

Sociological Explanations for Family Dysfunction



Is the Family Good for Individuals?

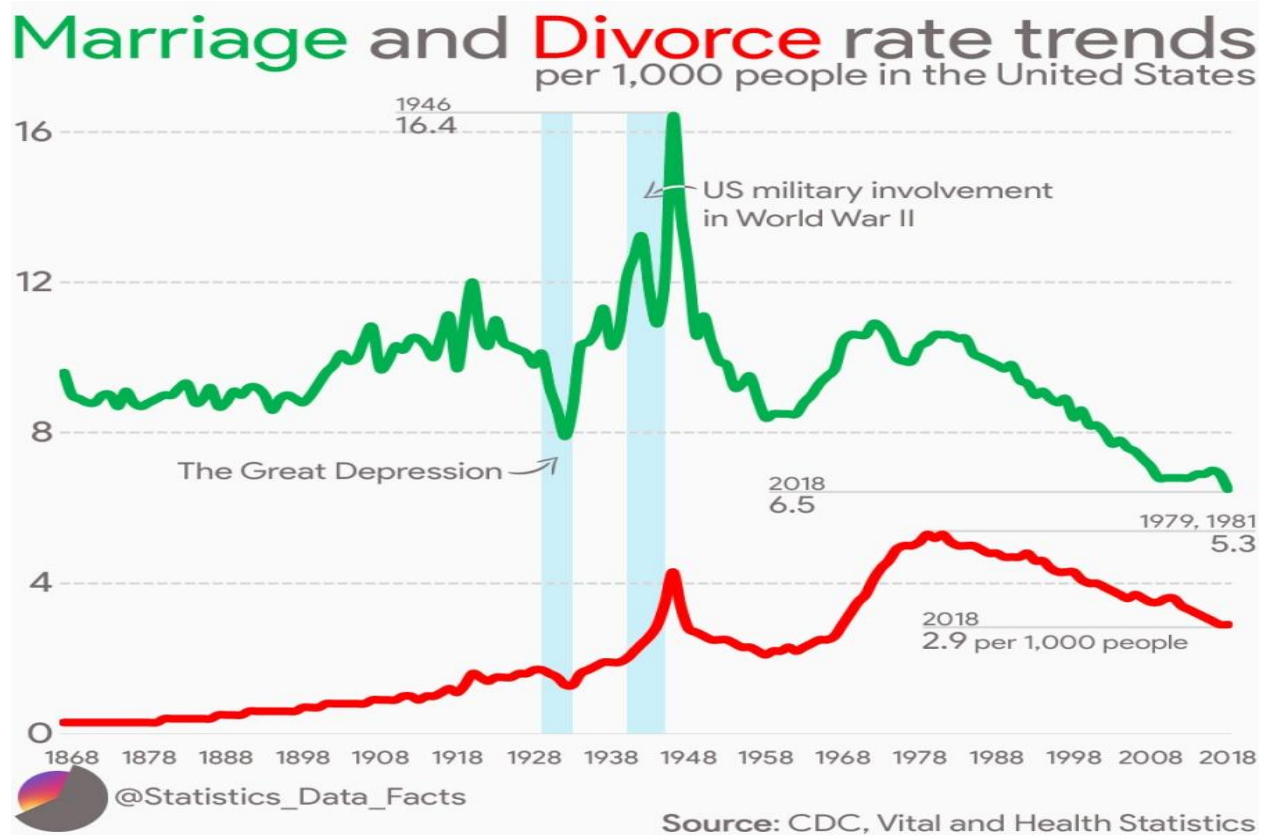
I guess I should give a trigger warning here. For the next few days I will be covering domestic abuse. So if you may have experience with this trauma, or may be experiencing this trauma now. If you have been impacted by or are experiencing domestic abuse, there is help. You can call 1 800.799.SAFE the Domestic Violence Hotline, or see go to their [website](#) for helpful resources.

Up until now, our analysis of family has involved families working the way we expect families to work. In other words, healthy families.

But we all know that not all families are healthy. So, how do sociologists explain unhealthy families.

Divorce

Well, the first thing we might want to ask is, what is a healthy family? How do we measure healthy families? One of the first things a sociologist might look for in a healthy family is one that remains together. A good proxy (remember from your research section, sometimes the exact data is difficult to get, so we use proxy data or data that comes close to representing what we are looking for) is comparing marriage and divorce rates. Here's the historical trend.



