Revision

Perspectives on the family

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This issue contains an exercise to help you recognise and distinguish between some different perspectives on the topic of families and households.

There is also a template to help you to get into the habit of structuring essays to long-answer questions to make the most of your knowledge and other important skills.

In addition, there is a presentation on fertility rates — an important aspect of families, households, population and demographic change.

Exercise

Sometimes the item accompanying a question will present a particular perspective, and it is important that you are able to recognise it — and, of course, be able to discuss alternative viewpoints.

Below are several statements expressing different views about the family and its role in society. Each can be fitted into a particular ‘perspective’, such as functionalist, Marxist, postmodern, liberal feminist, radical feminist, late modern, New Right and so on. Read each one, either on your own or with a classmate, and decide into which group you would put it.

Statements about the family

- ‘The ideology of familism,’ a concept introduced by Barrett and McIntosh. It refers to a set of ideas and images relating to family structure and relationships which dominates debate about how family life ought to be lived in Britain.

- The family is regarded as an important ‘organ’ in the ‘body’ of society. What is of interest is what the family does. Murdock considered the four basic functions to be the sexual, the reproductive, the socialisation and the economic.

- Beck and Beck-Gernsheim claim that modern societies are characterised by ‘risk aversion’, in which the main goal is the avoidance of personal risk — anything that acts to the detriment of the individual concerned. There are high levels of individualism and selfishness, and people have a much greater range of choices regarding their personal lifestyles. The emphasis on individualism can lead to conflict in relationships, as each partner tries to pursue his/her own goals.

- Capitalist society is based on the accumulation of private wealth and property, which are largely controlled by men. Consequently, a patriarchal family system linked to a system of primogeniture (inheritance by the eldest son) suits capitalism very well.
Marriage and the nuclear family provide the best opportunity for the socially controlled expression of the sex drive. More importantly, they provide the necessary stability for the successful nurturing and rearing of children.

Oakley and Ginsberg argue that many housewives suffer loneliness and boredom. The monotony of housework and social isolation of being housebound leads to a sense of alienation and, in some cases, clinical depression.

The basic economic function of the family is to provide food and shelter for its members. In pre-industrial societies, many families produced most of what they consumed. Nowadays, individuals work for money and buy much of what they consume, and the family has become an important unit of consumption of industrially produced goods.

There is a close ‘fit’ between the nuclear family and industrial society. While extended families were the best type of family structure for labour-intensive agricultural societies, modern industrial societies are best served by the small, close-knit and mobile nuclear family.

With industrialisation and the growth in the power and influence of the state, certain functions which used to be performed by the family are increasingly taken over by the state, leaving the family to become more specialised in other functions.

As the basic functions of the family have tended to be reduced, it has acquired an even greater role in personal and emotional life.

The ideology of the family is a historical creation. The very concept of the family was not used in the way it is today until the late eighteenth century. Its development as a concept and an ideology was an inherent part of the development of the industrial bourgeoisie during the later stages of capitalist development.

Parsons emphasises the importance of the contemporary family in the ‘stabilisation’ of adult personalities. The family provides a relatively secure and personally meaningful context for self-fulfilment, in contrast with the impersonal and frequently stressful nature of work.

It is not possible to treat women as a single homogeneous group, all exploited to the same degree and in the same way. There are significant differences between women based on social class, ethnicity and religion. There is an increasing variety of family types, in which women may experience different types and levels of exploitation.

The increase in personal wealth and leisure time for most people has enabled families to become more involved in the primary healthcare and educational, religious and recreational activities of their members.

Families socialise children to conform to the norms of society even though, for the working class, this is against their interest.

Giddens argues that ideas about ‘romantic love’ have been replaced by ‘confluent love’ in which couples only stay together if the relationship is working for them. Couples no longer feel forced to stay together because of family or community pressure.

Parsons and Bales describe the two roles within marriage as ‘instrumental’ (male breadwinner, concerned with work and the outside world) and ‘expressive’ (female housewife, providing love, security and emotional support for the other members of the family).
• Marriage is a form of exclusive private property. The female gives sexual satisfaction and domestic and caring skills in return for the economic security provided by her husband.

• Most of the functions of the family could be performed as well, if not better, by state-run institutions.

• The working-class family is subordinated to the needs of production. Before and during the early period of industrialisation, high productivity could only be achieved if men, women and children were directly involved in industrial work. As machine productivity increased, however, it became economically more efficient to exclude women and children from industrial work. Children could then be educated to become more efficient workers and women as full-time ‘housewives’ could better support and care for the adult male workers.

• At the current economic stage of development, with the predominance of the service sector rather than the industrial sector, economic expansion has again increased the need for women in the workplace. Changes in family roles and structure have made this possible, thus the family once again is meeting the needs of the economic system.

