

From Modernism to Postmodernism



Transition to Postmodernism

By the mid 1960's, it seemed that modern society was reaching its goals. Western democracies had defeated fascism in World War II and adopted some version of republican government (government through a representative body empowering common people rather than royalty). Capitalism was being challenged by communist countries of the Soviet bloc, but seemed to be doing well. Advanced nations had adopted some version of what we could call social democracy. In other words, they had representative governments, capitalist economies, but state regulations, social safety nets and the provision of public goods helped mitigate some of the excesses of capitalism. In the United States, the multiple civil rights movements were also experiencing legal successes in making sure the benefits of society were accessible to all regardless of race and gender.

Yay modernism!

Of course, it's not that simple. Changes were afoot going all the way back to World War I that would challenge some of the common sense notions associated with the modern world. These changes would have profound impacts on families.

So, today I want to elaborate what some scholars refer to as the postmodern era and, of course, talk a little about the postmodernist perspective as it relates to family.

I want to point out that there is debate as to whether or not we really are in a postmodern era. Obviously, theorists like Jean Baudrillard and Jean Francois Lyotard believe that the changes that culminated in the late 20th century are significant enough that advanced societies can no longer be referred to as modern. Sociologist Anthony Giddens (yes, Cambridge University Anthony Giddens) disagrees, claiming that what we are experiencing is "Late Modernism". For our purposes, however, we need to elaborate the postmodernist argument.

Modern societies are characterized by certain trends. First was spread of Enlightenment philosophy with regard to science and reason. Individuals applying scientific principles to discovery and social organization and the economy led to a vast expansion of knowledge and technological innovation, culminating in industrialization and industrial capitalism. Capitalism is, therefore, a pillar of modern societies.

Enlightenment philosophy also influenced modern ideas on government. Embraced by an increasingly educated and wealthy Bourgeoisie, advanced nations ultimately succumbed to "liberal" political ideology. In other words, they embraced concepts such as individual human rights, and representative forms of government "to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed..." (That's from the Declaration of Independence). These rights include freedom to speak, worship, and decide upon the direction of our lives. Of course, capitalism being central to liberalism, it also meant a right to property.

This convergence around republican government, individual human rights, and capitalism are the three pillars of "western" society. When the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990's, there was no longer any alternative to western liberalism. This is often referred to as the "Liberal World Order." Notice how I'm using the word "liberal" here. I'm not using it the same way we use liberal vs. conservative in our political debates. I'm using it in the academic sense. I don't want to get into the weeds here. I address some of the questions you might have with this [blog post](#) if you are interested.

The evolution of the Liberal World Order was really impressive. Rapid scientific innovations, especially in communication and travel. Industrial production bringing material comforts to even the most impoverished. Medical science improving life chances, lowering infant and adult mortality. Vaccines. Penicillin. Disinfectants. Cars. Planes. Air Conditioning. Imagine taking someone from the year 1600, and dropping him into the same country in 1700. He'd barely notice the difference. Take someone from 1700 and drop him in 1800...he'd notice. From 1800 to 1900 he would be shocked! From 1900 to 2000, he wouldn't know how to get along. From 1700 to today the world was transformed into one that is completely new to anything human beings had ever experienced before.

For families, this meant that your children were probably going to survive infancy for the first time in human history. Your children would likely get to know your parents. Urbanization and industrialization and individual ownership of property encouraged the growth of nuclear families living within a single household. A gendered division of labor created expectations of a male dominated workforce and women in charge of the domestic sphere. By the mid 20th century it was understood that children would go to school to further their own potential, rather than go into the workforce to further the family's potential.

The standard progression worked something like this. An individual was born into a [Family of Orientation](#). That family would care for the individual, teach them the norms and values of society, and prepare them for independent life. This individual would then leave the family household and create a **Family of Procreation** with someone of their own choosing in a new household. This Family of Procreation would then become the Family of Orientation for their children. Sound familiar?

