

“A” Level Sociology

Teaching Notes for Students

Module: Family Life

Unit 1a: Family Structure (1)

The Relationship Between Family Groups and Social Structures

- In this section of the course we are going to look at "family life" in terms of:
 - a. The family as a social institution and
 - b. The family as a social group.
- In simple terms, this means is that, on the one hand, we are going to examine the way in which family life is organised on a "structural level" (the relationship between this institution and other social institutions) and, on the other, we are going to examine the organisation of various inter-personal relationships within the family group itself (adults and children, male and female, etc.).

If you want to think about this in terms of "macro" and "micro" sociology (it might help you to isolate some of the theoretical issues involved), the former represents a macro view of family life while the latter focuses upon the micro view.

Before we start to examine in more detail at the various relationships I've indicated above, we need begin this section by looking at the way in which we can define the concept of "a family".

Defining the "Family Group"

In looking at how it is possible to define a family group, we need to be reasonably clear about four related concepts:

1. A "family" consists of people who are socially-related to one another.

An example of such a social relationship might be marriage (see below) or cohabitation (people who live together as "husband and wife" without being legally / formally married).

2. "Kinship" is a related concept that means connections between people (either through marriage or lines of descent) that are "blood relationships".

An example of a kinship relationship might be that of a mother and child. Thus, the relationship between a husband and wife is one of "family", while the relationship between them and their children is one of both family and kinship.

3. "Marriage" is an important concept when talking about family life in our society and it is one to which we will necessarily return in greater detail throughout this section of the course (since, as we will see, various theorists place a great deal of importance upon the concept of "legal marriage" as the cornerstone of the family group). For the moment, however, a basic definition of marriage offered by **Giddens** ("Sociology", 1989) will suffice. Marriage represents,

"...a socially acknowledged and approved sexual union between two adult individuals...the marriage bond also...connects together a wider range of kinspeople. Parents, brothers, sisters and other blood relatives become relatives of the partner through marriage."

4. A "household" is a group of people who have a common residence. There is not necessarily any family or kinship relationship between them. This distinction between "family" and "household" is an important one statistically, many because governments tend to provide statistical information about their populations on the basis of both "families" and "households".

An example here might be a group of friends who rent separate rooms in a house

Question:

As an initial exercise (one that will also be useful in a moment), try to construct a basic "family tree" for your family. Begin with your grandparents and include as many uncles, aunts and cousins as you can. For each person / people label them as either "family" or "kin" to yourself.

- While the above concepts are important, it should be evident that before we can explore the relationship between families and wider social structures we need, as I've argued, to define the idea of "a family group" in more detail - and this may not be as easy as you might first suppose...

Question:

How you would define "a family".

While it might seem fairly academic to you about the way a "family group" is defined (since I suspect that you all, having lived within some form of family group for a major part of your life, "know" how to define a family), it is actually important for two very good reasons:

1. Firstly, before we can understand anything in the social world, we need to have some form of "agreed definition" about what it is we are trying to understand.

If there is no general agreement over definitions, it is difficult to see how we can compare and contrast different theoretical explanations of the role of the family in society (since different writers might be constructing theories about fundamentally different social groups).

2. Secondly, the way in which you define something will affect the way in which you are able to construct theoretical explanations about some aspect of the social world.

For example, if you are trying to argue that the family group exists in every known human society, the way in which you define the concept of "family group" will have important consequences for your theoretical explanation.

- In our attempts to define the concept of a family group, an initial problem that arises is one of whether or not it is possible (or indeed wise) to assume that there is such an institution as "the" family in any society (note the emphasis on "the", since it means that there can only be one type). In this respect, we have to ask ourselves a couple of interesting questions:

a. Is there only one type of family structure in society, or is it possible to talk about a variety of family types?

b. If there are a "variety of family types" are these types really very different from one another (that is, are they theoretically and empirically distinct) or are they simply variations on a basic family theme.

For example, if your definition of a family involved the idea of "two adults and their children", is a family that consists of "one adult and their children" a different form of family or simply a variation on the basic theme?

