Module 2 Institutions

Lecture 11
Family, Marriage and Kinship – Part II

Theoretical Perspectives on the Family

The complexity of family patterns makes it difficult to understand families from any single theoretical perspective. Is the family a source of stability or change in society? Are families organized around harmonious interests, or are they sources of conflict and differential power? How do new family forms emerge, and how do people negotiate the changes that affect families? Above all, family is an abstract concept; it is a social institution. There are so many questions such as these which guide sociological theories of the family.

Sociologists who study the family have used many perspectives in their analyses. However, in this lecture, we are going to discuss four primary perspectives, viz. functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism and feminism.

Table I Theoretical Perspectives on the Family

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<th>Functionalism</th>
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<td><strong>Families</strong></td>
<td>Meet the needs of society to socialize children and reproduce new members</td>
<td>Reinforce and support power relations in society</td>
<td>Emerge as people interact to meet basic needs and develop meaningful relationships</td>
<td>Are gendered institutions that reflect the gender hierarchies in society</td>
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<td>Teach people the norms and values of society</td>
<td>Inculcate values consistent with the needs of dominant institutions</td>
<td>Are where people learn social identities through their interactions with others</td>
<td>Are a primary agent of gender socialization and discrimination</td>
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<td>Are organized around a harmony of interests</td>
<td>Are sites of conflict and diverse interests of different members of the family</td>
<td>Are places where people negotiate their roles and relationships with each other</td>
<td>Involve a power imbalance between women and men</td>
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<td>Experience social disorganization (&quot;breakdown&quot;) when society undergoes rapid social change</td>
<td>Change as the economic organization of society</td>
<td>Change as people develop new understandings of family life</td>
<td>Evolve in new forms as the society becomes more or less egalitarian</td>
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Now let us explain each of these.

**Functionalist Theory and Families**

According to functionalist theory, all social institutions are organized to provide for the needs of society. Functionalism also emphasizes that institutions are based on shared values among members of the society. Functionalist theorists interpret the family as filling particular social needs, including socializing the young, regulating sexual activity and procreation, providing physical care for members of the family, assigning identity to people and giving psychological support and emotional security to individuals. According to functionalism, families exist to meet these needs. Marriage is conceptualized as a mutually beneficial exchange wherein women receive protection, economic support and status in return for emotional and sexual support, household maintenance and the production of offspring (Glenn 1987). At the same time, in traditional marriages, men get the services that women provide – housework, nurturing, food service and sexual partnership. Functionalists also see families as providing care for children, who are taught the values that society and the family purport to have.

When societies experience disruption and change, according to functionalist theory, institutions such as the family become disorganized, weakening the social consensus around which they have formed. Currently, some functionalists interpret the family as “breaking down” under societal strains, suggesting this breakdown is the result of the disorganizing forces that rapid social change fosters.

Functionalists also note that, over time, other institutions have begun to take on some functions originally performed solely by the family. For example, as children now attend school earlier in life and stay in school for longer periods of the day, schools (and other caregivers) have taken on some functions of physical care and socialization originally reserved for the family. The family’s share of these functions has been dwindling, while other institutions have taken on more of the original functions of the family. Functionalists would say that the decline of the family’s functions produces further social disorganization because the family no longer carefully integrates its members into society. To functionalists, the family is shaped by the template of society, and things such as the high rate of divorce and the rising numbers of female-headed and single-parent households are the result of social disorganization.

**Conflict Theory and Families**

Conflict theory examines family as a system of power relations that reinforces and reflects the inequalities in society. Conflict theorists are especially interested in how families are affected by class, race and gender inequality. This perspective sees families as the units through which the privileges and disprivileges of race, class and gender are acquired. Families are essential to maintaining inequality in society because they are the vehicles through which property and social status are acquired (Eitzen and Zinn 2004).

The conflict perspective also emphasizes that families undergo transition with changes in the modes of production because the family produces agents that each mode of production requires, say the family produces workers that capitalism requires. Accordingly, within
families, personalities are shaped by adapting to the needs of a capitalist system. Thus, families socialize children to become obedient, subordinate to authority and good consumers. Those who learn these traits become the workers and consumers that capitalism wants. Families also serve capitalism in myriad ways — for example, giving a child an allowance teaches the child capitalist habits for earning money.

Whereas functionalist theory conceptualizes the family as an integrative institution — it has the function of maintaining social order — conflict theorists depict the family as an institution subject to the same conflicts and tensions that characterize the rest of society. Families are not isolated from the problems that a society is confronted with as a whole. The struggles brought on by racism, class inequality, sexism, homophobia and other social conflicts are played out within family.

**Symbolic Interaction Theory and Families**

Sociologists have also used symbolic interaction theory to understand families. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes that the meanings people attach to their behaviour and the behaviour of others is the basis of social interaction. Symbolic interactionists tend to take a microscopic view of families and might ask how different people define and understand their family experience. They also study how people negotiate family relationships, such as deciding who does what housework, how they will arrange child care, and how they will balance the demands of work and family life.

To illustrate, when two people get married, they form a new relationship that has a specific meaning within society. The newlyweds acquire a new identity to which they must adjust. Some changes may appear very abrupt — a change of name certainly requires adjustment, as does being called a wife or husband. Some changes are more subtle, for example, how one is treated by others and the privileges couples enjoy (such as being a recognized legal unit). Symbolic interactionists see the married relationship as socially constructed; that is, it evolves through the definitions that others in society give it, as well as through the evolving definition of self that married partners make for themselves.

