

THE SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF THE FAMILY

IONUȚ ANASTASIU²

ionut.anastasiu@yahoo.com

Abstract: *The family is a universal social institution. The defining characteristics of the family in a classical perspective are the fact that its members are living together, to undertake various joint activities, to contribute with resources necessary to life, and to have children. But the perspective on the family has suffered substantial changes in the second half of the twentieth century. However, despite these structural changes, the social functions of the family have remained essentially unaltered.*

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To describe the family as a social institution, one should first reveal its universal character. There is no society, no matter the era in which it functioned and has developed, in which family is missing. In other words, from the most remote times to present, the family is the most common form of social organization. To highlight this, the American anthropologist George Murdock (1897-1985) in his work entitled *Social Structure* (1949) examined a total of 250 societies of various kinds, both from hunters and gatherers category, as well as pastoral, agrarian or industrialized. Following this detailed analysis; Murdock concluded that in each of these societies there are certain forms that fit in the definition of family as a social institution. Therefore, despite of the variety of forms in which can occur, the family is a universal social institution. The American anthropologist defines family as a "social group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation, and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults"¹. In conclusion, the defining characteristics of the

² Assistant Ph.D, - Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest.

¹ Murdock, G.P., *Social structure*. The MacMillan Company, New York, 1949.

family are the fact that its members are living together, to undertake various joint activities, to contribute with resources necessary to life, and to have children. At least two of the family members have sexual relations, in accordance with the norms of the society in which they live.

The definition of family in Murdock's vision is considered to be restrictive in relation to the current diversity of life situations². For example, it does not include single-parent family, a social phenomenon that has grown substantially in recent decades. Single-parent family is defined as that type of family with one child or more who have not aged 18 years, which are raised by a single parent who may be widowed or divorced and that has not remarried later or has not ever been married. Most common type of single-parent family is composed of a natural mother and her children. It is estimated that at present, at global level, approximately 16% of all children live in single-parent family.

Another situation that is becoming increasingly common and may not be included in the definition of the family given by Murdock is considering lesbian and gay couples. Regarded by some sociologists as one of the most important social movements of the twentieth century, the liberation movement of gay and lesbian opens a new issue of analysis of the civil rights and those related to family. Sexual orientation "refers to an individual's beliefs, attractions, and behaviours toward members of the opposite and same sex"³. And for a family is a real challenge that one of its members has a sexual orientation different from the majority of people. The question is "how to accept or should accept" this situation which is becoming more frequent in the West. Thus, some studies have shown that in the U.S. around 5% of the population aged 18 years and over called themselves gay or lesbian and, moreover, 27% of gay and lesbian couples have children. That implies that approximately 10 million children are raised by gay or lesbian parents.

Moreover, the perspective on the family has suffered substantial changes in the second half of the twentieth century. To describe these relatively radical changes in the internal structure of the family as a social institution, some sociologists have introduced the term **postmodern family**.

² Tischler, H.L., *Introduction to Sociology (10th ed.)*. Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2011.

³ Ritzer, G. (eds.), *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of sociology*. Blackwell Publishing, Inc., Malden, 2007.

This concept describes the multitude of forms in which the family can occur, and “the fact that families today exhibit a multiplicity of forms and that new or altered family forms continue to emerge and develop”⁴. Some of these forms are: single-parent families, cohabitating heterosexual couples, gay and lesbian marriages and families, three-generation families, communal households, stepfamilies etc.

These changes can be summarized as⁵:

Traditional Nuclear Family	New Alternatives
Legally married	Never-married singlehood, nonmarital cohabitation
With children	Voluntary childlessness
Two-parent	Single-parent (never married or previously married)
Permanent	Divorce, remarriage (including binuclear family involving joint custody, stepfamily or “blended” family)
Male primary provider, ultimate authority	Egalitarian marriage (including dual-career and commuter marriage)
Sexually exclusive	Extramarital relationships (including sexually open marriage, swinging, and intimate friendships)
Heterosexual	Same-sex intimate relationships or households
Two-adult household	Multi-adult households (including multiple spouses, communal living, affiliated families, and multigenerational families)

Therefore, the modality to understand that the family structure and his role in society is everywhere the same, but also the perspectives on the

⁴ Lamanna, M.A. & Riedman, A., *Marriages, Families, and Relationships: Making Choices in a Diverse Society* (7th ed.). Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2012.

⁵ Source: Brym, R.J., & Lie, J., *Sociology: Your compass for a new world* (3rd ed.). Thomson Wadsworth, U.S.A., 2007.

family in different cultures can vary considerably, these differences being caused by the existence of different norms within each human society in part. Cultural diversity manifests itself directly in terms of conceiving and organization of family life. For example, in traditional Navajo society in the southwestern United States, the two spouses do not live under the same roof ever⁶. Relations between spouses are most often reduced to encounters with character intimate/discreet. In the Masai communities located in Kenya polyandry is the usual form to regulate relations between spouses. In other words, a married woman may have not only permitted sexual relations with her husband but also with all the men from similar age group. It is a matter of the norms available in Masai society, that the husband to have nothing to object when a good friend asks for permission to have sex with his wife. The one who decides ultimately is, moreover, his wife. In Banaro society, from Papua New Guinea, the husband can not have intimate relations with his wife, before she gave birth to a child whose father is a friend of him⁷. Parent-child relationship is therefore not necessarily a biological type. The fundamental importance of this relationship lays in its social character, children being recognized as belonging to the family, whether biological parent is the same person with official father.

