



Worksheet 7: Applying sociological theories answers

1

Marxist ideas applied to the family

The family benefits capitalism because it is an important unit of consumption. Marketing for different products targets both adults and children. For example, children may use 'pester power' on their parents in response to advertising about brands of food, clothing, toys, etc. that are marketed at them. In western societies this is seen particularly at Christmas time when parents may go into debt to satisfy their children's wants.

The family helps to reproduce class inequalities. Marxists argue this is because richer parents will send their children to private schools where they will be socialised into competitiveness and have access to social and cultural capital which gives them educational advantages. This contrasts with families in poverty who may not be able to afford much education and must send their children out to work at an early age. In this way the children of the rich maintain their privileges while the poorest remain socially excluded and in a cycle of poverty.

The family transmits capitalist ideologies. For example, working class parents will often promote the 'myth of meritocracy' and encourage their children to work hard despite their material disadvantages. If their children do not succeed, they believe that it is their fault and that the successful middle-class children deserve their success. They therefore develop a false consciousness and capitalism can continue unchallenged.

2

Functionalist ideas applied to the family

The nuclear family gives stability across the generations due to the process of primary socialisation identified by Talcott Parsons. Children learn basic skills from both parents such as talking and walking as well as key social norms and values such as honesty and the importance of caring for others. All of this prepares children to integrate into society and to identify with its values.

The family has several functions which allow society to run smoothly. As well as socialisation these include the biological reproduction of the next generation in a stable loving environment. The New Right argues that the nuclear family offers the best environment in which to have and look after children. Another function is social control. Children learn the importance of good behaviour through positive and negative sanctions which creates self-discipline, a key skill throughout life.

The 'warm bath' theory shows that the sexual division of labour is functional for both family members and society. Functionalists argue the male breadwinner plays the instrumental role earning money for the family. He comes home filled with frustration and tired from his day's work. Women play the expressive role and are crucial in feeding and taking care of the male breadwinner, easing their tension so that they are ready to enter the workplace afresh the next day.



3

Feminist ideas applied to the family

The family benefits patriarchy and male power. This is particularly true of the nuclear family because it reinforces traditional gender roles – men as breadwinners and women as housewives – and socialises children into such roles. These roles are patriarchal as they benefit men more than women and are the basis for patriarchy in society.

The family illustrates the use of male violence to maintain power in domestic violence and abuse. Not only violence but the threat of violence socially controls women and makes them afraid to resist male dominance over family money, decision-making, etc. Dobash and Dobash showed how common such abuse is and the negative impact it has on the emotional and physical wellbeing of women and children.

Children are socialised into gender stereotypes from an early age. Ann Oakley showed how the processes of canalisation, manipulation and verbal appellation are used by parents to socialise children into stereotypical gender identities. So, little girls are encouraged to be feminine which involves being compliant, caring and expressive. This then prepares girls for their future role as housewives and mothers in a patriarchal society.