** between "**home**" and "**workplace**".

b. This form of production is highly dependent on the **geographic mobility** of the general workforce (and since communications systems develop hand-in-hand with this form of economic production, such mobility is no longer very difficult).

In addition to population movement from the countryside to the developing towns, **Capitalist** forms of economic production broke the link between the peasantry and feudal lords - people were no longer tied to a particular area of the country.

In the above respect, the family group is still important in industrial societies, but its **functions change** to adapt to new demands made by industrial forms of production. In order to illustrate and explain the contention that the "**isolated nuclear family**" evolved **because** of the **industrialization** process, **Parsons** developed the concept of "**pattern variables**" – that is, patterns of behaviour characteristic of different forms of social organization (basically a distinction between "simple" and "complex" forms of social organization and behaviour). We can illustrate the above by outlining Parsons' conception of the two forms that pattern variables can take

<b>Pattern Variables Type "A"</b> (Characteristic of small-scale, pre-industrial, traditional-type, societies)	<b>Pattern Variables Type "B"</b> (Characteristic of large-scale, industrial, modern-type, societies)
<b>1. Quality</b>	<b>1. Performance</b>
Status is ascribed (that is "given" to you by others). It is determined by the type of family into which you are born.	Status in society is achieved through the things you do, rather than simply as an accident of birth.
<b>2. Diffuseness</b>	<b>2. Specificity</b>
People enter into relationships with others that satisfy a large range of needs. For example, a mother - child relationship satisfies a range of sociological and psychological needs.	People enter into a wide range of social relationships, each of which satisfies a specific need. For example, the relationship between a shop assistant and a customer.
<b>3. Particularism</b>	<b>3. Universalism</b>
People act differently towards particular people, based upon their relationship. For example, you may trust your immediate family, but not a stranger.	Individuals act according to values and norms that are "universal" in their society. For example, the value that all under equal in the eyes of the law.
<b>4. Affectivity</b>	<b>4. Instrumentalism</b>
Relationships that are based upon love, trust, close personal involvement, etc.	Relationships that are based upon what people can do for us in particular situations (and what we can do for them). Such relationships are not necessarily based upon values of love, trust, etc.
<b>5. Collective Orientation</b>	<b>5. Self Orientation</b>
People put the interests of the social groups to which they belong before their personal interests.	People give primacy to the pursuit of their own interests, rather than those of the group or groups to which they belong.

**Note:** Table based on Haralambos ("Themes and Perspectives") and Moore ("A - level Sociology").

**Pattern Variables "A"** are considered to be characteristic of **small-scale, pre-industrial, society**.

**Pattern Variables "B"** are considered to be characteristic of **large-scale, industrial, societies** - with one major exception. In **industrial societies** Parsons argued that although the social system and the various institutions within it conform to pattern "B", the **family institution** invariably conforms to **pattern "A"**.

For Parsons, therefore, we can note that on the basis of the above:

1. **Social evolution** involves **change** from relatively **simple** to more **complex forms** of social organization (this is very similar to **Durkheim's** explanation of the way in which social organization logically develops - which is not too surprising given their mutual theoretical perspective).
2. This process is characterized by the fact that people gain **progressive control over their environment**.
3. **Increasing specialization** in the **production process** leads to **increased social differentiation** (as people are educated to perform specific production tasks, they become socially-defined by the particular roles they play - housewife, labourer, manager, etc.).
4. **Generalized value systems** develop to aid the integration of people into their new social roles (as opposed to particularistic values in pre-industrial societies).
5. Finally, **the family group** becomes **progressively isolated** (in economic terms) from wider kin.

On the basis of the above argument we can see that the process of industrialization produces changes in the way work is organized and, as people are forced to adapt to these changes, the basic structure of the family as both an institution and a group also changes (we will look at this idea in some depth at a later point).