After emphasizing the universal character of the family, the anthropologist George Murdock (1949) argued that the family has four basic social functions: sexual regulations, reproduction, economic cooperation and socialization/education. The first function that performs family as a social institution is that of **regulation sexual behaviour**. In this sense requires a finding that is that there is no society which leaves people to express their sexual behaviours as they want, but there are a whole set of written and unwritten rules/norms that prohibit certain ways of sexual behaviour.

For example, in many societies, the practice of sexuality is not permitted during periods of mourning, in the periods of various religious ceremonies, while the woman is pregnant or during menstruation. Murdock argues that, despite significant differences between the various societies, there is a common element that is **incest taboo**, respectively

⁶ Gelles, R. J., & Levine, A., *Sociology: An introduction* (5th ed.). Mc-Graw Hill Companies, Inc., U.S.A., 1995.

⁷ Haralambos, M., & Holborn, M., *Sociology: Themes and perspectives* (7th ed.). HarperCollins, Publishers Limited, London, 2008.

prohibition of sexual relations and marriage between close relatives (between parents and children, between brothers and sisters, or between grandparents and grandchildren).

The most important objectives that the incest taboo fulfils in society are, on the one hand, to eliminate sexual rivalries and conflicts within the family, on the other hand, do not confuse regarding the appropriate roles of each family member and to create family ties with other families, in relation to which it can develop and achieve different types of mutually beneficial interests. A detailed analysis reveals an important difference between the types of regulation of sexual behaviour in traditional societies, which pose a very broad character, in relation to contemporary societies, where the sphere of action of society on individuals is significantly diluted.

The second function that fulfils the family in society is **reproduction**. In order to develop, each society needs new generations of young people to replace the old people and this cannot be merely in three ways: by reproduction, migration or conquest of other societies. However, in the absence of biological reproduction, any society is sentenced to disappearance. Situations of this type were found mainly in religious communities, such as the self-entitled Shakers - namely, the society of believers in the second appearance of Jesus Christ - in which social equality is essential, but sexual relations are rejected as under the human dignity, which resulted in strong decrease of the number of members of this community⁸.

The economic cooperation function has also an important role in the family. Murdock's explanation for that, in addition to meeting the needs of a sexual nature, people get married and founded new families is that "by virtue of their primary sex difference, a man and a woman make an exceptionally efficient cooperating unit"⁹.

In the traditional society, the family constitutes the basic economic unity. It has the role of satisfy the basic needs of its members, which consist mainly in food, housing, health and comfort in general. The situation has changed in modern societies, where some of the economic aspects traditionally belonging to the family were taken over by other social institutions. From this point of view, a major change occurred at this

⁸ DiRenzo, G.J., *Human social behavior: Concepts and principles of sociology*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., U.S.A., 1990.

⁹ Murdock, G.P., *Social structure*. The MacMillan Company, New York, 1949.

level has the function to transform the family's producer function into consumer. The economic activities of production were dominant in the traditional family, especially for families located in rural areas, while today's society offers a variety of family oriented predominantly towards the consumer. Another change in the economic function looks at the issue of family health care for the sick or elderly. In this case, family is replaced by another social institution, respectively hospital or, in some cases, nursing home, which take over the care for them. However, despite this fundamental change of role, the family still maintains the basic economic functions: revenues are provided by mature people, who undertake various economic activities in society, in return for which they receive some remuneration.

Moreover, each family manages according to their lifestyle, activities and food preparation, dishwashing, cleaning, leisure, etc. remained the responsibility of each family, whether these activities (especially food preparation and cleaning) are performed by the family or for a fee, by other people outside that family.

The fourth function that performs family is **education**, which, in Murdock's opinion may be equated to the **socialization** of children. Some sociologists¹⁰ have noted that the American anthropologist uses the term of education with reference to the socialization.

In fact, family is the primary agent of socialization, and as such, it is not just a producer of biological kind, is not limited to reproduction, but has a fundamental role in the use by children of a certain language, learning a set of values, beliefs, skills, etc. Most of the times, socialization provided by the family as the primary group is so complex that it is not notified of every individual in the actual running time of this process. Hence we conclude that socialization has a natural character, it is natural itself.

Thereafter, other sociologists have added further family functions than those proposed by Murdock. For example a function of family that should not be neglected is to provide **affection, protection and emotional support**. Within the family, the parents are not limited to ensure their children's food, but also, no doubt equally important, protection, self-confidence and support in relation to the difficult situations, medical support etc when is necessary. In the absence of psychological needs can occur a lot of malfunctions in the conduct of a person in society.

¹⁰ Haralambos, M., & Holborn, M., *Sociology: Themes and perspectives* (7th ed.). Harper Collins Publishers Limited, London, 2008.

It should be said that the family is the best / adequate group to satisfy these needs and that is because it is involved at all levels - biological, psychological and social - but also because its primary group structure gives it a huge advantage over the other agents of socialization, such as school or the peer group. Moreover, cohesion and solidarity is manifested primarily in the family.

Finally, another important function of the family is granting of a **social status**. Thus, in the first instance, individuals define themselves in relation to the family they belong; the sense of belonging plays an important role in terms of assuming various roles within the family. In this sense, most of the prescribed statuses of a person are directly related to the family to which he belongs, for example, age, ethnicity, nationality, social class, religion etc. are conferred to an individual because he was born into a particular family.

Nationality, religion or social class can be changed later by the will of the individual and converted in acquired statuses, but some statuses cannot change, because it is permanent.

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