

THE FAMILY AS A FUNCTIONAL UNIT

Structural—Functional paradigm explains family as a functional unit. The structural-Functionalists consider family as a basic social unit on which entire society rests. They identify family as a performer of four important functions without which society may not continue to exist.

1. Socialization : Family plays the most important role in socializing individuals. A child acquires all basic skills, norms and values, beliefs and knowledge from the family. Not only the parents but also the other members of the family directly or indirectly contribute to the social development of the child. Overall research suggests nothing is more likely to produce a happy, well-adjusted child than being in a loving family.

Family also gives a child a social position in terms of religion, race, ethnicity and class, i.e. an identity for his/her self. Class position of the parents affect the children to a great extent, not because the amount of money spent on children vary from one class to another, but the attitudes and behaviour patterns of the children are likely to be guided differently by the parents of different class backgrounds. Surveys show that, when asked to pick from a list of traits that are most desirable in a child, lower class people in U.S.A. favour obedience and conformity. Well-to-do people, by

contrast, prefer good judgment and creativity. Melvin Kohn pointed out, the parents always went to inculcate such traits in their children which satisfy their interest in the real world and they try to help their children to follow their footsteps in the field of real life activities. Thus the people coming from lower social background usually have limited education and they perform regular jobs under close supervision. They expect their children to do the same routinised jobs and crave for obedience and conformity in their children. Whereas the people from upper class social background have jobs that demand imagination & creativity. Their parents, therefore try to inspire the same qualities in their children. Middle class parents provide their children with an extensive program of leisure activities, including sports, travel, music lessons which enrich the children in such a way that they may opt for creative and innovative professions in their later life. The whole process of socialization thus begins in family and revolves around the same.

2. Regulation of sexual activity : Sexual activity is restricted to maintain social order and homogeneity. The incest taboo is a norm forbidding sexual relations or marriage between certain relatives. Different society marks the line of distinction in accordance with its social reality and nature of kinship identity in respective societies. The Navajo society eg. forbid marrying the relative of one's mother as it is a matrilineal society. In general, bilateral societies of modern times maintain the incest taboo to both sides of the family, imposing specific restrictions on near relatives. However brother—sister marriages found approval among some societies like ancient Egyptians, Incan or Howaian nobility.

Family is generally used as a device to limit incest, which ultimately leads to a controlled society. The incest taboo is a welcome measure for societies as this limits sexual competitions in families by restricting sexuality to spouses. Second, kinship defines social responsibility and interactive behaviour without which the existence of society would have been threatened. Reproduction among close relatives is very likely to disturb this kinship structure causing severe damage to social cohesion. Third, if the people agree to marry outside their immediate families, the scope for the integration of larger society may increase. Thus, a formal structure becomes essential which can ensure restricted sexuality and social interaction and family is the only response to this need.

3. Social Placement : As family is an important unit to control sexuality and ensure essential reproduction, it also conforms social position of an individual. Every child is cared and reared only within a family set up which ascertains his/her social position and lifestyle. Parents confer their own social identity—in terms of race, ethnicity, religion and social class—on their children. Even, health is closely related to social standing of respective families. Children born into poor families are three times more likely than children born to privileged families to die from disease, neglect, accidents or violence during their first years of life. Also social placements are more or less determined, if not dictated by family.

4. Material, Emotional and Financial Security : Family is considered as the only source of solace for the modern man in this complex and cruel world. People living in families tend to be happier and healthier than people who live alone.

Parents, siblings or grand parents provide security and safety in case of emotional set-back and turmoil. If a person loses his/her job or is frustrated with professional world can get support only in a family. Financial responsibility can also be shared by the family members.

Structural-Functional Analysis presents some reasons for which society needs family, but this approach glosses over the great diversity of family life in modern world perspective and also ignores how other social institutions eg. Government could meet some of the same human needs. Moreover structural - Functional explanations often fail to explain the negative aspects of family life, including patriarchy, gender bias or violence.

The other side of family life and its standing as a functional unit has been identified by the social - conflict paradigm. This paradigm also emphasizes on the importance of family as a basic social unit.

1. Property and inheritance : Friedrich Engels pointed out that the man of wealth felt the need of family at a specific juncture of historical evolution of human society as they wanted to maintain and transmit their property which they could acquire after a prolonged effort and pain. Families thus originated and maintained to support the concentration of wealth and reproduction of class structure in each succeeding generation. Every later researches projected the fact that, higher income-group in the society are more interested in making and maintaining families so that their upward mobility in the society is justified and secured.

