

Key learning

You will be able to:

- identify, explain and compare a variety of sociological perspectives on conjugal roles
- explain the work of Zaretsky on developments in families.

Link

Refer back to pages 95–99 on the functions of families.

Activity

Referring to pages 95–97, make a list of the key ideas of the functionalist approach.

TIP

It is really important to be able to evaluate sociological perspectives. ✓

Link

For more information on changes in family structure over time, see pages 100–102.

Conjugal roles: functionalist and Marxist views

As you will know from previous chapters, there are different viewpoints from which sociologists examine society. Different sociologists emphasise and explain different aspects of society. This is the case when looking at the jobs performed within the family. Different sociologists have different views on who does or should do the household tasks. These reflect their differing ideas about the nature of wider society. Functionalists, Marxists and feminists explain conjugal roles in different ways.

Here, we look at the functionalist and Marxist explanations and pages 122–123 look at feminist explanations.

Functionalist views on conjugal roles

Functionalists believe that everything in society has a function. They argue that it is 'natural' for women to be housewives and men breadwinners. They argue that both these jobs are important and it makes sense for women to be the housewives and the carers because of their nurturing characteristics. Functionalists, such as Parsons, argue that the woman should take on the expressive role of looking after the house and children, while the man should take on the instrumental role (breadwinner).

Each partner has an important role to play, which makes the family more stable and is the most effective way of keeping society running smoothly.

An important part of primary socialisation according to functionalists is 'gender role socialisation'. They believe that if primary socialisation is done correctly, then boys learn to adopt the 'instrumental role' – they go on to go out to work and earn money. Girls learn to adopt the 'expressive role' – doing all the 'caring work', housework and bringing up the children.

According to Parsons, working life in industrial society is stressful and the family is a place where adults can be de-stressed, which reduces conflict in society. This is also known as the 'warm bath' theory.

Evaluation of functionalism

- By looking at the roles that men and women are expected to perform (men – instrumental, women – expressive) in a positive way, functionalists ignore conflict in the family.
- Parsons' view of the instrumental and expressive roles of men and women is very old fashioned. It may have held some truth in the 1950s but, today, with the majority of women in paid work, and the blurring of gender roles, it is more likely that both partners take on both expressive and instrumental roles.
- There are no biological reasons for the functionalist's view of separation of roles into male breadwinner and female homemaker. These roles lead to the disadvantages being experienced by women.