But the seeds of modernity's destruction were already at hand by the 1970's. You can review this by taking a look at [The Postmodernist Perspective](#). For our purposes let's look at a few of the variables as they relate to family.

First is **Globalization**. Improvements in communication and travel made it possible for individuals to experience norms and values from all over the world. It also meant that our economies were integrated at a global scale. TV and movies opened us up to all sorts of possibilities. It also made it easier for us to interact with people from different cultures. Globalization also contributes to **multi-culturalism**. People from diverse cultures are more likely to interact, especially in high capital nations like the United States because labor will chase capital. Where diverse cultures are likely to interact, we are also likely to see diverse cultures intermarrying. The traditional endogamous marriage was now sharing the stage with more diverse [exogamous marriages](#). We also see an increased tolerance for different marital norms.

The second variable is **Deindustrialization**. By the 1970's, those nations destroyed by World War II were productive once again. This increased competition on a global scale. Advances in communication technology at this time also made it possible for production owners to move their factories to other countries to take advantage of cheaper labor, more lax regulations, and lower taxes.

The same communications advances that encouraged globalization also manifest in the increasingly rapid rise of **mass media**. From inexpensive magazines and news dailies in the late 19th century to the advent of radio in the 1920s and ultimately television in the 1950s, people had ready access to a world of experiences and stories. Media institutions started to "market" themselves to attract mass audiences. Access to this media was inexpensive because it was funded by advertisers intent on selling products.



Okay. Okay. I'm a Trekie! But there's a reason. We can see a convergence of many of the things that I'm talking about here. In the mid 1960's families could turn on the televisions and see, in color, a multi-cultural crew, including an Russian and a space alien, work together to take on existential challenges! This was a radical concept at the time. It is now taken for granted. Star Trek was the height of modernist philosophy transitioning into the postmodern

The loss of productive jobs was transformative. In modern societies people, especially men, identified themselves with the work they did. I work at the Ford Plant! That distinction was largely gone by the 1990s. It was replaced by **Consumerism**. Western nations, especially the United States, transformed from a society in which things were produced and manufactured, into an economy in which things were bought and sold. Instead of establishing identities based on

where we worked, we bought our identities at the store. We purchased name-brand clothes and advertised for our favorite bands. Our identities became linked with capitalism as we transformed ourselves into walking billboards for multinational companies (uncompensated, of course).

Suburbanization was related to consumerism. It became the aspiration of every Family of Procreation to purchase a piece of property in the suburbs, away from the city. The nice house with the lawn and the white picket fence became the "American Dream." This was a huge problem for cities because they lost their middle-class tax base. Once thriving middle and upper working-class neighborhoods saw their property values collapse, opening them up to poorer residents seeking opportunities in the cities...but the opportunities were no longer there. This caused a brutal negative feedback loop in urban centers. More poor people with fewer opportunities required more services. But the taxes were no longer there to provide those services. So legitimate opportunities in the cities evaporated...leaving only illegitimate opportunities. A war against drugs increased the value of said drugs, incentivizing drug dealing...need I say more? Meanwhile, suburban life is very different from urban living. Families became more insular and less interactive.

Finally, **Second-Wave Feminism** disrupted traditional gender roles and expectations. It wasn't that women were entering the workforce. We've already seen that working-class women were already in the workforce. In this case, however, middle-class women were entering the workforce and planning careers. This also equated to more women going into higher education, investing in advancing themselves rather than advancing their marital prospects. Look, our children are now likely to survive...and they are no longer economic contributors to the family. So families now had an incentive to have fewer children.

Greater economic access for women also meant greater independence for women. Women now "don't need no man" to get by. They can get by on their own. Many have opted to do exactly that. In the 1980's and 1990's divorce rates exploded and single-parent families increased.

This sets us up to look at families using a postmodern perspective. I think we'll go through that tomorrow. In the meantime, try to brainstorm what you think a postmodernist may say about how these transitions might influence family structure. Remember, for postmodernists, narratives are important. What were the narratives holding premodern and modern societies together? How are those narratives different in a postmodern society? How do these narratives shape the stories we tell about family?