2. Patriarchy : Families are essential to limit sexuality because the male family heads are interested to identify their own heirs. So, generally the incest taboo is meaningful only when it restricts the marriage of women and limits her within a monogamian family. Thus families act as the instruments in the hands of men to transform women into sexual and economic property of male members of the family. Still, it is believed that the responsibility of providing all basic facilities to family members, both women and children lies with the man of the family thereby leaving woman into an inferior position.

3. Racial and ethnic inequality : The families maintain social order which means racial and ethnic categories persist over generation only to the degree that people prefer marrying within their own social and class background. Even, they also maintain a family standing in terms of values, sense of morality, religious beliefs etc. so that society can maintain a stratified and hierarchical system.

Social-Conflict theory thus emphasized on the role of family in social stratification in terms of property, gender and ethnicity. This view of understanding family links it with social inequality which is again one-sided. We can hardly deny that family carries out societal functions not easily accomplished by other means.

Both structural-functional & Conflict theory view the family as a structural system. Micro-level approaches on the other hand explore how individuals shape & acknowledge family life.

Symbolic-Interaction analysis states that family living offers opportunity for emotional security. Family members share activities, care for each other, sacrifice for benefit of close one and thus they can justify their living. The parents emotionally depend on their children, expect a warm relationship and enjoy living together. People within family turn to one another for help with daily tasks and responsibilities.

Social-Exchange analysis, another micro level approach depicts human relationship as a give-and-take process. The best possible way to negotiate the best opportunity for an enjoyable living can be the selection of marriage partner.

In patriarchal societies, men bring wealth & power to the marriage market place and women bring beauty. But presently the term of exchange are converging for men

and women. However through this exchange both search for an emotional – Financial shelter which is expected to be lifetime partnership for pleasure and satisfaction. The children and other members of family, all are parts of this exchange negotiation leading towards a better living.

Micro-level analysis balances structural – functional and social conflict visions of the family as an institutional system. Family structure and role varies from one society to another but all would agree that ultimately family is a basic functional unit in society as a whole.

Family may have been originated to satisfy some biological needs. Functionalists viewed family as a functional unit which not only functions for the individual family members, but also identifies a functional connection with the society as a whole. For our purpose, we must acknowledge the fact that, family has certain indispensable functions for the society.

Family is the social unit in which man can distribute and share their responsibilities, both economic and emotional. Collective work ensures economic satisfaction, and if the basic requirement is earned through a group effort, it gives positive result. Among the Kadar, food gathering is a family activity. Again, emotional security for the children and adults of the family can be provided only in the family. We can find out the definite and most important functions of the family —

(1) Fulfilment of the basic biological and economic needs—The basic needs include food, shelter, clothing, health and education.

The head of the family is expected to fulfil such basic needs of the children of the family as well as the other members. The Hindu marriage makes it obligatory for the husband to provide comforts to his wife. Among the tribals also such basic needs are fulfilled by the family. When, a member of the Kadar tribe, of Cochin, joins his family members in search for fruits, he helps in the satisfaction of the hunger of the group as a whole of which he is a member.

(2) Upbringing of children—The children are the responsibility of the family. However, the period of upbringing varies from society to society. Among the tribal people the period of dependence on the family is short and among the caste Hindus and other mainstream communities the children depend on the family for a much longer period. The children are expected to be provided with food, clothing and shelter by the family. They are cared in the time of illness. Their basic social education is imparted through the family. They finally become a social being only from within the family.

(3) Channelising Sex-Satisfaction—The family is an institution in which the male and the female can have regularised and controlled sex-satisfaction which helps the society to develop a healthy relationship among men and women. The family norms and usages offer a desirable situation where man-woman relationship is determined not only on the basis of sex differences but other emotional and social determinants are nurtured also. Cohabitation leads to conception and children are born which ultimately ensures the perpetuation of the group and the species. Thus sex-urge and mating are channelised for a socially productive purpose.

(4) Providing Psychological Security—Family supports the children, the aged and all the other members so that psychologically they never feel lonely. In the primitive society, the environment was too unfriendly and the people had to fight with odds to earn their living, so they sought a relief from violence and competition inside a family. Even in modern complicated world, family offers security and

protection, though often in a new way, somewhat different from the earlier family patterns.

(5) Transmission of Culture—The societies develop culture for their people and the family acts as an agency to transmit that greater culture to the next generation. The family teaches the social behaviour, language, dress codes etc. Which draws an individual within the greater society. Family may not act as a transmitter always in a formal and organised manner, but through its regular activities the members spontaneously adjust themselves with the society as a whole. Family acts simultaneously as an educative unit and a socio-cultural agency.

