

Theoretical Approaches to Family

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the four theoretical approaches in sociology and how they theorize the family, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Structural-Functional Approach to the Family
2. Social Conflict Approach to the Family
3. Symbolic-Interactionist Approach to the Family
4. Social Exchange Approach to the Family

1. STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONAL APPROACH TO THE FAMILY

Each of the broad theoretical approaches in sociology--structural-functionalism, social conflict approach, symbolic interactionism, and social exchange approach--have a distinct way to theorize the family in society.

The **structural-functional approach to family** poses the question about what important functions the family provides for society as a whole. This perspective looks at the family as an institution that has social functions, in the same way that the government is an institution that has social functions.



HINT

Recall that structural-functional theory revolves around stability, harmony, and what is going to make the complex machinery of society work together to function stably.

This perspective, then, theorizes the family as an institution within society--the complex machine--whose roles and functions within the broader social system make the whole machine function. There are four social functions that the family provides for society as a whole:

- **Socialization:** The family is the first and foremost site of socialization. Ideally, parents help their children grow into functioning adult members of society, learned within the context of the family. Therefore, socialization is a very important function of family.
- **Roles and statuses:** Along with socialization, there is the assignment of various roles and statuses. For instance, the family is a place where children learn what they are good at and what they like to do. They also learn how to be a brother or sister, how to be a son or daughter, and even, later, how to be a parent themselves. The family is hugely influential and important in the assigning of social roles.

- *Economic consumption:* Families are good for society because they ensure economic consumption. When families group together as households and form economic units, they consume, purchase and contribute far more to the economy than a solo dweller. In this manner, families are good for the economy.
- *Emotional support:* Families provide emotional support, care, and stability. They are ideally a bastion of stability in a chaotic world. Families, in addition to friends, give people others to share their lives with and to confide in. Many social scientists have found that people in families are happier, healthier, and wealthier than those who are not in families, which is obviously a good thing for society. In this way, families provide a support function for society.



TERM TO KNOW

Structural-Functional Approach to Family

Structural-Functional theories of families emphasize how families operate as institutions and relate to other institutions in society. In particular, they emphasize what the important functions of the family are for the maintenance of society.

2. SOCIAL CONFLICT APPROACH TO FAMILY

Rather than seeing the positive functions of the family in society, like the structural-functional approach does, the **social conflict approach to family** focuses on the negative aspects of the family, such as the way in which the family perpetuates social inequality in society.

Critically, the family is an instrument for the consolidation of wealth and property. The family enables wealth to be handed down to children, and the children's children, and so on. You're either born into wealth, poverty, or somewhere in between, and you're likely to stay that way because wealth or non-wealth can be passed down. As such, families reproduce the class structure of society through generations.

The social conflict approach does look at a function of the family, like the structural functional approach does, but it looks at a negative aspect of that function. It concentrates on how the family serves to consolidate wealth and pass that wealth on through generations, and thereby keep the class structure the same through generations.



THINK ABOUT IT

What aspects of the family might be of interest to a social conflict theorist? For instance, a social conflict theorist might look at how "patriarchy" or male dominance controls the family, or the way in which historically, control of women by men transforms women into the economic and sexual property of men. Even though gender equality is making strides, historically, women have been looked upon as property of husbands and men.



BIG IDEA

It's important to note that both the structural-functional approach and the social conflict approach are viewing society and the family's place within society from a broad, macro-level view of society, not a micro, narrow-focused view of society. They're evaluating it from a broad perspective and theorizing how the family is an institution that works and functions in society as a whole.