- Whatever the niceties of the matter (and these questions will assume much greater importance as we move through this section of the syllabus), a "classic definition" of "the family" is one provided by the Functionalist sociologist George Peter Murdock ("Social Structure", 1949), when he states:
"The family is a social group characterised by common residence, economic co-operation and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially-approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults."

- As an initial definition, this seems as good as any and you should note three points that derive from the above:

a. The concept of family is not necessarily linked to the concept of marriage.

In the above view, it is the social relationship between individuals that is important, not the legal framework to their relationship.

b. Family groups can involve any number of adults who maintain socially-approved sexual relationships

This means that families may involve a number of men related to a single woman (or vice versa) and the "sexual relationship" does not necessarily have to be heterosexual (between people of the opposite sex), since children may be adopted into the family group.

c. The family group involves both adults and children.

This means, presumably, that a husband and wife, for example, who do not produce children are not considered to be a family...

Question:

Murdock's definition, although widely-used, may be too-restrictive in the way it defines the family. Can you think of any groups that might constitute a "family" without conforming to this definition?

- Although we may or may not agree with Murdock's definition, it is evident that various types of basic family structure may potentially exist in any society and, in relation to our society at least, we can broadly outline four main types of family structure based around Murdock's definition.

As I've suggested above, we have to be careful here because it is frequently very difficult to determine whether or not the final two basic types are really types in their own right or simply variations on a basic theme established by the first two types...

- In case you are not sure what we mean by the concept of "structure", it refers to the way in which different social relationships between people form the basis for family arrangements. For example, a family that consists of two adults and their children represents a group that will have slightly different relationships to one that consists of two adults, their parents and children. The concept of different structures should become a bit clearer from the information provided below...

A. Extended Families:

- This type of family structure generally consists of three or more generations living in the same household (or very close proximity). The usual name for this type of family is a "**vertically extended group**" because the "extensions" to the basic family group are inter-generational (that is, "between generations" - they involve grandparents rather than uncles or aunts).
- Another form of extended family structure is that of the "**horizontally extended family**" which involves relations such as aunts, uncles, cousins and so forth. The "extensions" to the basic family group branch out intra-generationally (that is, within generations - a wife's sister, for example).
- As you might expect, there are **social** reasons for the existence of this basic type of family structure (that is, its existence is related to the various ways in which the family group responds to changes and developments in wider society). The extended family type, therefore, usually arises in those societies where a large group of related people living together can of use to one another in their everyday lives - each family member provides some kind of support to the remaining members of the family. For example:

In **agricultural** societies, where people are dependent upon working the land for their existence, a large group of people can work together to do such things as care for the sick, do domestic labour, work and so forth.

In **industrial** societies (especially where no support for the family is provided by the state), the extended family provides a form of mutual aid - especially in times of family crisis.

- This form of family has existed (and probably still does exist in one form or another) amongst all social classes in Britain at various times and there is particularly clear evidence for its existence amongst:

1. The **Working Class** into the 1960's.

See, for example, Wilmott and Young's classic study "Family and Kinship in East London".

2. The **Upper Class**.

Roger **Gomm** ("The Uses of Kinship"), for example, provides a good overview of the way in which "extended family and kinship relationships" can be utilised by the rich.

3. **Immigrant groups**.

This tends to be especially true of **first generation immigrants**. For such groups, the extended family still survives as a family type for reasons of mutual help and protection, cultural preservation, family businesses and so forth.

- We will develop the concept of extended family structures when we look at a related topic (the relationship between changes in family structure and the process of industrialisation).