In short, the **family** as an institution:

- a. **Loses** some of its general **functions** to other social institutions and evolves to perform vital specific functions (see above).
- b. Becomes predominantly **nuclear** in form because the old extended family structure is less efficient at meeting the requirements of industrial capitalism.

**Testing the "Fit Thesis".**

If we think about the ideas we have just outlined in **methodological** terms, it is possible to do two things:

1. Firstly, we can think about the relationships specified within the general "fit thesis" as a **theory** that can be **tested**. To do this we will need to examine various forms of **empirical evidence** relating to the nature of both pre-industrial and industrial family structures.
2. Secondly, once we have tested the theory we will need to see if the basic **hypothesis** involved needs to be **revised** in the light of the testing we have done.

As an **example** here, if we were so inclined, one hypothesis we could test would be something along the lines of: "**To what extent was the extended family structure the norm in pre-industrial society?**"

Thus, in order to evaluate the Functionalist claim that the structure of the family changed in response to the demands of a new form of economic production we would, ideally need to look at a number of basic ideas:

We would need to decide whether or not the structure of the family actually did change from being extended in pre-industrial society to nuclear in industrial society.

Additionally, we would need to evaluate the claim that the basic functions of the family have changed, over the period in question.

Finally, we would have to evaluate the claim that, where the functions of the family can be shown to have changed, this was in response to the industrialization process, rather than as a response to some other social process (such as the development of Capitalism, for example).

As you may be thinking, these are large and complicated questions and, whilst we only have to understand their implications on a very general level in this context, we do need to address them...

To help us do this, there are a number of **questions** we can formulate - and answer - in relation to the general fit thesis, beginning with:

**A. Was the extended family structure the norm in pre-industrial societies?**

It is evident that the **validity** of the "fit thesis" is **highly-dependent** on the extent to which the historical **evidence** demonstrates that the structure of the **pre-industrial family** was predominantly **extended**.

One writer to cast doubt on this idea is **Peter Laslett** ("The World we have Lost", 1965 and "Household and Family in Past Time", 1972) and he has extensively **criticised** this basic conception of the pre-industrial family structure (and by extension this version of the "fit thesis") in the following terms.

**Laslett** argued that the basic structure of the **pre-industrial family** was **predominantly nuclear** and he based his argument on a variety of **secondary sources**, including:

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Parish registers,  
Wills,  
Church records,  
Secular court records.

These sources produced a wealth of **empirical evidence** relating to such things as:

Birth and death rates,  
Population size and  
Household composition.

It is important to note that **Laslett's** sources relate to **household** composition **rather than family composition** and, as such, this tells us very little about the quality of relationships within the family group.

The above notwithstanding, **Laslett** argued that it was a **methodological error** to view the **family** as a **simple social institution** that took the same **form** across the **class structure**. He argued that there were **significant class differences** in relation to family structures in **pre-industrial Britain**.

a. **Upper class households**, for example, frequently included both **wider kin** and **servants** (mainly because there was sufficient room to include such people within the household and, perhaps more importantly as we will see in a moment, because people of this class had a reasonable life expectancy).

b. **Lower class households**, on the other hand, were frequently **nuclear** because of very high mortality rates amongst the elderly.

This evidence is particularly significant in relation to **Parsons'** argument, for example, since the latter based his general argument on the logical proposition that **pre-industrial family structures** were largely **extended** in form because of a fundamental **lack of opportunities for geographic mobility**.

However, as Laslett clearly shows, while this might be a **logical assumption** to make (lack of geographic mobility should have resulted in some form of extended family), the **empirical evidence** suggests that because of **high rates of mortality** - especially amongst the **lower classes** (the vast majority in pre-industrial society) - **few people lived long enough to enjoy an old age** in which they would assume the role of grand-parent...

In addition, Laslett's **class-based analysis** led him to the conclusion that **lower class households changed** from **predominantly nuclear** in form in **pre-industrial Britain** to **predominantly extended** in form **during the process of industrialization and urbanization** before gradually **reverting** to their original nuclear form in the following 100 or so years (thereby effectively reversing the basic proposition put forward by functionalist fit theorists).