Postmodern Families

Just a quick and brief review of Postmodernism. Remember, postmodernists make the assumption that contemporary society is significantly different from modern societies, and must therefore be analyzed differently. For postmodernists, people today have become more aware of the importance of their own subjective life experiences. Consequently, social structures that used to be constraining of human behavior are now less so. People are using their freedoms to construct personal identities. Traditional social structures like religion or "the state" were constraining because they controlled the **grand narratives**, or **meta-narratives** that told the big story about the society as a whole. In pre-modern societies, the grand narrative was that of the church, or the dominant religion. In modern societies, science and reason, and institutions like higher education and big bureaucracies like the state told a grand narrative about human progress and endeavor. But now those structures are breaking down. Human beings are no longer constrained by these grand narratives. They are free to construct **personal narratives**. To understand society, according to postmodernists, we must understand the influences of these personal narratives.

This makes for some interesting sociology when looking at the family in postmodern society (again, I remind you that whether or not we are actually in a "postmodern" as opposed to a "late modern" society is up for debate). And when you look at families today it's easy to see that the postmodernists have a point.



Postmodern families are a lot less predictable than were traditional families

Of course, if you look at pre-modern societies, individuals had very little to say about their own marriages. Families used marriage to strategically progress in an otherwise stifling, feudalistic social structure. Property was determined based on patriarchy. Division of labor was based on child-birth. One's marriage was sanctified by a single church. Because lifespans were short and infant mortality was high, reproduction was central to the family. The family fulfilled all functions for the included individuals and were largely sedentary, so large, extended families based on **Ascribed Status** were the norm. There was very little variation of the theme.

In modern societies, the state and the market took on increasing functions for individual needs. Families became mobile and social advancement was less about marriage than it was about seeking opportunities in the new industrial market. Individual identity was constructed through **Achieved Status**. This offered more opportunities for individuals to seek their own partners and to construct marriages based on notions of **Romantic Love**. Still, traditions continued that defined the resulting Nuclear Families as patriarchal, with a clear gendered division of labor based on Instrumental Tasks, or "going to work" and Expressives Tasks, or taking care of the nurturing domestic labor. Less constraining than pre-industrial families, but still constraining.

Postmodern families, however, are all over the place. Because of the successes of the second wave feminist movement, women have greater access to the market and more equitable access to legal protection (Still, inequities exist, but there are certainly fewer such inequities today than there used to be...so far). Couples, especially women, are no longer locked into marriages based on an expectation of lifelong Romantic Love that can only be broken due to barrenness or infidelity.

Marriages can be terminated based on mutual dissatisfaction. Sociologists often refer to this as **Confluent Love**. In other words, we marry and form families based on a love that is expected to be mutually needs fulfilling. When it is no longer so, we see no reason to continue with the marriage. Our buddy Anthony Giddens addressed this in his book, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism*, defines confluent love relationships as a "social relation...entered into for its own sake; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfaction for each individual to stay within it" (again, remember Giddens is NOT a postmodernist, but is still seeing what a postmodernist would see).

For postmodernists, a marriage is a way for individuals to tell their own mutual story about what their marriage means. Individuals are no longer bound by any particular rituals or structures that define the family for them. They are influenced by multi-culturalism, often engaging in exogamous marriages. The rituals they follow may be a hodge-podge of traditions that they've witnessed, or may be entirely made up by the couple. How they exercise their marriage in the real world is negotiated by the couple and often satisfied in ways that meet their individual needs rather than the expectations of the larger community.

So, if tradition and religion do not shape marriage, what does. Individuals don't just make stuff up from scratch, do they? Of course not. In postmodern societies traditional institutions like religions, families, education and the state are breaking down. But the **media** as an institution is becoming more influential. That media is becoming more atomized. We see a Tik-Tok of a couple getting married by exchanging their pet dogs and we think, 'Hey! That's cute! Let's incorporate that in our wedding!' Oh, and here's a woman who danced to the alter to [Brick House](#) instead of *Here Comes the Bride*...that's so cool!