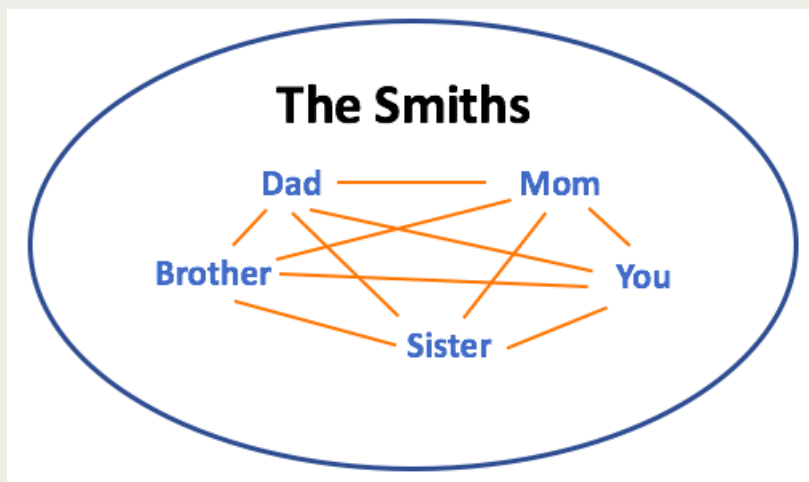
Social Conflict Approach to Family

Conflict theories of families emphasize the family as an instrument for the consolidation and transfer of wealth and argue that patriarchy subjugates women within families.

3. SYMBOLIC-INTERACTIONIST APPROACH TO FAMILY

The **symbolic-interactionist approach to family** takes a more micro-level approach, looking at specific interactions and how these specific interactions through time give rise to meaning and understanding of families.

IN CONTEXT



This is a diagram of interactions among 'the Smiths.' It is hypothetically outlining you, your sister, your brother, your mother, and your father. You're consciously interacting through time to define this notion of 'the Smiths.' What does it mean to be a part of this family? What does the family mean today?

Looking at the family this way, families are groups of people who interact with each other over time. Social interactionists are concerned with meaning derived through social interaction, so they're interested in the family as a site of meaning making, as a process of negotiation.

In this case, they would be interested in how this particular family interacted with each other over time to produce the reality and understanding of 'the Smiths.' Are 'the Smiths' close knit? Are they a loving family? Are they emotionally distant? Are they dysfunctional? Are they abusive? These are all questions that are answered through observing the various interactions of the members within the family.

This is a markedly different way to theorize the family than the structural-functionalism approach and the social conflict theory. Gone is the focus on the family as an institution or as a broad structure in society.

Symbolic-interactionists are not concerned about the consequences of the family for social stability or inequality. They want to dissect the family and look at meaning, because how can you study the function of the family if you're not first clear on what the family means in a particular society, in a particular time? How does the family give rise to social roles and statuses? So symbolic-interaction, then, is essentially looking at how interactions give rise to meaning and to understanding.



TERM TO KNOW

Symbolic-Interactionist Approach to Family

Symbolic-interactionists assume that families create meaning for their members, and that family identities emerge from the combination of personality and social roles within families.

4. SOCIAL EXCHANGE APPROACH TO FAMILY

Another micro-level approach to theorizing family is the **social exchange approach to family**. This theory uses a market metaphor of cost and benefit analysis to theorize why people do things and why they develop relationships with another. In cost-benefit analysis, people want to maximize their benefits--their utility and satisfaction--and minimize the costs that go along with those benefits.

All sorts of actions have associated costs and benefits, and social relationships are really no different.

IN CONTEXT

People tend to look at partners in terms of their costs and benefits. Essentially, you "shop around" for a partner or a mate, whether you do this consciously or unconsciously.

You ask yourself, "What do I gain from this relationship and this person? What are the benefits of this person? What are the costs of this person? What do I give and get in return?" You're always thinking this way, and this perspective holds that you bring the same market mentality into your lives and relationships, even your romantic relationships.

You may think, "No, I love this person because I love this person. I don't break them down in terms of costs and benefits!" Yet this perspective argues that, actually, in fact, you do. You look at the choice of a marriage in terms of this cost-benefit analysis, and once you decide that your benefits outweigh the costs, you proceed with the marriage and establish the family unit. Social exchange theorists hold that this process of give and take happens within the family. Exchange is always occurring: "If I do this, you do that," or an attempt to balance the costs and benefits.

Ideally, people strive for costs to be less than or equal to the benefits in a relationship. When you feel like you have a relationship in which the costs outweigh the benefits, you might decide to end that relationship. Social exchange is essentially looking at the micro focus of cost-benefit exchange happening between two people in a relationship or broadly, in a family.



TERM TO KNOW

Social Exchange Approach to Family

Social Exchange theorists base their understanding of families on cost benefit analysis, where people seek to maximize benefits and minimize costs. This same cost benefit calculus is brought to bear on partner selection and family and relationship dynamics.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about how the four theoretical approaches in sociology theorize the family: **structural-functional** and **social conflict** approaches (macro-level), and **symbolic-interactionist** and **social exchange approaches** (micro-level).

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



TERMS TO KNOW

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