To clarify this evidence, Laslett's observations can be summarized as follows:

1. From the middle of the 16th century to the middle of the 19th century the tendency to marry late coupled with high death rates amongst adults meant that **the three-**

**generation extended family** was comparatively **rare** in Britain. Approximately 1 household in 20 contained more than two generations of kin.

2. **Extended households** (as opposed to extended families) were much more **common**, however. Laslett argues that this was due to factors such as:
  - a. The widespread presence of servants within upper and middle-class households. For example, he estimates that approximately 40% of all children entered some form of "domestic service" in their childhood / youth.
  - b. The widespread practice of married couples (especially those from the lower class) "lending" their children to childless relatives.
  - c. The tendency for families to take-in lodgers, as part of an "extended household", as a means of increasing family income.
3. Only about 10% of households contained kin beyond the nuclear family, hence his argument that the family was basically nuclear in form during this period.

Support for Laslett's argument comes from **Michael Gordon** ("The Nuclear Family in Crisis: The Search for an Alternative", 1972). Gordon argues that the **definition** of "nuclear" and "extended" family structures is important in this context:

**"The term 'nuclear family' refers to a unit consisting of husband, wife, and dependent offspring. The nuclear family is generally contrasted with the 'extended family', typically a residential unit composed of husband, wife, dependent offspring, and married sons and their spouses and offspring...these terms are often used sloppily, so that we will find a nuclear family with an adult member in residence in addition to the mother and father (e.g., an unmarried sibling [brother or sister] of the latter or a widowed parent) being referred to as an extended family. The extended family as defined above is seldom actually encountered in any society, pre-industrial or industrial."**

Gordon's definition of an "extended family" is rather more precise and specific than the one used throughout these Notes (once again highlighting the problem of how concepts are defined within sociology) and, given Gordon's conclusion, it would appear that the way the "extended family unit" is defined has important consequences for the way in which we can theorize a relationship between family structure and the process of industrialization.

**Gordon** argues that, if we are to talk about extended families at all, we can only do so in terms of a "**modified extended family**" group (defined as parents, dependent offspring and one son returning, upon marriage, to live with his family). Even here, Gordon follows Laslett's lead by noting that **rules of inheritance** coupled with **high death rates** tended to preclude even a modified form of extended family being considered as a "permanent" (as opposed to transient) feature of life in pre-industrial society.

Gordon argues that the "wealth" of pre-industrial families was measured in terms of land (because agriculture, as we have seen, was the primary economic activity).

**"Ideally, the family's holdings would be large enough to divide among the sons, but inevitably most families found themselves in a position where there was only enough land to support a single family. This meant that just one son could inherit"**

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the family holdings...A frequent if not universal condition of the son's taking over the farm was that his parents would remain in the home and be provided for until their death. Still, what should be kept in mind is that it was only for a brief period - between the father's retirement and his death - that these families could be spoken of as extended, and even then in a modified way.

Moreover, in the United States, because an enormous amount of land was available during the pre-industrial period, even inheriting sons did not have to wait for a father's retirement to start a family. What the Industrial Revolution did, then, by shifting a large part of the population out of agriculture, was to undermine this temporary and modified extended familism."

In addition, Gordon **questions** the idea that there was **little or no geographic mobility** in pre-industrial societies. On the contrary, people were forced to be geographically mobile for two main reasons:

- a. Firstly, as we have noted above, in societies where land was plentiful the opportunity to own land encouraged younger, non-inheriting, sons to take advantage of these opportunities.
- b. Secondly, where land was not particularly plentiful, the same process resulted, mainly because younger married sons and their families could not depend on their parents' supporting them.

On the basis of the **historical evidence**, therefore, it seems possible to conclude that "**industrialization**" was **not a cause** of a **change** from an extended to a nuclear family structure, primarily because the pre-industrial family was **not** extended in form.