B. Nuclear Families:

- The nuclear family basically consists of two generations of family members living in the same household. Family contacts amongst kin (for example, brothers, sisters, cousins and so forth) are usually weaker and less frequent than amongst members of extended families. Contact with wider kin, while it clearly exists, is more likely to involve "impersonal contacts" such as the telephone, rather than the more closely-personal relationships experienced in the extended family.
- Such contacts between the nuclear family and wider kin are also likely to be devoid of any economic content - that is, wider kin do not provide a mutual support network for family members in the form experienced by the extended family (although, it should be noted, writers such as Peter Townsend ("Poverty In The UK.") have found evidence that, even amongst nuclear family groups, various forms of "mutual support" amongst family and kinship groups exist amongst the very poorest in our society.
- In general, the nuclear family structure is usually found in two distinct types of society:
 1. In those societies where a large family group would be a hindrance rather than a help - for example, relatively simple societies (such as Nomadic societies) based upon hunting / gathering, where food may be in short supply and high levels of geographic mobility are required.
 2. In advanced, industrialised, societies (such as modern Britain), where the state provides help for the poor through a social security system / Welfare State. In such societies, there is less need to rely upon family support, although it is clear that poverty-stricken families, even in this type of society, do utilise an extended form of family network on many occasions.

Question:

How would you summarise the main characteristics of extended and nuclear forms of family life.

C. Single-Parent Families:

- As the name implies, this involves a single person plus dependent children. Although it is more likely to involve a female parent, a significant proportion of such families involve a male parent. This type of family is sometimes referred-to as a "broken nuclear" family, insofar as it often - but not always - arises out of the break-up of a nuclear family. In Britain, the presence of this family structure can be attributed to three main factors:
 1. An increase in the numbers of people divorcing.
 2. The removal of most of the social stigma formerly involved in pregnancy outside marriage (this type of single parent family usually involves the desertion of the male partner following female pregnancy)
 3. The death of a marriage partner.
- We will explore this type of family structure in more detail when we consider patterns of marriage, divorce, cohabitation and single-parenthood.

D. Reconstituted Families (sometimes called "Step-Families"):

- One consequence of high rates of divorce and remarriage (or cohabitation) is an increase in the number of families headed by step-mothers and step-fathers. This type of family is usually nuclear in form and involves parents, children of either spouse from a first marriage and (possibly) children from their present marriage. This type of family structure is becoming increasingly common in Britain - in 1986, for example, 1 in every 14 children (approximately 7%) lived with step-parents.

Question:

To what extent, in your opinion, can we characterise single-parent and reconstituted families as types of family in their own right, rather than as simple variations upon a basic nuclear form?

- Thus far, we have addressed the related questions of:
 - a. The way we can define the concept of "a family" and
 - b. The possible basic variations that exist in terms of "family structures"
- Next, we need to develop these basic ideas by looking at the question of whether or not the family group is a "universal" social institution. In short, we need to consider whether or not the family, as a recognisable social institution, has existed in all known human societies?
- Before we look at this idea in more detail, it is relevant to think about why we should, as sociologists, need to consider such a question at all - we do not, for example, tend to agonise unduly over questions about whether or not religion is a universal feature of human societies or whether or not the same can be said about crime, work, poverty and so forth. Why then, this almost unique preoccupation with such an idea in relation to the family?

- A number of points can be usefully considered here:
 1. Firstly, if the family could be shown to be a universal human social institution it would have wide-ranging implications for the way in which any society can be socially organised (for example, all societies would have to develop institutions that catered for this basic functional prerequisite).
 2. Secondly, if this were the case, then it would follow (perhaps) that something about the essential nature of all forms of human social relationships (and the way in which they are structured) compels people to adopt family-type forms of social organisation. Three points need to be noted in this context:
 - a. **Structuralist** sociologists would be vindicated in their assertion that the structure of human relationships determines / conditions the nature of social interaction.
 - b. **Interactionist** sociologists would have to account for the fact that, while individuals interpret the social world in particular ways, they would appear to be doing so in a uniform, patterned, way - which suggests that structural factors in human social organisation are of far greater significance than Interactionists generally allow.
 - c. There would be a challenge from theorists (such as **sociobiologists**) to accepted forms of sociological theorising, such that it could be argued that there is some form of underlying genetic imperative to human social organisation, whereby individuals are compelled, by their genetic make-up and inheritance, to develop family groups. The implications of this argument, for sociology, are immense, since if this could be shown to be the case, then it is a relatively short step from here to the argument that all forms of human activity have an underlying, genetic, component...
 3. Thirdly, aside from the debates between sociologists and non-sociologists, "Functionalist" and "Non-Functionalist" sociologists ((which I propose to develop in a moment), there is perhaps a further reason for the sociological preoccupation with the idea of the "universality of the family group". This is neatly summed-up by **Diane Leonard** and **John Hood-Williams** ("Families", 1988) when they note:

"What is at stake is the idea that the family (especially the family as we in the West know it) is a good thing, the way we 'ought' to live. If the family is a universal, a natural thing, its worth and desirability is self-evident. Using 'nature' and 'natural' as synonyms for real, necessary and good is a key ideology in the West...Those who seek to demonstrate that the family is natural and universal are almost invariably engaged in proving that it is 'good'. As such the relevance of these arguments extends beyond the social sciences and into wider political debates. For this reason, critics of Western family life are more likely to line up against the Universalists."

Question:

As an example of the way "natural" is used to mean "good and necessary" can you think of examples of advertising that imply this interpretation?

One example I found is "Stabburet Scandinavian Crispbread. 100% Natural".

Now, briefly explain:

- a. Why should this idea of "natural" be important to advertisers?
- b. Why the idea of the family as a "natural form of social organisation" might be important to some sociologists?

Is the Family Group a Universal Social Institution?

- As I have suggested, like most sociological concepts, the answer to the question about whether or not the family is a universal form of human social organisation depends to a large extent upon how you define "the family group".
- In the first place, it is clear that human biology dictates that babies have to be both nurtured and socialised by other (adult) members of a society. The human baby, unlike many other mammals, is relatively defenceless outside of the social organisation into which it is born. In this respect, there is always, by definition, some kind of social bond between infants and adults - the question we need to answer, however, is does this bond take the same basic form in every human society?
- Secondly, it is evident that if we define "the family" too widely - as consisting simply of adults and children - then we define the question out of existence (since, as I have just noted, it is a biological necessity that children are raised in a social context because they are unable to survive without help).

Conversely, if we define the family too narrowly, we may ignore family forms that, while they do not necessarily conform to a "westernised norm", do nevertheless perform much the same kind of services for both infants and society as a whole.

- We can begin to explore this question by looking at examples of what we might term "alternatives" to Murdock's basic definition. To this end, use a reading from **O'Donnell** "A New Introduction To Sociology", 1981) that covers a number of the main "alternatives to the conventional family" (alternatively, **Hamalambos** covers much the same area).

The Nayar of Malabar,
Kibbutzim,
Communes in America,
Soviet Communes.

- Despite the examples at which you have just looked, a couple of points seem clear:
 1. Various alternatives to the "conventional" family form conceptualised by Murdock are few and far between. In the main, therefore, it seems that the family group identified by Murdock (with perhaps some slight variations) is pretty much a universal social institution.
 2. None of the alternatives identified by O'Donnell appear to be particularly valid examples of alternative family forms if we consider them in terms of:
 - a. Their long-term existence / development and
 - b. Their impact upon the societies in which they exist / did exist.
- Taking the above into account it would seem that, notwithstanding the fact that the way in which you define the "family group" will influence the conclusion you are able to reach concerning the "universal existence" of the family group, it is fairly reasonable to assume that some form of basic family group has existed in all known human societies.
- However, while this may or may not be significant, it is evident that we need to pose a couple of more fundamental questions concerning the idea of universality.
 1. Firstly, if for the sake of argument we assume the family group to be a universal social form, does this derive from the influence of biological / genetic factors, or can we explain it in terms of the influence of social factors?
 2. Secondly, we can look at the question of whether or not the nuclear family is a universal form of family structure in modern industrialised societies.

- To deal with the first of these questions, we can look at various theorists (non-sociological) who support the former position and contrast them with various theorists who support the latter position.

Non-Sociological Perspectives...