As you can see, since 1878, divorce rates have ticked up consistently with some readjustments from World War II until around 1968. In 1968, divorce rates shot up, about doubling in a decade. Currently, we are in the midst of a downward trend in divorce rates per population. However, we are also in the midst of a downward trend in marriages, so the number of marriages ending in [divorce](#) has been pretty consistent between 40% and 50% depending on how the data is collected. As it stands, if you get married today, it's about a coin toss chance that you will still be married to that same person in five years.

Why do people get divorced?

Well, the first and most obvious answer is--because they can. Today, it is much easier to get a divorce than in the past, consequently, people who are not happy in their marriages simply end the marriage. A hundred years ago, divorces were much harder to get and virtually impossible for women to initiate a divorce. What happened?

First, the laws have changed. In the past, divorce was legal only if infidelity or infertility could be demonstrated. Again, these laws disproportionately impacted women, especially when it came to infidelity. It was understood that men would cheat. For women, to initiate a divorce they had to prove that their husbands were not providing for them. Very difficult to do. Most women didn't have the resources to do this.

In the 20th century, the laws loosened up allowing couples to petition for divorce for just about any reason at all. Why? Well, a lot of our norms and values have changed. Remember, in the 18th century, marriages were financial contracts that could not be broken. By the late 18th century, we started to see the rise of marriages based on **Romantic Love**. True, romantic love was supposed to last a lifetime, but what if it didn't? As we enter the 20th century, we see the advent of confluent love being the basis for marriage, which largely continues today. Remember, **confluent love** is mutually negotiated and satisfying. When it is no longer so, it is understood that the couple has a claim for divorce. The laws changed to reflect the values.

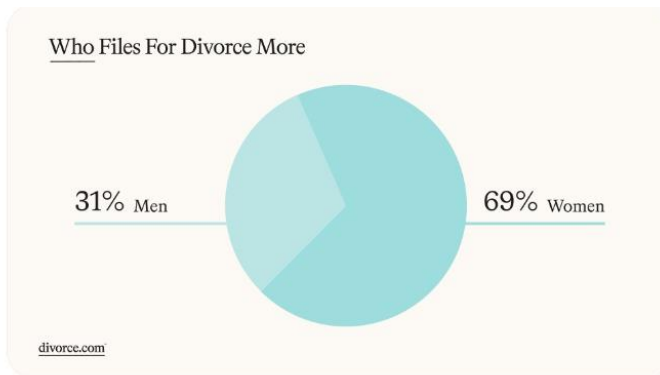
Also, divorce is not nearly as stigmatized today as it used to be. When I was a kid, it was rare to see other kids whose parents were divorced. It happened, but often the kids wouldn't talk about it. Today, about half of you have experienced divorce in your lives, and you certainly have at least one friend whose parents are divorced. It's really no big deal socially speaking.

Student Question

I did get a question from one of you...which absolutely made my day! Here is the question and my response. This question relates to my statement above about divorce no longer being stigmatized. That means that divorce is no longer considered a deviant act.

So would you say that the rising divorce rates reflect the idea that people are becoming deviant towards the traditional rules of marriage like love and romance? And would this be considered a post-modern view since it shows how society is shifting away from 1950s society?

Remember, for sociologists, deviance is socially constructed. What is considered deviant is specific to one's culture at a particular time and place. So, to answer your question, you are complicating the analysis. What is happening is that in a postmodern society, divorce is no longer considered deviant. Going back to when I was a kid, there were still many stigmas associated with divorce, especially for women. But today, it's considered normal by most but the most conservative end of the culture. It's not that people like divorce. Divorce today is just something that sucks that happens. It's like a car accident. So no, people are not becoming deviant to traditional rules. It's just that the rules are no longer binding to the point where divorce is something that is considered deviant. Yes, you can incorporate this into a postmodernist understanding that marriage is a story presented by a couple about the nature of their relationship. When the story changes, the marriage ends.



In short, the sociological reasons why divorce happens in contemporary society is that the structures have changed. The structures by which divorce is achieved are more open and available to everyone. The structure of marriage has changed by which we understand what a marriage is no longer in terms of a binding, lifelong, financial contract, but rather in terms of Romantic or Confluent love. And the

structures applying stigma to divorce have eroded, making divorce an increasingly available option. Especially for women, as women are the primary initiators of divorce.