Having said this, there still remain further avenues to explore in relation to the general fit thesis, one of which focuses upon the idea that, if "family structures" do not appear to have been changed substantially, have there been substantial changes in household structures and extended family networks created by the process of industrialization?

## **B. To what extent were extended family networks changed by the industrialization process?**

**Michael Anderson** ("Approaches to the History of the Western Family", whilst broadly agreeing that there is little historical evidence to support the "fit thesis" claim that the pre-industrial family was mainly extended in structure, has argued that, in order to understand the changing nature of family structures over the past 300 years, we have to recognise that - especially in pre-industrial Britain - **no one family**

**structure was dominant.** Rather, he argues, the period is characterized by a wide diversity of family structures.

In this respect, Anderson changes the focus of debate slightly to include not just the concept of extended and / or nuclear family structures but also the various **support networks** that surround the family group. **Anderson's** argument is based upon his detailed analysis of **census data for Preston, Lancashire in 1851** and his argument has two dimensions that are of interest to us here:

1. Firstly, that extended family networks and households were more significant in the pre-industrial period than in the industrial period.
2. Secondly, that changes in this network were **not** caused by the process of industrialization, as such, but rather that both were the result of **changes in society** created by the transition from one **mode of production (feudalism)** to another (**capitalism**).

In essence, Anderson's argument is fairly simple to understand, insofar as he claims that the relationship between family structure and economic structure is one in which **different classes** are **differentially placed** in relation to their **market position** (a form of **Weberian** analysis). Thus:

- a. Upper, middle and working class families, because of their different positions in the class structure, developed different "**strategies for coping**" with the social and economic changes that occurred with the development of capitalism and industrialization.
- b. The relationship between family structure and industrialization is one that is necessarily complex and changing - it is **not** an "**either extended or nuclear**" equation, but rather one in which changing market situations and experiences give rise to changing family structures.

Anderson argued that there were many **continuities** of family structure during the change from agricultural to industrial forms of production. The fact that, historically, **capitalism** as an economic system pre-dates the process of industrialization provides clear evidence to suggest that this fact influenced the way in which family groups responded to the later changes created by the industrialization process...

For **example**, we know that capitalist forms of social relationships - based upon the payment of wages for work - had penetrated the feudal system long before industrialization took off. **Rosemary O'Day** ("Women In The Household"), for example, has charted this process from the 17th century onwards in the following terms:

- a. A large rural proletariat of agricultural labourers existed in the 17th century. They owned no land and lived by selling their labour outside of the family group.
- b. Similarly, huge numbers of "landless peasants" appears to have existed (evidence of this is provided by the Elizabethan "Poor Laws" which attempted to deal with paupers - mainly people were too old or too ill to work or women children who had been abandoned by their husbands and families). Such people appear to have spent much of their time moving around the country begging or looking for work. The Victorian "workhouse system" represents a later attempt to deal with a "social problem" that had been in existence for hundreds of years...

c. The "**putting-out**" system represents an early incursion of capitalist economics into rural economies. A central capitalist businessman (it appears that women played no part in this initial form of ownership) distributed the raw materials needed to make-up various products within the home - a form of "**piece-work**" that is still familiar to large numbers of families in modern day Britain...

The significance of this idea, however, is in the fact that **capitalist social relations** based upon a separation between owners and non-owners (**employer and employee**) appear to have developed in the countryside long **before** the process of **industrialization** occurred.

d. The process of **industrialization** - and the development of **factories** - appears to have simply **accelerated** a process that had been developing over a long period of time. People - especially the rural poor - were already well-used to capitalist forms of economic and social relationships prior to the migration from countryside to town that occurred over a period of 100 - 150 years.