And, of course, media is driven by advertising. Consequently, human behavior in postmodern societies is shaped by **Consumerism**. In pre-modern societies, our identities are "ascribed" to us by our family heritage and our social class. We are assumed to be born who we are. In modern



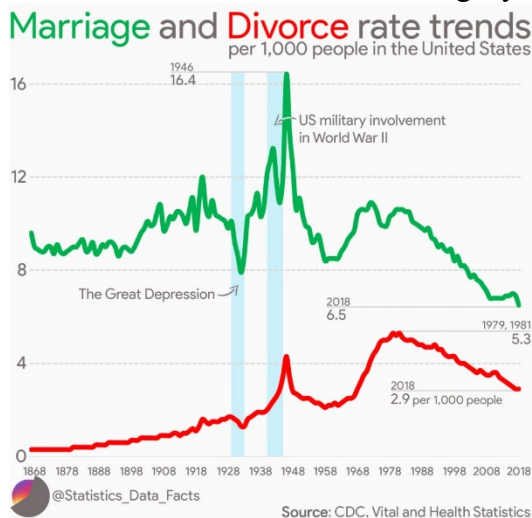
Ironically, the television show Modern Family, offers an interesting representation (simulation) of Postmodern Family structure and the challenges they offer. Think about how viewers related to this family as if they were a real family and not paid actors...Hyperreality!

societies, our social identities are achieved. They are based on what we do and our levels of education and profession. In postmodern societies we buy our identities on Amazon. We express who we are by the clothes we wear, the car we drive, how we decorate our houses. Even those who shape our identities by rejecting consumerism...are still being shaped by consumerism.

Another postmodern influence on marriage identity is **experts**. This is a shout-out to our buddy Michel Foucault. We self evaluate the success and health of our marriages based on what marriage experts tell us a successful and healthy marriage is. These may be pastors and priests, but they are more likely professional counselors, psychologists and "experts" in a scientific understanding of marriage. We read their books, watch their YouTube videos. We take a look at our friends marriages on social media (a surveillance as well as a media platform). Sometimes we seek counseling which involves opening the most intimate details of our marriages up to professional scrutiny. These expectations help shape our sense of satisfaction with the marriage relationship.

Now, in many ways, such marriages are liberating. We enter into the marriages we choose. We decide how to express those marriages. We even get to decide how long the marriages last and whether or not to enter into another marriage...or no marriage at all.

Another liberating element is that our children will almost certainly survive. Losing a child today is an almost inconsolable tragedy, whereas in pre-modern societies it was pretty much an



expectation that everyone would live through. I'll be elaborating changes with regard to children more in depth later on, so I don't want to get into it much here. For our purposes, in postmodern families there's not so much pressure to have children. In fact, we can say that there are really good incentives to limit the number of children we have. So families often limit their fertility. In 2022, the average number of children in American families was 1.94. For the record, 2.1 is required for population stability. Some married couples are making the decision not to have any children.

On the other hand, such marriages are a lot less stable. Since people choose how they express their marriages, there's a lot

less stigma on ending a marriage. Consequently, a lot more marriages end today than they did traditionally. Furthermore, we also see trends in which people are deciding not to marry or forgoing marriage until much later in their lives. Marriage is no longer a stable and predictable feature of social life.

1. What are some other phenomena we see with regard to marriage and family that aligns with a postmodernist explanation of marriage?
2. Where does postmodernism fall short? What are some continuities in marriage and family that have continued from pre-modern and modern era to today?
3. What are your personal expectations on marriage and family as you enter into that stage of your life? How is postmodern or late modern society shaping your own expectations as an individual?

A New Theory: Neofunctionalism

As you can see, something is going on with our society that is a bit different from strictly modernist approaches to understanding it. As I've hinted at, however, there is a debate as to whether or not we are living in a "post" modern age, or a "late modern age."