I also want to point out that divorce rates are NOT rising in the United States (and trends seem to be similar in the UK). Take a look at the chart above. Divorce rates have been largely stable for the last thirty-five years or so. If you get married, and almost all of you will, because it remains an expected social milestone, you have about a 50/50 shot that you will remain married.

Of course, some marriages fail and some succeed. Is this entirely out of your hands? Is there any agency involved in a successful marriage? So, I'll finish this section by sharing some sociological advice on how to increase the probability of a successful marriage.

First of all, some things that you may not have much control over with regard to threats to your marriage have to do with causes of stress that make it difficult to sustain a relationship with your significant other. The biggest contributor to this is financial strain...and sometimes financial strain just happens through nobody's fault. Anything that creates stress in the relationship can be problematic. Too much time away from your partner, maybe through working multiple jobs, or jobs that take you away from your partner for long stretches of time. High-stress jobs. Jobs are actually pretty important to a quality marriage.

Other stressors might be internal to the family. For instance, in-laws who do not approve of the marriage can cause a great deal of stress. One factor that I did research on as a graduate student is caring for a severely handicapped child. This creates a great deal of stress on the family. My team's research found that the only significant way to hold that family together is if the parents

were able to spend meaningful time away from the child to work on their marriages. This flies in the face of our values with regard to parenting and sacrifice, but it is no less true.

Other factors that are more interactionist in nature mostly revolve around inadequate communication with your partner. For instance, being in love is awesome and intense...in the beginning. That's not how your marriage is going to remain. Over time, routines set in, there are bills to pay, and trash to take out. Then there are kids to raise. This loss of spontaneity and passion can often be misconstrued as a loss of "love." In fact, what is happening is that "getting to know you" stage, the really exciting, spark-inducing part of the relationship is winding down, and now the couple is in the "know you" stage. This one isn't quite so exciting, but it can also be really cool if you let it develop. If your expectation is that you are going to remain in that "getting to know you stage" and every day will be a passionate rendezvous...you are setting yourself and your marriage up for failure.

It may sound cliché that communication is key, but it is. Individuals continue to develop and change over time. Those changes can cause two people to "grow apart" over time into a "no longer know you" stage. The thing is, our personalities are not just shaped by what's happening in the marriage. It is shaped by what's happening in the job, among friends, in the media, on the golf course...wherever an individual might be. Changes also happen when our bodies change as we age. Couples that succeed talk to each other about the things that are influencing their lives and they decide mutually how to navigate these changes together.

It's also a really good idea to set the parameters of your marriage. We still have these Romantic Love notions that if we are meant to be together everything will fall into place. If this other person really is my soulmate, we will just sync. That's unlikely to happen. If that's your expectation, you are setting yourself up for failure. Couples have to be clear about what they expect from their partners and have to be introspective and honest enough to be able to say with certainty that they are willing to accept these expectations. If not, marriage is not such a good idea.



Researcher [John Gottman](#) and his team did some fascinating research on divorce that offered some stunning results. Gottman is a psychologist who focuses on what he calls "thin slicing." In other words, his research focuses on micro-interactions cataloged and measured in intervals of less than a second. He has identified a number of variables that, when present in an individual, it is likely the marriage will not be successful. Among these variables are what he calls the Four Horsemen of Marital Apocalypse. With just these four variables, Gottman can predict with eighty to ninety percent accuracy, which marriages will succeed and which will fail.

What are these Four Horsemen?

1. **Contempt:** This is the most important. If one person shows contempt for the other, the marriage is in trouble. Gottman is looking at micro-interactions, so indicators like one partner rolling their eyes when the other speaks is an indication of contempt. Contempt may also be shown when one partner complains to his/her friends about the negative qualities of the other partner.
2. **Criticism:** When one partner is overly and negatively critical of the other. There's constructive criticism that all partners should do for each other...according to norms established by the partners through respectful communication. Criticism, however, is different. This is happening when one partner feels that they can do nothing right in the eyes of the other.
3. **Defensiveness:** When one partner feels that they must defend their thoughts and actions to the other, that's a bad sign. Defensiveness could result from feelings of personal inadequacy, but may also be a response to another person's criticism.
4. **Stonewalling:** This is especially bad because the stone wall that is being built is designed to stymie communication. Stonewalling is any attempt to avoid discussion on a topic. It can come in many forms, from the person just turning their back and giving the silent treatment, to gaslighting, to "whataboutism". An example of whataboutism may be, "I really don't like it when you just change the channel without asking if I'm watching something." "Yeah, well what about when you always turn on the light in the bathroom when I'm trying to sleep." Effective communication deals with one problem at a time. It doesn't try to deflect one problem with another.