This time scale is significant since the development of factories was **not** something that, according to **Anderson's** research, **changed** the nature of **rural life overnight**. While the development of capitalist forms of **wage labour** had started to (fatally) weaken the feudal system, the attraction of factory life was **not** in itself particularly strong for the mass of the rural peasantry who had small-holdings of their own which, however minimal, could be passed down the line of inheritance from father to eldest son. Rather, the process of **migration** appears to have initially involved:

a. The landless peasantry attracted to the plentiful supply of work in factories (even though they were replacing one form of low paid, arduous work for another).

b. Families headed by younger sons who would not inherit land from their fathers.

As **Anderson** argues,

**"Most of the urban factory labour force did not consist of young men and women of peasant stock who had come alone to live in lodgings in a large city cut off from friends and relatives, working in a huge factory as part of an atomised labour force. Instead, more often than not, migration and entry to factory employment were acts pursued within a family-orientated context; most migration was highly focused onto particular places (and jobs within places) where the opportunities available to the migrant would match if possible the skills and earning potential of himself and his family and would be set within a context which would not conflict with values brought from the sending community. For example, in Lancashire many urban textile factory workers seem to have had some experience in rural textile industries, while girls from peasant farming backgrounds followed traditional patterns of going mainly into domestic service..."**

The picture we see developing, therefore, is a **complex historical process** in which the development of **capitalism** and **class-based forms of stratification** were significant developments related to - but **pre-dating** - the **industrialization** process. For this reason, we need to **reject** the relatively simplistic notion contained within the general fit thesis that we can understand changes in family structure **without** including a strong class-based element in the equation. Different social classes, as I have suggested, experienced and reacted to the explosion of industrial forms of production in very different ways, some of which we can explore briefly below.

Thinking in these terms - of extended family networks - we can note some of the **basic features** of **Anderson's** argument for a **diversity** of family structures across

the class structure that developed out of the market situation of different social classes, in the following terms:

### **1. Working classes.**

During the process of industrialization, the working class family generally seems to have developed a broadly extended structure and this resulted from such structural factors as:

#### **a. The development of factories.**

People moved from the countryside to their new places of work (creating towns in the process). Pressure on living space (and the relative underdevelopment of communications) resulted in the adoption of extended forms of family structure.

#### **b. Mutual aid**

The absence of anything akin to the modern Welfare State resulted in working class families relying upon a kinship network for their survival.

The extended family network (rather than an extended family structure) performed a number of useful functions in this respect:

##### **1. Employment:**

Where both parents worked, for example, relatives played a vital part in child care. In addition, since the concept of "childhood" was rather different to the one current in present-day Britain, childhood was not a long drawn-out process involving an extensive education. rather, children as young as 8 or 9 were expected to contribute in some way to family income by working - making "child care" less of a family problem than it is today...

In addition, in a situation where educational qualifications did not exist and where the vast majority of the working class could neither read nor write, an "unofficial" kinship network played a vital part in the securing of employment for family members through the process of "speaking-out" for relatives when employers needed to recruit more workers.

##### **2. Care of orphans:**

High death rates amongst the working classes meant that the children of dead relatives could be brought into the family structure. In an age of "child labour", young relatives could be used to supplement family income.

##### **3. Sickness and unemployment:**

Again, a system of mutual aid arose whereby family members could provide for each other in times of extreme hardship. The "problem" of elderly parents was not one that was particularly great during this period since life expectancy was still very low amongst the working classes. Once again, in the absence of a truly extended family, extended family networks based on kinship were highly important.

##### **4. Income from rent:**

People were able to supplement their income from wages by taking-in lodgers and it made sense, both economic and social, to invite family members into the home to help with both a share of rent and general family maintenance.

## 2. Middle classes:

During the industrialization process, the middle classes tended to display a **predominantly nuclear family structure**, the main reason for this being the increasing importance of education (for male children). The cost of this education tended to mean that middle class families were relatively smaller in size than their working class counterparts.

Greater levels of geographic mobility amongst this rapidly-developing social class (the class from which the managers of the new industrial enterprises were recruited) also meant that extended family ties tended to be much looser than amongst the working class. However, once again extended family networks (if not structures) were still important for this class in terms of securing employment and so forth.