The symbolic interaction perspective emphasizes the construction of meaning within families. Roles within families are not fixed but will evolve as participants define and redefine their behaviour towards each other. This perspective is especially helpful in understanding changes in the family because it supplies a basis for analysing new meaning systems and the evolution of new family forms over time.

**Feminist Theory and Families**

Feminist theory has contributed new ways of conceptualizing the family by focusing sociological analyses on women’s experiences in the family and by making gender a central concept in analysing the family as a social institution. Feminist theories of the family emerged initially as a criticism of functionalist theory. Feminist scholars argued that functionalist theory assumed that the gender division of labour in the household is functional for society. Feminists have also been critical of functional theory for assuming an inevitable gender division of labour within the family. Feminist critics argue that, although functionalists may see the gender division of labour as functional, it is based on stereotypes about the roles of women and men.
Influenced by conflict theory, feminist scholars see the family as not serving the needs of all members equally. On the contrary, the family is one primary institution producing the gender relations found in society. Feminist theory conceptualizes the family as a system of power relations and social conflict (Glenn 1987; Thorne 1993). In this sense, it emerges from conflict theory but adds the idea that the family is a gendered institution.

**New Perspectives in the Sociology of the Family**

Theoretical and empirical studies conducted from a feminist perspective in the 20th century generated increased interest in the family among both academics and the general population. Terms such as the ‘second shift’ – referring to women’s dual roles at work and at home – have entered our everyday vocabulary. But because they often focused on specific issues within the domestic realm, feminist studies of the family did not always reflect larger trends and influences taking place outside home (Giddens 2010).

An important body of sociological literature on the family has emerged which draws on feminist perspectives, but is not strictly informed by them. Of primary concern are the larger transformations which are taking place in family forms – the formation and dissolution of families and households, and the evolving expectations within individuals’ personal relationships. The rise in divorce and lone parenting, the emergence of ‘reconstituted families’ and gay families, and the popularity of cohabitation are all subjects of concern. Yet these transformations cannot be understood apart from the larger changes occurring in our late modern age. Attention must be paid to the shifts occurring at the societal, and even global, level if we are to grasp the link between personal transformations and larger patterns of change. One of the most important contributions to this literature has been made Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim.

**Beck and Beck-Gernsheim**

In *The Normal Chaos of Love* (1995), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim examine the tumultuous nature of personal relationships, marriages and family patterns against the backdrop of a rapidly changing world. The traditions, rules and guidelines which used to govern personal relationships no longer apply, they argue, and individuals are now confronted with an endless series of choices as part of constructing, adjusting, improving or dissolving the unions they form with others. The fact that marriages are now entered into voluntarily, rather than for economic purposes or at the urging of family, brings both freedoms and new strains, demanding a great deal of hard work and effort.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim see the present age as one filled with colliding interests between family, work, love and the freedom to pursue individual goals. This collision is felt acutely within personal relationships, particularly when there are two ‘labour market biographies’ to juggle instead of one. By this, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim mean that a growing number of women in addition to men are pursuing careers over the course of their lifetimes. Previously women were more likely to work part-time outside the home, or to take significant time away from their careers to raise children. These patterns are less fixed than they once were; both women and men now place emphasis on their professional and personal needs. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim conclude that relationships in the modern age are about much more than relationships – not only are love, sex, children, marriage and domestic duties topics for negotiation, but relationships are also about work, politics, economics, professions and
inequality. A diverse selection of problems – from the mundane to the profound – now confronts modern couples.

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that antagonisms between women and men are on the rise. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim claim that the ‘battle between the sexes’ is the ‘central drama of our times’, as evidenced in the growth of the marriage counselling industry, family courts, marital self-help groups and divorce rates. But even though marriage and family seem to be more ‘flimsy’ than ever before, they still remain very important to people. Divorce is increasingly common, but rates of remarriage are high. Fewer people choose to get married, but the desire to live with someone as part of a couple is certainly holding steady.

**What do these competing tendencies explain?**

According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, the answer to the question ‘What do these competing tendencies explain?’ is simple: love. They claim that today’s ‘battle of the sexes’ is the clearest possible indication of people’s ‘hunger for love’. People marry for the sake of love and divorce for the sake of love; they engage in an endless cycle of hoping, regretting and trying again. While on the one hand the tensions between women and men are high, there remains a deep hope and faith in the possibility of finding true love and fulfilment on the other.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue that it is precisely because our world is so overwhelming, impersonal, abstract and rapidly changing that love has become increasingly important. According to them, love is the only place where people can truly find themselves and connect with others. In our world of uncertainty and risk, love is real:

> Love is a search for oneself, a craving to really get in contact with me and you, sharing bodies, sharing thoughts, encountering one another with nothing held back, making confessions and being forgiven, understanding, confirming and supporting what was and what is, longing for a home and trust to counteract the doubts and anxieties modern life generates. If nothing seems certain or safe, if even breathing is risky in a polluted world, then people chase after the misleading dreams of love until they suddenly turn into nightmares (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995: 175-6).

Love is at once desperate and soothing, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue. It is a ‘powerful force obeying rules of its and own and inscribing its messages into people’s expectations, anxieties and behaviour patterns’. In our fluctuating world it has become a new source of faith.

Each theoretical perspective used to analyze families illuminates different features of family experiences.
References


Questions

1. Explain the functionalist perspective on the family.

2. Describe the significance of the conflict theory in explaining family

3. What is symbolic interactionism? How is family represented through symbolic interactionism?

4. How is the feminist perspective of understanding the society different from functionalism and symbolic interactionism?

5. Explain Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s understanding of the concept of family.