- We can begin this section by examining the theories of a group of related writers going under the banner of sociobiology. For writers such as E.O. Wilson [the pseudonym of Frank Baird] ("On Human Nature") and Tiger and Fox ("The Imperial Animal", 1972), the assumed universality of the family is taken to indicate some form of "underlying or hidden biological imperative" (which we can loosely define as a "command" to do something that is beyond our ability to resist) within humans to form family groups. This imperative is provided by the genetic make-up of human beings...

A general overview of sociobiology is provided by **Giddens** ("Sociology", 1989) and you should read it in order to familiarise yourself with the basic arguments put-forward by sociobiologists (alternatively, **Hamalambos** has a section on this theory)

Sociobiology and Methodology

- **Haralambos** ("Themes and Perspectives", 1990) outlines a number of sociobiological themes in relation to gender and the family and includes a number of criticisms of this approach. Rather than go over this ground in detail, I want to use sociobiology as a means of introducing a major question of methodology within the social sciences in general and sociology in particular.

From your text-book:

Write a brief description of the term "methodology":

Briefly, how does "methodology" differ from sociological "methods"?

- Sociobiologists have adopted a particular methodological technique in their work that involves the following ideas:
 1. Firstly, they have collected data that suggests two things:
 - a. That the "family group" is present in all human societies
 - b. That the mother-child relationship represents the basic family unit predetermined by "nature".
 2. Secondly, they argue that these "facts" have to be explained - a theory has to be developed that will explain the empirical data and relationships they have discovered.
 3. The "theory" that explains the "facts" is one they term a "human biogrammer" - that is, a genetically-derived impulse in humans that predisposes them to behave in certain ways. A biogram is different to the idea of instinct, insofar as human culture can modify the biological imperative of the biogram - but it cannot completely over-ride it.

This technique is basically one of "**logical inference**" (which you may sometimes see characterised as "**inductive positivism**" - if you are not sure about the meaning of the term "**positivism**" it is important that you now work your way through the Study Pack that deals with this idea in the **Sociological Theory** section of the course).

- In this instance, sociobiologists look at the evidence - the "facts" - and infer the cause of these facts. That is, they argue that such facts of human existence have to be traced back to an underlying cause, and the cause, in this respect, is some form of genetic predisposition - the "human biogram" of sociobiological-speak.

- This type of reasoning is not something peculiar to sociobiologists since this methodological technique has a long and respectable history in the natural sciences (such as physics). For example:

Long before atoms were ever seen through an electron microscope, physicists had theorised their existence on the basis of empirical observations.

Similarly, astronomers theorised the existence of planets such as Neptune, Uranus and Pluto (many years before they had developed telescopes powerful enough to see such planets) on the basis of observed irregularities in the orbits of planets such as Jupiter and Saturn.

- In Sociology too, theorists such as Emile Durkheim ("Suicide: A Study in Sociology", 1897) used this methodology to good effect - why then should we doubt the validity of such a methodology?

- There are two main reasons for such doubt:

1. "**Facts**" (and in particular, **social facts**) are not self-evident things.

On the contrary, they are produced by the society in which they occur - by the meaningful interaction of people as they go about their daily lives - as a sociologist such as Peter Berger ("The Social Construction of Reality") might have put it.

In the natural sciences there can be a general agreement amongst scientists about "facts". Using one example, show why you think this kind of "general agreement" might not be possible in Sociology (for example, is it a "fact" that men are more intelligent than women?).

- Thus, one question we need to ask, in this respect, is how conclusive is the evidence in the first place - are the observations that sociobiologists consider to be "facts" open to doubt?
- According to writers such as:

Oakley ("Conventional Families", 1982)
Bleir ("Science and Gender", 1984)
Rose, Kamin and Lewontin ("Not In Our Genes", 1984)

the "facts" upon which sociobiologists rest their case are by no-means conclusive - especially if we look at family structures on a comparative basis (that is, on the basis of how different societies are socially organised).

Many societies, they argue, either do not develop clearly-recognisable family structures or, more importantly, do not assign social roles (such as child-care) in the way that they are assigned in Western societies (where women, in the main, take-on responsibility for the care of children).

