



Northeastern University  
*Online*



# Family Functions and Dysfunctions

SOC 2634 Week 1 Lecture



## **Family and Society**

- Cultural universal
- Major institution
- Adapts to surroundings and circumstances

The family is a major cultural institution. It is probably the first human institution. It is essential to the survival of the group and the society. In the earliest human societies cooperation was essential for successful procreation and survival.



## **Theoretical Perspectives**

- Structural-functional
- Conflict
- Symbolic Interaction

Sociologists tend to look at the family and other cultural institutions from one of the three major sociological perspectives:

- The structural-functional perspective looks at the functions of each major institution. These institutions include the family, religion, education, the economy and work, and politics. (Politics is defined by sociologists as “the exercise of power in a social situation. In the case of the family they focus on the ways in which the family contributes to the stability and functioning of the society as a whole.
- The conflict perspective focuses on the way in which the family creates and sustains inequality in societies.
- The symbolic interaction perspective views society on the micro level (face-to-face interaction) of the society. They are looking at the meanings and patterns of interaction that emerge within the family. The form that a family takes and the challenges they face have a large impact on the way in which the members of the family interact and the expectations they have about what a family should be.



## Structural-functionalism and the family

- Socialization
- Social placement
- Regulation of sexual activity
- Meeting material and emotional needs

The structural-functional perspective looks at the universality of the family as evidence of its necessity for and contributions to the stability and productivity of the society as a whole. The functions that they consider to be the most important are:

•**Socialization:** human beings are born dependent and remain dependent on others for a number of years. (Think, for example, of all the discussion about when children are “old enough” to engage in various activities and when it is that we are really “adults.” The answer varies across time and cultures, of course, but these kinds of questions/considerations are always part of the process of socialization. Human beings evolved to the point where we do not rely upon or even really have instincts. For sociologists, socialization is what has replaced instincts and is the “process of becoming human.” In terms of the family, for example, we often hear about a “mothering instinct” in women. However, instinctual behavior is universal and there are many instances of mothers who are judged to be “unfit” and, when you can find such exceptions, you know you are not dealing with an instinct. Little girls are socialized from early in their lives to “cook” and to “take care” of dolls, etc. Our society emphasizes “motherhood and apple pie” as “all American.”

•**Social placement:** because children are dependent and because of the importance of descent and children as the future, it is critical in all societies for children to be a member of a family and for the “caregivers” to be clearly identified.

•**Regulation of sexual activity:** in the earliest types of societies, it was important for a family to form alliances with other families. Some sort of “incest taboo” is one of the mechanisms which restrict sexual activity between certain kin. In this society we consider members of our immediate family to be inappropriate sexual partners. This would include siblings, parents, grandparents, great-grandparents etc. First cousins are also on this list.

•**Meeting material and emotional needs:** children must be “taken care of.” This nurturing includes the basic food and shelter but also must address emotional needs. Parents are expected to “bond with” and satisfy the emotional needs of their children.



## Conflict Perspective and the Family

- Perpetuation of inequality
- Patriarchy
- Inheritance
- Cultural and social capital
- Economic conditions

The conflict perspective is all about who has power and how it is used. One interesting focus is on the powerlessness of children in the family. Their dependency makes them very vulnerable to manipulation and control. Women, too, are sometimes viewed as particularly vulnerable because of their relative inequality within societies and within the family itself. The same is true for the elderly who become increasingly vulnerable because of declines in their physical, mental, and economic conditions. Contemporary social problems include domestic violence in the form of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse of family members.

•Families perpetuate inequality because they reflect the inequality within a society as a whole. For example, this is an increasingly individualistic and competitive society and the socialization of children reflects this. We hear a lot about “sibling rivalry” and we also know that this individualistic approach to life contributes to the high divorce rate in this society. In the past, couples often stayed married out of a sense of “duty.” This is much less likely to be the case today. People “grow apart” and they have different ideas about what is most important. There is a tendency to focus on one’s own needs at the expense of family stability.

•Patriarchy, or the control of the society by males, is the most common pattern. It is reflected in the family as well. In earlier centuries, fathers were the “head of the household” and they even had control over the “life and death” of family members. We still live in a patriarchal society but women have more say when they make an economic contribution to the family. Housework and childcare are largely invisible since Industrialization took men off the farm and into the factory (work world). Prior to that, all members of the family contributed to the work on the farm.

•Cultural and social capital vary according to the economic standing of the family. Children are at an advantage if they are born into wealthier families where the parents tend to have more cultural capital such as larger vocabularies and more education. Social capital refers to the kinds of skills that the parents have. In addition not only benefit from the knowledge and skills of their parents but also from the fact that these parents can send them to better schools and connect them with people who may increase their opportunities and chances of success.

•Finally, the conflict perspective points out that the family must adapt and change in the face of changing economic conditions. The extended family form declined once people had to move to cities to find work. Families became smaller as geographical and economic mobility increased. Richard Sennett wrote a book called *The Hidden Injuries of Class* which looks at the “American Dream” which involves the expectation that our children will be “better off” than we are. However, when this successful upward mobility does happen, the children often come to have different norms and values than the parents. The “injury” that results is to the parents who may be proud of their children but no longer feel close to them. They feel “inferior” to their own children.



## Symbolic-Interaction Perspective

- Face-to-face interaction
- Emerging:
  - Meaning
  - Consensus
- Emotional bonds
- Micro level

The symbolic interaction perspective looks at how people interact and what the results are. These sociologists are concerned with”

•Face-to-face interaction rather than institutions. They do not look at “the American family” but rather patterns of interaction within individual families. Current concerns include such things as how and why children become delinquent, the impact of birth order on a child, the role of internet interactions on dating, marriage, and divorce, the experiences of stepchildren in “blended” families, the kinds of situations which increase the likelihood of domestic violence, etc. For example, the article for Week 2 on grandparents in Ghana looks at particular examples of what grandparents mean in that society.

•This perspective looks at the emergence of this meaning and at the type of consensus which emerge through interaction. In general, people want interactions to go smoothly and we all try to come to some sort of consensus or agreement about what is happening, what should happen, and what is likely to happen next.

•Children become emotionally dependent upon their parents because they must rely on them in order to survive. Spouses also bond. A good marriage includes emotional support and general agreement about goals and priorities. This happens over time as a result of continuing face-to-face interaction.

•Again, this is a micro level perspective that does not look the functioning of institutions such as the family, religion, education and the economy but focuses on the way in which our culture, our norms and values, are expressed and shaped by direct interaction.