Now, I don't want to get into the weeds on this. I think I'll do a blog post on sociology and the politics of academia. I do, however, want to go a bit into the history to help you understand the strange new theory that I need to introduce you to.

Sociology as an academic discipline really flourished in the United States starting with the Chicago School in the mid-nineteenth century. It really came of age, however, with Talcott Parsons in the mid-twentieth century. In the 1940s to the 1960s, if you were studying sociology, you were studying Parsons...and may God have mercy on your soul!

Starting in the 1950s or so a fellow named [C. Wright Mills](#) started to make a name for himself. He came out of the Critical Theory/Neo-Marxist tradition and his stuff was really exciting and interesting. There were also some new and innovative voices coming out of the relocated [Frankfurt School](#). Also, we were looking at a more politically liberal or left-leaning time. Consequently, students going into sociology in that era didn't want to spend their time with the dusty old Parsons. They wanted the new and exciting Mills, and Critical Theorists like [Herbert Marcuse](#), [Walter Benjamin](#) and [Jurgen Habermas](#). You know...the cool kids!

Suddenly, the old school Functionalists weren't cool anymore. They didn't get invited to parties. More importantly, students didn't sign up for their classes. They had to reinvent themselves. So, they did. The result was a theoretical approach called Neo-Functionalism.

FUNCTIONALISM	NEOFUNCTIONALISM
Emphasis on Social Institutions: AGIL	Emphasis on social systems, how social groups and institutions work together.
Societies tend to be orderly and stable. They are "static"	Societies are dynamic and must adapt to change over time.
When institutions are working right, the society is working right.	Institutional actions may have unintended consequences (both positive and negative) "Spillover Effects"
Focused on individual societies. Analysis at the Nation-State Level	Nation-States interact globally, therefore global dynamics must be taken into account.
Institutional structures shape human behavior.	Institutional structures shape and are shaped by human behavior (Structuration)
Societies avoid conflict	Conflict is a necessary component of society.

As you can see, the Neofunctionalist approach is a lot more dynamic and interesting than the nice, relaxing functionalist approach we learned first semester. These new functionalists are still interested in looking at how society is structured, but they are more interested in how the structures in society interact with each other. So, they are basically adapting our buddy Giddens's theory of Structuration. The Neofunctionalists are also influenced by the interactionists by recognizing that the traditional functionalist top down approach to understanding society and human behavior was only part of the story. Institutions are made of people and people influence the institutions.

Neofunctionalists are also interested in understanding society through a globalist lens. So, they've been influenced by Emmanuel Wallerstein (whom you will be introduced to in A Level...if that's a possibility, which it probably isn't).

Now, we have a foil for the postmodernists. It isn't that social structures are breaking down and no longer constraining, as the postmodernists claim. Rather, social structures are undergoing transformations, the pace of which may be destabilizing in the short term, but the process of which is perfectly normal in any society at this current state of development.

Neofunctionalist Approaches to Understanding the Family

Postmodernists largely see the changes in family structure as, over all, a good thing. It is much more liberating to the individual to be able to enter into a marriage and build a family based on personal choices and beliefs rather than being bound by traditional roles and values. A woman who wants a career is no longer bound to marry someone not supportive of those goals. She can put marriage off until she finds someone who will be a partner in her own fulfillment rather than someone she must submit to. If it turns out she made a bad choice, she can always back out and make other choices.

True, this also means that men have comparatively less power in family dynamics than they used to. This, however, is also liberating to men overall because now they are no longer bound to being the "providers" and laboring at meaningless jobs because that's the expectation. A man can be the nurturer. Some men like baking cookies! And taking care of children is very personally rewarding.

Neofunctionalists recognize that family structures are changing. They are changing because women have more power over themselves and in the political economy. Technology has evolved that has changed the larger society. Values have changed that influence family structure. Neofunctionalists, in essence, extend Parsons' "Fit thesis" to understand contemporary society. The traditional nuclear family worked while society was modernizing, but may no longer matter as much in the twenty-first century. Now more diverse forms are needed to satisfy not only the social functions of family, but also the personal needs of the individuals within the family.

