

# **A-Level Sociology**

## **Teaching Notes**

### **Family Life:**

**The Nature and Extent of Changes Within  
the Family Group (1)**

## A. Historical Overview...

1. Parsons has argued that broad changes in family structure (basically from an extended to a nuclear form) have occurred primarily because of the industrialisation process. As we have also seen, various writers (such as Laslett and Anderson) have criticised this basic "fit thesis" on the grounds that it is:

- a. Too rigid a formulation and
- b. Not particularly well-supported by empirical evidence.

2. If Parsons' view is rejected, it doesn't mean that changes have not taken place - if not always between institutional structures, then almost certainly within these structures. Examples:

- Willmott and Young ("The Symmetrical Family") have argued that family in Britain has undergone three major stages of development:

- **Pre-Industrial Family** (Pre-1750): Characterised as:

- Stable
- Productive as an economic unit
- Having economic links with wider society
- Father as head of household, exercising economic control over family

- **Asymmetrical Family** (1750 -1900): Characterised as:

- Disrupted by industrialisation process
- Involving a clear separation between home and work
- Having "absent" fathers (at work)
- Emphasising women's role as "mother" and domestic labourer

- **Symmetrical Family** (20th century): Characterised as:

- Stable
- Child-centred
- Involving greater levels of equality between males and females
- "Mutual adaptation between needs of home and economy"

3. Elizabeth Bott ("Family and Social Network", 1957) has developed the last of these three categories:

- In-depth study of 20 London families and developed the idea of joint conjugal and segregated conjugal roles as a means of identifying changes in gender and role relationships within the family.
- Evidence that class was a significant factor in determining the type of roles played within the family, she also noted that social networks played a significant role.

4. Argued that joint conjugal role relationships are more-likely to develop within the family if the social network surrounding the family is highly dispersed, rather than highly connected.

- Joint Conjugal Roles:
  - Husband and wife share domestic tasks and interests
  - Dispersed social network
  - People known to family may not be known to each other
  - Husband and wife have similar interests
- Typical of middle class families, but found increasingly in working-class families
- Segregated Conjugal Roles:
  - Husband and wife have different tasks and interests
  - Highly connected social network
  - People known to family are also known to each other
  - Husband and wife have separate interests
- Typical of working class families, but may be found in some middle class families.

5. We should probably see Bott's analysis as what Weber called "ideal types" - idealised versions of social reality that we construct in order to help us measure the reality of social life (that is, we are unlikely to find families that conform fully to either of the above types of conjugal relationships, although different families will lean more heavily to one or other extreme).

## 6. Summary:

- Conjugal roles have changed from inequality based upon male domination (a good example being family life in Victorian Britain) to greater equality (as evidenced by the symmetrical family structure put forward by Willmott / Young and Bott).
- Changes within the family should be viewed in a positive light: Greater levels of individual choice, personal freedom, gender equality and so forth.

## 7. Other Functionalist views:

- Fletcher ("Family and Marriage in Britain").
- Rejects idea that family is in decline. Contrasts stereotyped view of "golden age of pre-industrial family" with reality of:

- No recreation
  - No education
  - Bad housing
  - Extreme poverty
  - Disease

- 20th century family is a:

- "Rewarding institution catering for the satisfaction of societal needs and for individual self-realisation and autonomy".

8. Edward Shorter ("The Making of the Modern Family"). Pre-industrial family was characterised by:

- Emotional coldness (relationships based on economic dependence, not "love")

Women as "chattels" (i.e. as the property of their husbands)  
Indifference to the welfare of their children

- The development of Capitalism broke traditional family constraints and led to:

Economic independence of women and children  
Sexual emancipation of women  
Greater levels of equality between men and women.

- Shorter: "The nuclear family is a nest. Warm and sheltering".

### 9. Summary:

- Family life - considered in terms of basic conjugal relationships - has changed significantly over the past 2 - 300 years.
- For a variety of reasons (economic, political and ideological), increasing emphasis is now being placed (by both sociologists and the participants themselves) on the concept of a symmetrical form of family relationship.
- Symmetrical forms of family relationship are a trend that has not - as yet - been fully realised across the class structure (Willmott and Young note for that amongst the poor and the elderly symmetry has not been established. Young married couples, on the other hand, are starting to display increasing levels of symmetry.
- If the symmetrical family form either exists - or is coming into existence in contemporary British family life - the following features of family life seemingly need to be present:
  - a. The married couple will be increasingly "home centred".
  - b. The extended family structure will increasingly be less important.
  - c. Male / female roles will cease to be segregated and instead will achieve greater balance in relation to the home and work.