• Alternative ideas which challenge the ideological supremacy of the nuclear family are either suppressed or defined as ‘deviant’ by powerful institutions such as the government, the mass media and the law.

• Oakley argues that familistic ideology may have negative consequences for women. She argues that the ‘myth of maternal deprivation’ has operated to make employed mothers feel guilty and inadequate. Familistic ideas about motherhood are designed to keep women in the home.

• Burchill notes that the majority of recorded assaults take place within the family. Dobash and Dobash examined police and court records relating to family violence for a period of a year in Edinburgh and Glasgow. They argue that marital violence is seriously underestimated in the statistics.

• Barnard points out that marriage is not experienced in the same way for both partners, and that ‘her’ marriage may not be the same as ‘his’.

• While men’s physical, emotional and mental health improves with marriage, married women’s health is generally less good than that of single women. Barnard argues that ‘marriage literally makes women sick.’

• McIntosh takes issue with the assumption that housewives have a lot of free time. To equate being at home with ‘free time’ is a thoroughly male assumption, and it is, indeed, true for most men. For all women, in paid employment or not, being at home is definitely not an experience involving much leisure.

• The family household has two basic functions — it serves for the reproduction of the working class and for the maintenance of women as a reserve army of labour, low-paid when they are in jobs, and often unemployed.

• Women are subjected to patriarchy, which is largely a result of the gender role socialisation which takes place within the family. This mainly favours males, who learn aspects of hegemonic masculinity, such as men being naturally superior to women and being the providers for their family. However, considerable progress has been made, and family roles and relationships are becoming much more egalitarian.
• For at least a generation, there has been encouragement of a social climate and policies which undermined the nuclear family. Now the nation is having to deal with the consequences of this in the form of soaring crime, increasing squalor, widespread welfare dependency, the spread of the yob culture and crumbling communities.

• It is becoming increasingly clear to all but the most blinkered social scientists that the disintegration of the nuclear family is the principal source of so much social unrest and misery.

• It is not the capitalist system that is the source of women’s exploitation, but men themselves. Men’s dominance over women pre-dates the emergence of industrial capitalism. Millett and Firestone both argue that women and men form ‘sex classes’, with different goals and levels of power. Men form the dominant class, and exploit women in many ways, not simply economically.

• The time has come to put the nuclear family at the centre of social policy. It needs to be preserved and nurtured. Too many existing policies and attitudes only serve to undermine it.

Template for planning answers to essay questions

The following template will help you to get used to planning answers to higher-mark essay questions. You would not necessarily use it in this format as a plan in the exam, but when writing answers to homework questions it will help you to get used to identifying what needs to go into the exam. There is no need to write anything at length — just brief phrases, titles of studies etc.

Question title
You would never write out the question in an exam, but for class work, writing down the question can help you to think about what you need to do to answer it fully.

Number of marks Approximate time allowed
Again, noting how many marks are available and how much time you should spend on a question is a useful habit, getting you used to a particular type of question. Again, if it is a homework essay rather than a timed one, you will probably spend longer than the time you would have in an exam, though as the exams approach, it is a good idea to write answers in roughly the time you would have available in the exam room.

Use of item
If the question is one which has an item, underline those parts of the item that contain information which would be useful in answering the question. In some cases, you are instructed to use the item, so get into the habit of finding the relevant parts before you start to answer the question.

Introduction
Keep this very brief but focussed. Is there a particular perspective addressed by the question or the item? Is the question controversial in some way?
Theories
Which sociological theories would be helpful in answering the question, either for or against any views that might have been expressed? Don’t go into any detail here — just note down e.g. Marxist feminist, functionalist, postmodern etc.

Concepts
Again, just note single words or phrases. Using appropriate concepts will give your answer a proper sociological ‘feel’.

Studies
Provided that they are relevant, it is always useful to refer to a couple of studies in support of, or against, the views you are expressing. Try to use recent studies, or if it is appropriate to use older ones, indicate in your answer that you are aware of this, perhaps by using phrases such as, ‘Although carried out in the 1970s,’ or ‘However, critics have pointed out that the education system (or whatever the topic is) has changed considerably since this study was carried out.’

Examples/illustrations from ‘real life’
This may not always be possible, but it is always a good idea to refer to appropriate contemporary events that will not yet have appeared in your textbooks. This shows that you have good application skills. Just one or two examples would usually be sufficient.

Evaluation
Hopefully, you will have done this throughout your answer, but it is always worth checking. Evaluation can be shown by contrasting one theory/perspective/study with another, or raising various criticisms which have been or could be made of what you are writing about.

Conclusion
In a written answer, this should always be brief and to the point. In the template, just note that ideally, you should refer back to the question. You may have come down on one side of an argument or another, or it may be that there is no clear-cut answer — you will have looked critically at all sides of the debate.

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