## 3. Upper classes:

As **Roger Gomm** ("The Uses of Kinship", 1989) has argued, the **extended family** network has always been significant for the upper classes in Britain (so much so, he argues, that even today, when the majority of the population live in relatively self-contained nuclear families, upper class kinship networks play a significant role in the maintenance of property relations, mutual economic aid amongst kin and so forth).

During the industrialization process, upper class family structures tended to be a mixture of nuclear and extended types, with the latter probably being to the fore. As with other social classes, the extended family network performed a number of functions (albeit very different ones to the working class). These included:

### a. Patrilineal Descent:

The practice of inheritance down the male line meant that it was important to maintain strong kinship networks, since if family wealth was to be preserved and enhanced fathers had to be sure of their legal heirs.

### b. Marriage:

The significance of marriage for both the maintenance, consolidation and expansion of wealth needs to be stressed. Arranged marriages amongst the upper classes were (and still are to some extent) an important way of ensuring that family wealth was not diluted. The promotion of close kinship

networks was a significant means of ensuring that wealth was passed-on from generation to generation.

**c. Space and life expectancy:**

Wealth meant that extended kin could be relatively easily accommodated within the family home and the evidence suggests that it was relatively common for the vertically extended family to exist amongst the upper classes.

In addition, life expectancy amongst the upper classes, whilst not approaching life expectancy in modern Britain, was significantly greater amongst this class than other classes. Extended kin (grandparents) could be accommodated within the family group.

Finally, in this particular section, we need to note that according to writers such as **Gomm** (see above) and **Townsend** ("Poverty in the UK") the idea that the **modern nuclear family** is an "**economically isolated unit**" is **not** particularly **true** if we think of family structures in terms of **extended kinship networks** rather than "extended families".

**C. Is the nuclear family well-adapted to industrial society?**

The final aspect of the general "fit thesis" that we now need to consider is that of the extent to which "nuclear family structures" are particularly well-suited to industrial societies characterized by various forms of factory-based production. This idea, you will recall, is fairly central to the fit thesis since it forms the basis of the argument that the nuclear family form is central in modern industrialized societies because of the way in which it is functional for both its members and wider society.

**Goode's** argument ("The Family") about the relationship between industrialization and the development of nuclear family forms is useful in this context and we can summarize his main reasons for believing that the nuclear family system "serves well the needs of the modern industrial system" as follows:

1. Extended kin are less important and this allows people to move around from job to job.

2. Employers can ignore kinship ("nepotism") in seeking the best people to fill jobs in society (although Goode does argue that, amongst the upper classes, extended kinship ties do have some significance in modern industrial societies).

**Parsons** ("The American Family") has added to and extended the above by arguing that:

- a. The modern nuclear family has lost a number of its former functions, making it responsive to economic changes (responsibility for wider kin is no-longer a family function, for example).
- b. The growth in the technical sophistication and demands of work has meant that the family group has been superseded in its educational function by an institution better adapted to provide the (intellectually and practically) skilled workforce necessary to modern industrial forms of work.
- c. The social complexity of modern societies has meant that instrumental ties (that is, relationships based upon what people can do for us) are the most important in all but the early (primary socializing) years of life. This has down-graded the significance of kinship ties because they are no-longer functionally useful.

We could continue with this type of list (**Linton** ("The Family in Urban Industrial America"), for example, relates the rise of the nuclear family form to dominance over other forms on the basis of **urbanization**, **industrialization** and **secularisation**), but the **main point** should be apparent here; the **nuclear family** is the **dominant** family form in modern industrial societies because it is able to **adapt** most easily and quickly to **economic changes**.