10. We can begin to test this proposition by examining gender and power relationships within the family, using the example of Domestic Labour.

## B. Gender and Power Relationships

1. The relationship between men and women - both in society generally and the family specifically - has changed over the past 200 - 350 years. In Britain, women now have full legal and political equality with men. Women have progressed from being possessions of men, with no legal status of their own, to being considered legal citizens in their own right. It is difficult to argue that the position of women in society has not changed.

2. However, the question we need to address is the extent to which gender roles within the family have changed. Has legal and political equality brought with it full social equality?

3. Willmott and Young focus on class differences in the way that family relationships have developed in Britain, using the concept of "stratified diffusion" to explain a process which they identify as involving, firstly, a change in upper class family relationships (from segregated to joint conjugal) and, secondly, a gradual "trickle down" effect, whereby joint conjugal relationships come to be adopted by middle class families and finally working class families.

- A contemporary example of "stratified diffusion" might be the idea of cohabitation as an alternative to marriage.
- The practice of cohabitation as a conscious alternative to marriage first started to appear amongst the upper classes (and especially the famous) who were socially powerful enough to ignore conventions relating to marriage, illegitimacy and so forth. Gradually, as the practice increased amongst this class, it came to be seen as increasingly acceptable (it started to "trickle down" the class structure).

4. Bott stresses the nature of a married couple's immediate and personal social network - the more-extended a couple's "external social relationships" the more-likely were their family roles to be segregated (something Bott held to be true irrespective of social class). Bott's study ("Family and Social Network", 1971) can be criticised in terms of a small, possibly unrepresentative, sample.

5. Many feminist writers have argued that although class is important, an equally important concept ("patriarchy") has largely been neglected by (male) sociologists as a means of explaining the basis of gender relationships within the family.

6. Goldthorpe and Lockwood et al (in their refutation of the embourgeoisement thesis) have also indicated that they found evidence of a split in the working class that reflected this notion - affluent workers being more "home centred" (or privatised) than their traditional working class peers.

- There is another side to this equation that argues legal and political changes have not radically altered the relationship between men and women within the family. The relationship has changed in some way, but it is still men who seem to "benefit most" from family life.

- By understanding the nature of such things as domestic labour, power relationships and so forth, it should be possible to come to some conclusions about the nature of gender roles within the family (especially if we look at power relationships in terms of such things as child abuse, marital rape and physical and mental cruelty).

7. A number of initial observations can be made about domestic labour:

a. The vast majority of sociological analyses of the subject point to the fact that domestic labour is largely performed by women.

- "One occupation in particular, that of housewife, is exclusively feminine. In Britain, 76% of all employed women are housewives and so are 93% of non-employed women...": Ann Oakley: "Housewife", 1974.

b. The amount of time devoted to domestic labour varies in relation to the life-cycle of the family. For example,

- Families with young children
- Families with elderly / sick relatives

c. Domestic labour as an almost exclusively female domain doesn't vary that much between social classes. This suggests that the concept of patriarchy is significant. However, it is also evident that female experiences of domestic labour (in terms of time spent, energy expended and so forth) does vary greatly between social classes.

- "In 1973, Young and Willmott published "The Symmetrical Family" in which they argued that the emergent family form is a symmetrical one...both men and women have two roles, in paid work and in the domestic sphere...Unfortunately, their own evidence contradicts them...for their study of how much time a sample of 350 people spent working at household tasks showed that men did under 10 hours, while women who had full-time jobs did over 23 hours; women with part-time jobs did over 35 hours and full-time housewives did over 45 hours. These were people aged between 30 and 50...so there were not many couples in the sample with very young children or sick / elderly dependants...": Peter Worsley: "The New Introducing Sociology", 1987.

d. Domestic labour has a lower form of status attached to it than non-domestic labour:

- Unpaid labour
- "I'm just a housewife"
- Distinction between "real (paid) work" and "domestic chores"

- Tends to be made by (male) sociologists just as much as by non-sociologists...  
"The majority of women are not in full-time work..."  
O'Donnell: "A New Introduction To Sociology", 1981.

e. Housework tends to be seen not as labour, but as an integral part of the "feminine role" in life. This idea helps to explain:

- a. The ideological assumption that housework is "women's work".
- b. That the division of labour within the home is "natural" and reflects a rough "equality" between men and women (the male role being the "different but equal" one of working outside the family to provide for his wife and children).