The functions of the family are changing with time but even now family persists as the most fundamental social unit. People in a complex, competitive world are always searching a cordial and safe corner and they are still interested in making family consisting parents, children and siblings.

FAMILY AS AN ASSOCIATION :

As the family can be understood as an agency to perform certain functions, it can also be viewed from the aspect of its structure and form as an association. The basic form of the family includes the mother and the child which can be extended to include the father and the siblings of the child. Thus, mother, father, children are the most fundamental components of a family.

There are several criteria for classifying family as an association. Those are—

(i) size, (ii) residence, (iii) descent, (iv) inheritance and (v) marriage.

(i) Size : The size of the family means the number of members in a family. On the basis of this criterion family can be divided into three types—(a) Nuclear family, (b) Extended family and (c) Joint family.

(a) **Nuclear family**—The meaning of nuclear family is a group composed of a man, his wife and their children. It is generally said that, the members of an elementary family always live together in the same household, either by themselves or as part of a wider household group such as a joint or extended family. A. M. Shah found six major types of nuclear family households which according to him are incomplete—(i) husband and wife, (ii) widower father and unmarried children, (iii) widow mother and unmarried children, (iv) unmarried brother and sister, (v) an unmarried, widowed or divorced man and (vi) a widow. Cohn distinguishes three sub-types of nuclear family—(i) single aged adult, (ii) man, wife and unmarried offspring and (iii) woman and unmarried offspring.

Cohn defines a nuclear family as, "typically consisting of married man and woman with their offspring", Murdock added, "although in individual cases one or more additional persons may reside with them". Talcott Parsons identifies the nuclear family as an isolated family. It is isolated because it does not form an integral part of a wider system of kin relationships.

Obviously, there are social relationships between members of nuclear families and their kin but these relationships are more a matter of choice than binding obligations. However, in India nuclear families are not isolated from their kins. Tribal people always preferred nuclear family but maintained a close connection with their kins as well.

(b) **Extended family**—An extended family is composed of two or more nuclear families affiliated through an extension of the parent child relationship. A series of close relations are connected either following the male or the female line, usually not along both the lines. This kind of family in India is named as joint family in India. Among some South African tribes these extended families prevail.

(c) **Joint family**—Joint family means two or more elementary families joined together. It is called patrilineal joint family when the relations extend through father's line and it is matrilineal joint family when the extension takes place along the mother's line. If only one member is added to a nuclear family, it will take the shape of joint family. Thus, for example, considering the father as the male head of the family, the addition of his widower father or unmarried, divorced or widowed brother or sister or son's wife would bring about a joint family. The addition of any one of such relatives means an addition of more than one social relationships. For example, the addition of the son's wife means the addition of relationships not only between the son and his wife but also between father-in-law and daughter-in-law and mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.

Prof. M.N. Srinivas defines the composition of the joint family as, "It consists of the descendants in the male line, of a common ancestor, and their wives, sons, married as well as unmarried, and unmarried daughters." Prof. Irawati Karve presents the composition as follows: "There are three or four generations of males related to a male ego as grandfather and his brothers, father and his brothers, brothers and cousins, sons and nephew, and wives of all these male relatives, plus the ego's own unmarried sisters and daughters".

R.W. Nicholas makes a distinction between joint family and extended family, considering the former as a unit of joint property arrangements between two or more nuclear families, and the latter a unit of Co-residence or the use of certain kinds of family kinship terms outside the nuclear family. On a broader plane, a joint family is defined as a group of several related conjugal or nuclear families in one household. In this family labour is pooled and all are responsible to the same authority.

(ii) **Residence** : Families can be classified on the basis of the residence of the females. When the females start staying in her husband's residence after marriage it is patrilocal family and the female staying in her mother's residence even after the marriage and the female line continues in terms of residence if it is a matrilocal family. Thus, on the basis of residence families may be grouped into two—(a) Patrilocal family and (b) Matrilocal family.

(a) **Patrilocal family** : The patrilocal extended family consists of two or more nuclear families affiliated through an extension of father-son relationship. In this kind of family, descent is traced through male line. Many of the Indian tribes like Kharia, Ho, Bhil, Gond are having patrilocal families. Among the civilised people of India also we mostly find patrilocal families.

(b) **Matrilocal family** : The Matrilocal extended family comprises of two or more nuclear families affiliated through an extension of mother-daughter relationship. This type of families are made of the married couple who resides in wife's family or kin group. In these families, the husbands either visit their wives periodically or live permanently with the matrilocal family. In the communities where matrilocality is the norm, the daughters are desired and valued. In India several tribal groups are found like Khasi of Assam or Nayars of south India who follow patrilocal type of family norms.