**Criticisms** of the above viewpoint are many and varied (and they come from writers from a range of theoretical perspectives), but most focus upon the following ideas:

1. **Firstly**, the "classical functional perspective" typified by the work of **Parsons** has been criticised for being "**overly theoretical**"; that is, for **ignoring empirical evidence** (a criticism, you will remember, that we have noted earlier in relation to both Laslett and Anderson's analysis of pre-industrial and industrial family structures).

In this respect, the main point of criticism here is that the distinction between "nuclear" and "extended" family structures is drawn too sharply - that a picture of modern, economically isolated, nuclear families is contrasted with a (fictional) picture of economically productive extended families in the past. We have already considered this in some detail in relation to the work of O'Day.

2. **Secondly**, writers such as **Sussman and Burchinal** ("The Kin Family Network") in North America and **Rosser and Harris** ("The Family and Social Change") in Wales have demonstrated that:



- a. **Contacts** between kin were generally **more extensive** and "**emotionally closer**" than writers such as Linton and Parsons have suggested.
- b. **The nuclear family group** is **not** as "**economically isolated**" as Parsons has claimed. As **Townsend** ("Poverty in the UK") has argued in relation to the very poor and **Gomm** ("The Uses of Kinship") has argued in relation to the very rich, kinship networks in modern industrial societies are still very significant in relation to a wide range of social and economic services they provide for family members.
- c. Even amongst middle class families (the class one would expect to show most evidence of the small, nuclear family type set-up because of the type of work they perform and the fact that they are less tied to a particular location by either poverty or wealth), the empirical evidence seems to suggest that wider kin (a form of "modified nuclear family" arrangement) are still highly significant and highly valued in terms of emotional, recreational and ceremonial attachments.

**To conclude** this section of the course, we can note that:

1. The idea there is a close fit between changes in family structure, the development of an economically isolated nuclear family and industrialization does **not** seem to be particularly valid if considered in terms of the work of writers such as Parsons.
2. We need to be very careful when thinking in terms of "sociological perspectives" not to classify "all functionalists" as propagating the idea of either a "very close fit" between changes in family structure and industrialization or the idea that the "modern nuclear family" is best-suited to the needs of modern capitalist society.

Writers such as **Goode**, for example, have tended to leave open the question as to whether or not the nuclear family either exists in its "pure form" (that is, largely unencumbered by wider kin relationships) or is necessarily the family structure best-suited to modern societies. In Britain, writers such as **Willmott and Young** (who tend to be fairly closely associated with the functionalist perspective) have demonstrated the significance of kinship networks to working class families, at least up until the early 1960's (see "Family and Kinship in East London", for example).

**Litwak** ("Geographic Mobility and the Extended Family", 1960) has argued, from a basically functionalist perspective overall, that we should use the concept of a "**modified nuclear family**" to describe family structures in modern industrial societies. In this respect, the structure of the family is **neither "truly extended" nor "truly nuclear"** - but a (functional) **mixture** of elements of both forms.

In this respect, it is possible to **conclude** that:

1. The "fit thesis" as advanced by writers such as Parsons is not particularly valid.
  2. It is a mistake to argue that pre-industrial family structures were extended in form, just as it is a mistake to see modern family forms as purely nuclear.
  3. The extent to which industrialization was a cause of changes in family structure (in particular, the relationship between members of an extended kinship network) is debatable, since it is clear that, in Britain at least, the develop of capitalist forms of economic and social relationships may have been more-responsible for kinship changes than "industrialization".
  4. Different classes experienced the industrialization process differently (the working classes in particular, according to writers such as Anderson, seem to
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have developed extended family structures that come nearest to the "pure form" of extended family during the initial process of industrialization) and it would appear that the process of social change in relationship to kinship networks should not be viewed as a smooth, historically-inevitable, transition from one family structure to another.

5. Finally, it is also necessary to keep in mind the fact that perceptions of a fit between the modern (modified) nuclear family and industrial society may owe more to the assumptions made by writers such as Parsons concerning what is - or is not - functional than to anything more substantial. The whole question of "function" and "dysfunction" is one that tends to be clouded in the values of the observer...