- "Underlying this is the assumption that to keep house is a natural adjunct of femininity. Wielding a needle or a mop, changing a nappy or a bed, not running out of flour or into debt come easily to a woman, it seems. We are blamed if we cannot manage them, whereas men are praised if they can...": Barrett and McIntosh: "The Anti-Social Family", 1982.

f. The introduction of technology into the home (in the form of "labour-saving" devices) has not reduced the amount of (female) time devoted to housework. On the contrary, it appears to have increased the time burden (whilst decreasing the physical burden), since women now spend more time cleaning "thoroughly" than in the past.

### C. Domestic Labour: All Work and No Pay?

1. Why should it matter that domestic labour is largely performed by women?

- Why should women want to replace a form of labour (housework) that gives them some (limited) control over their work, with a form of labour (paid employment) that gives them none at all?

2. Women interviewed by Ann Oakley ("The Sociology of Housework", 1974):

- "To an extent you're your own master...you can decide what you want to do and when you want to do it...it's not like being at work when somebody rings you up and you've got to go down and see them or you've got to do this and that within half an hour.". (Ex-computer programmer).
- "The thing that's nice about being a housewife is you have your own time - there's nobody behind you with a punch card. You're your own boss, like..." (Painter and decorator's wife).

3. Oakley: "Housewife's autonomy [personal freedom] is more theoretical than real. Being 'your own boss' imposes the obligation to see that the housework gets done. The responsibility for housework is the wife's alone and the failure to do it may have serious consequences...the wrath of husbands and the ill-health of children."

- Indicates that females have a degree of autonomy within the home (and hence power over the daily routine), but real power resides with the male. The consequences of female "failure" may also be high, in terms of male violence directed towards the female.

- Although both paid labour and domestic labour are exploitative (the Capitalist profits from male / female labour just as men profit from female labour), the key difference is that one is paid whilst the other is not. The ability to earn money brings with it a degree of (political) power, since the male worker, for example, makes the female dependent upon him for her physical existence.
4. Concept of power helps to explain why the economic independence of women is a crucial factor in greater levels of equality in relation to gender roles within both the family and society as a whole.
5. Family life-cycle is an important concept in relation to domestic labour:
- a. If "housework" is part of the female domain, any increase in family commitments (such as the birth of children or care of relatives) falls disproportionately on the female, increasing the number of hours she works.
  - b. Whereas "male work" involves a relatively fixed time scale (9 - 5?), female labour continues throughout the day. Consequently concepts of leisure time vary between males and females (this also tends to hold true even when children are not involved - preparing the evening meal, for example). Whilst men tend to make a clear distinction between "work" and "leisure" time, this distinction may not be either as clear-cut or as relevant for females.
6. Heidi Hartmann's research in USA during 1960's / 1970's ("The Example of Housework", 1981):
- Female domestic labour:  
On average, full-time housewives worked 60 per week on household chores. When children were involved, an extra 10 hours a week was added to domestic labour.
  - Male domestic labour:  
Males devoted on average 11 hours per week on household chores. When young children involved, males devoted 5 hours per week to childcare.
  - These 5 hours per week were not added to the males' total hours, but subtracted from their "normal" household duties (Men, on average, gave the same amount of time to domestic labour, regardless of the extra work involved in raising children).
7. Methodological point: Wide disagreement about amount of time females devote to domestic labour - how, for example, is it measured and do different measurement techniques produce different results?
8. There are clear class differences in domestic labour. Middle class women:  
Have greater career opportunities than their working class counterparts.  
Tend to have smaller families.  
Are more likely to be able to pay others to tend children.  
Are more likely to pay others to do routine household chores.
9. However, whilst the concept of class is undoubtedly important, another dimension is added by looking at the concept of patriarchy in this context.
10. Elston ("Medicine: Half of Future Doctors?", 1980) studied the lives of male and female doctors who were married to one another. Elston discovered that:

- 1% of male doctors did chores such as shopping, cleaning and cooking.
  - 50% of female doctors performed chores such as cleaning (which perhaps suggests that many were able to employ cleaners to do this work).
  - 80% of female doctors carried-out chores such as shopping and cooking.
- The evidence suggests that male and female ideological expectations about domestic labour are powerful factors in determining whether it is males or females who carry -out this labour - even in situations where the female works full-time.

11. The social status of housework in our society is a rather ambivalent (like the status of motherhood or women in general). On the one hand, it is undeniably valuable work - both for the family and society - but, on the other, it is undervalued.

- Part of this low social status clearly derives from the generally lower status of women in our society, just as part derives from male ideologies relating to the status of work outside the home.
- If we think about how occupations outside the home attract social status, it gives us an insight into why domestic labour is seen as both a valuable activity and an undervalued status.
- Occupational status derives, in part, from the ability of social groups / classes to organise themselves in pursuit of better pay, conditions and status. High status occupations (such as lawyers, accountants and doctors) use educational and professional examinations as a means of securing high status. Such organisations are tightly controlled in terms of who can and who cannot become a member - and this organisation confers power by restricting access to such occupations.
- Women within the home cannot organise in this way - they can't restrict entrance to motherhood, for example. The reason for this may be physical isolation within the home (something that is increased when "labour-saving" devices become widespread and contacts outside the home decrease).
- Similarly, women are tied to domestic labour by love, affection and identification. It is easier to go on strike against a boss you hardly know than it is to strike against your husband or child...
- Finally, women tend to take pride in their achievements as wives and mothers - they feel that they "do a good job" and this tends to militate against organising to improve their social status.

12. Domestic labour as an integral part of "being female". In our society, women are socialised into the idea that domestic labour is part-and parcel of a woman's life. A woman's sense of self (what it means to be female) is developed in a social environment that actively encourages men and women to adopt "gender appropriate" roles.

- This socialisation process ranges from the childhood environment - where males and females experience role-differentiation amongst adults (the stereotyped "mother in the kitchen, father in the garden" image) - to the development of self-perception as a "man" or "woman" in youth and early adulthood. The predominant ideological images to which females are constantly exposed are ones that encourage - and reward - actions that reaffirm "feminine traits and behaviours".

13. Women are capable of rejecting "traditional" roles and beliefs, but the constant ideological bombardment (coupled with the realities of male expectations and power - especially violence) makes it difficult for women to break free of gender stereotyping.

- Pat Mayes ("Gender", 1986):  
"Images of being a wife and mother are incorporated into a woman's perception of herself as a woman. They are the only occupations into which workers are socialised from birth and the only occupations so bound with notions of love and duty, and with romantic illusions about women's reproductive functions. Given the strength of the ideology, the role of women within marriage is highly resistant to change."

14. The idea that the introduction of technology into the home (in the shape of "labour-saving" devices) has somehow freed women from drudgery and boredom is a myth. It assumes that:

a. Domestic tasks are of a finite length and type.

- Giddens ("Sociology", 1989) notes:

"The amount of time British women not in paid employment spend on housework has remained quite constant over the past half century. Household appliances eliminated some of the heavier chores, but new tasks were created to take their place. Time spent on child-care, stocking up the home with purchases and meal preparation all increased."

b. Technological change produces change in social attitudes and practices.

- The integration of technology into existing social conditions does not create a change in those conditions - it simply alters the way in which household tasks are carried out. A child, for example, does not demand less of a wife's time simply because the washing does not take as long to do - on the contrary, the female simply has more time to devote to her child.
- Similarly, the social / ideological pressures on women to fulfil their domestic labour tasks do not decrease with the buying of a vacuum cleaner or a tumble-dryer. All that happens, in this respect, is that such "labour saving" devices decrease the physical effort needed to complete various jobs, leaving the woman "free" to devote any time saved to "making a better job" of all the other tasks she has to complete as part of her role as "housewife and mother"...