- In this respect, the idea that "the facts" are self-evident things that require explanation is not one that can be supported methodologically. The "facts", in this instance, could be interpreted as the self-interested attempt by sociobiologists to create phoney, insupportable and invalid consensus about human social organisation that can then be "explained" in terms of genetic predisposition's...

2. Is the existence of "biograms" a reasonable **assumption**?

- As I have suggested, while it is perfectly reasonable to theorise the existence of something (such as atoms), there comes a point when assumptions have to give way to proof. In this respect, sociobiologists have to demonstrate the empirical existence of biograms, rather than simply conveniently assume their existence (since it would be just as methodologically valid to assume that biograms do not exist...).

- Although, for example, geneticists have, over the past thirty years, demonstrated empirically the existence of genes that determine human physical characteristics, no one has ever empirically-isolated a gene that determines human social characteristics (a "gene" is something that carries hereditary information about a living organism). All genes thus far discovered that affect an individual's social characteristics - such as low IQ - also have associated physical affects.
- In addition, many geneticists have questioned the supposed relationship between "genetic inheritance" and social behaviour as it is proposed by sociobiologists. Modern genetics stresses the idea that, far from being a biological advantage (as sociobiologists and others claim), the determining of social behaviour by genetic inheritance would be a huge biological disadvantage since it would take away our ability to adapt to changes in our environment (both physical and social). In this respect, while it is evident that our ability to learn is genetic in origin, it our environment (culture) that shapes what and how we learn...

In terms of the above, therefore, the "explanations" provided by sociobiologists remain unproven assumptions...

- A second strand to the "universal family" is provided by writers such a **Ferdinand Mount** ("The Subversive Family), a writer associated with the **New Right** in Britain. Mount's basic argument can be summarised as follows:

1. The nuclear family unit is seen to be the most fundamental co-operative unit in any society, mainly because it is a form of social organisation that pre-dates all other forms of social organisation (it has existed from the earliest dawn of human history and has persisted to the present day).

2. The family group is held together by necessity, love and, in its modern form, marriage. As Mount argues,

"[It is] a way of living which is both so intense and so enduring [that it] must somehow come naturally to us, that it is part of being human".

- In the above respect, the basic argument revolves around a faulty form of reasoning which:
 - a. Accounts for the continued existence of the family group in terms of some form of hidden biological imperative which is not specified (the nearest we come to a specification is in the concept of "nature").
 - b. Neglects to examine other possible (social) variables that may be of greater use in the explanation of the apparent universality of family groups.

Sociological Perspectives...

- The argument concerning the universal nature of the family as a form of social organisation is normally seen, within sociology, to be a debate between, on the one hand, Structural Functionalists and, on the other, Marxist and Feminist Conflict Theorists. While this dichotomy (that is, a division into two, opposed, groups) probably oversimplifies the matter, it is evident that Functionalists do tend to see the family, as a social group, in a rather different light to other sociological theorists. As we shall see in a moment, the differences involved revolve around two ideas:

1. That the family is "functionally necessary" for any society (the general Functionalist view) - and hence necessarily "universal" (since if it is functionally necessary it must exist in all societies).

2. That the form taken by "family-type" groups relates to the specific nature of social organisation in any society (the general Conflict view) - and hence "the family" is not necessarily universal.

- Whatever the differences between the two arguments (which are many and varied and at which we will necessarily look in more detail in a moment), there remains a general agreement amongst sociologists that mankind is not "biologically" or "genetically"-predisposed towards forming family groups (be they nuclear or extended in form).
- Even those (Functionalist) sociologists - such as Murdock, for example - who view the family as universal, attempt to explain this functional necessity sociologically. In basic terms:

Human societies, by definition, are organised in terms of social relationships.

These social relationships reflect both biological and cultural necessities (the need to produce and socialise children).

All human societies are faced with the same basic problems in this respect (problems which are structural imperatives if human society is to exist).

Therefore, it is not surprising that people necessarily arrive at similar solutions to those problems.