Exemplar of 20 mark family question

Item B: Research by feminist sociologists such as Oakley showed that gender roles were unequal in many families, with women taking the greatest share of housework and childcare. Some sociologists argued that this was because these roles were ‘natural’. However, it is now claimed that there is a growing equality between partners, with domestic tasks being shared more equally.

**Applying material from Item B and your knowledge, evaluate the contribution of feminists to our understanding of the family [20]** [Advice: this question needs you to combine knowledge of feminist theoretical approaches with those from the gender roles booklet to argue whether gender roles are now more equal in the family and therefore feminism is less relevant, or whether feminism is still relevant because roles are still unequal]

Feminists have contributed to our ability to understand the family by exploring the inequality that may be present within the conjugal roles of husband and wife. Instead of looking at how the family benefits its members with men and women doing different roles, as functionalists do, feminists look at the problems the family may hold for women. Rather than seeing roles as natural, they instead regard them as the result of socialisation or the wider patriarchy present in society.

Firstly, liberal feminists like Oakley consider the nuclear family as problematic. This is because it socialises children into traditional gender roles through manipulation (reinforcing) and canalisation (channelling children into activities seen as ‘appropriate’ for their gender). Liberal feminists are generally optimistic about the family, believing this can be prevented and patriarchy reduced by socialising children in the same way. Oakley argues that while this is possible it is not currently happening as she indicates women are still taking on a dual burden. A study in 2000 supports this as it found women do 90 minutes of housework a day and men 30. This has shifted a great deal since the 1960s, however, indicating roles are becoming more equal. Functionalists, such as Parsons, argue gender differences are due to the natural, biological differences of men and women. He also states that it is necessary for boys and girls to be socialised differently.

Secondly Marxist feminists think that the nuclear is problematic. They have helped highlight the way the family props up capitalism, as women provide free labour (Breughal). Fran Ansley’s safety valve theory argued that women as a release for the working man’s frustrations, which prevents them from revolting. This is similar to Parsons’ warm bath theory, which sees this role of women as part of their natural state as the emotional care givers. Conversely theories like postmodernism would argue roles in the family have changed massively and the idea that women act as props to the working man do not reflect our current society. Hakim, for example, would argue the roles now taken on by women in the family are due to their personal preference.

Radical feminists take a completely different stance to liberal and Marxist feminism arguing the nuclear family is inherently patriarchal and that is harmful to women. Jesse Bernard found that married women are more likely to experience depression than their husbands. Furthermore, Delphy and Leonard state women do 57 forms of unpaid labour in the home. Which plays into Duncombe and Marsden’s belief that women are now doing a ‘triple shift’. They in fact have less choice today as they have to balance a range of roles. The personal life perspective would criticise this contribution of feminism (in addition to the others) by focusing on the nuclear family. Carol Smart argues we must look at the difference in experience of individuals. Women are able to leave unhappy marriages if they wish today, which demonstrates choice (Alan and Crow). However, liberal feminists would state that they were instrumental in helping push for this change.

Overall whilst feminism provides an important evaluation of the family, which allows us to look at gender equality and the exploitation of women it is only one perspective, which must be compared to alternative views in order to be comprehensive. Whilst the views helped to shift and change society that may not provide an accurate portrayal as to the nature of families today, with the great complexities now present.

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