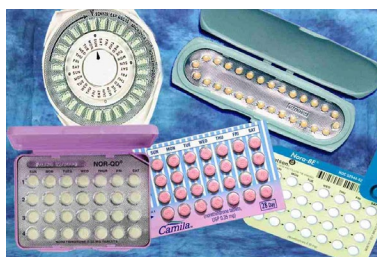
This isn't a bad thing, but it isn't necessarily all puppies and ice-cream either. There are going to be spillover effects as contemporary families interact with other institutions in the larger social system.

For instance, many women want to enter the workforce and build careers. This has the effect of raising competition in the workforce, while at the same time increasing the buying power of families overall. This can lead to wage and salary stagnation, and contribute to inflation. In the 1950s, it's noted that a family with the father as the sole source of income could afford to buy a house, a car, and send at least a couple of their children to college. Today, most two parent families struggle to do the same thing. Women entering the workforce may have had the unintended consequences of reshaping the marketplace

Sorry! Phone Call!

Anyway, neofunctionalists see changes in the family as resulting from changing social contexts, much as outlined below. But they also seek to understand how these changes in the family can, in turn, cause changes in the larger society. A neofunctionalist may be involved in trying to figure out what kind of state policies can be put into place to benefit families...if any, or how education may be reshaped by changing expectations of the family. For instance, children are no longer expected to be economic contributors to their family. They are expected to expand their educations. As more children enter school, the more technologically sophisticated the society becomes, the more schooling becomes a necessity. When the 20th century started, a child could get by with a sixth to eighth grade education. The state provided that. By the middle of the 20th century, at least a high school education was necessary. The state provided that. Today, we can argue that college or some kind of post-secondary education is necessary...does the state provide that? Are families responsible? Either way, there are consequences that spill over into other areas of the society.

Related to that, the more education is necessary to get by...the longer people will be going to school, the greater the incentives to put marriage off until later. The greater the incentives to limit one's fertility. That means fewer young people. More old people. We old people want our Medicare and Social Security. We need more young people! If we need more young people, there's only two sources. We either make them ourselves, or we import them from other countries. But we don't want to make them ourselves because we need to focus on getting our educations and establishing ourselves in a career first.



One of the most significant technological innovations impacting society has been the birth control pill. From a neofunctionalist perspective, what have been some of the "spillover effects" of this innovation?

So that leaves...bringing in young people from elsewhere. Where? Well, it turns out that there are plenty of young people who want to come to the United States to work. Well, that brings up some other debates, doesn't it.

Anyway, I'll close with this. Neofunctionalists don't necessarily take positions on these topics, but the work of neofunctionalists is often cited by political activists in The New Right Movement. Later, when we talk about the family and social policy, we'll dig into that a little deeper.

Note

If you are interested in more information about Neofunctionalism, here are some of the major theorists. AICE doesn't really go into the actual theorists that much, but it's not bad to know who they are.

1. **Jeffrey Alexander:** Pretty much the founding father of Neofunctionalism
 - Major works: "*Theoretical Logic in Sociology*" (a four-volume series that critiques classical sociological theory and proposes a new agenda for sociological theory, including neofunctionalism) and "*Neofunctionalism and After*" which further develops his views on modern sociological theory.
2. **Niklas Luhman**
 - sometimes more closely associated with systems theory, his work has significantly influenced neofunctionalism. He proposed a highly abstract and complex theory of social systems that emphasizes the self-reproducing capacities of social systems through communication.
 - Major works: "*Social Systems*" in which he outlines his theory of social systems, and "*The Reality of the Mass Media*" which applies his theory to the specific case of mass media.
3. **Richard Münch:**
 - Münch has contributed to neofunctionalism by integrating elements of action theory with a functionalist framework, emphasizing the interpenetration of social systems.
 - Major works: "*Theory of Action: Towards a New Synthesis Going Beyond Parsons*" which seeks to extend and update Talcott Parsons' work, integrating it with insights from other theoretical traditions.