Now, these things happen in any relationship. But when they are consistent behaviors, something needs to be done. If it is a dating relationship and the goal is marriage, either the behaviors need to change, or the goal of marriage needs to change. If already married...well, no you have to decide just how meaningful that marriage is to you. Remember, in a Confluent Love arrangement, equality is important. Remember David Morgan's "Economies of the Family". Well, these economies are also present in any relationship.

So, what can you do to maximize your chances of having a successful marriage?

1. **Wait:** Marrying your high school sweetheart right after getting your diploma? Bad idea. There is still a lot of development happening between ages 18 and 25 that may cause you to drift apart, and the maturity necessary for this kind of communication is hard to come by in people of that age. We all know people who did exactly this and their marriages worked. But the fact that we are often surprised when we find such people is an indicator that it probably won't work.
2. **Get your education:** Higher levels of education correlate to higher chances that your marriage will work out. Perhaps because higher levels of education also correlate to financial stability.
3. **Find Religion:** I'm advocating any particular religious belief here. I'm just pointing out that higher levels of religiosity correlate to lower likelihoods of divorce.
4. **Spend time in your relationship:** Meeting that girl on the cruise and rushing to the Captain to get married before you disembark? Bad idea! You want to develop a

relationship with the person first. Remember, Confluent Love. You need some evidence that each of you can meet the other's needs and expectations.

- **Cohabitation?:** Living together before you get married...doesn't work. At least there's no evidence that it works. Living together is not an effective "trial marriage" by which you can determine if your marriage will be successful. Partners who cohabit before marriage are often more likely to get divorced than partners who did not cohabit. Most likely this is because people who cohabit are, in general, less committed to marriage from the start, often due to lower levels of religiosity.

Dysfunctions in the Family

Divorce is an indicator, or proxy, of marital and family well-being. But as you can imagine, it is just an indicator. There are some problems with using divorce as a proxy measure. Let me go over the more obscure and least thought-about problem.

The existence of divorce itself, namely the ease with which a couple can get divorced, may impact the nature of the data. Every marriage encounters problems and "rough patches" in which the couple may not be getting along. The couple could, with a lot of work, especially emotional work, get through this rough patch and become an even stronger couple...but this is hard. Arguably, divorce is much easier. It's impossible to know with much validity how many divorced couples may have remained married and developed a healthy marriage if divorce were not such an easy option.

The second factor is the more obvious. Plenty of marriages that, arguably, should end...often don't. We often imagine a healthy marriage as one that mutually satisfies the needs of its members. When one or more people in the marriage are not getting their needs met, then that marriage is likely not healthy. If this remains true with no effort to change, this is a chronic problem that requires intervention or needs to end. This is especially true when it is not just a matter of needs not being met but is rather a setting in which people are being exploited and/or abused in some way.

Abuse has many facets. The most obvious is **physical abuse**. This is when members of the family are being physically hurt by another member or members. Obvious examples of people being battered, bruised, lacerated, broken bones. Not all physical abuse is obvious. A member of the family hitting another family member, whether it leaves marks or not, may be defined as abuse. How do I decide? Well, I've looked at the research and can say, there is no morally valid reason to hit a family member out of anger, to assert power, or to enforce discipline. There may be some extreme cases in which one may have to use physical force against a family member in defense of themselves or others. Regardless, this is an abusive situation from one angle or another.

This is where I get some pushback. For instance, siblings getting into a fight may hit each other. This is true. Parents need to intervene and teach their children appropriate ways to resolve conflict and establish procedures for resolving conflict that do not involve hitting.

What if they are just playing around? That happens. Children may wrestle, roughhouse, and even box for fun. Fun is a need (I'm using Glasser's [Choice Theory](#) Category of Needs here). If wrestling and roughhousing meet that fun need for all involved, then it is play. If someone is not having fun...it's potentially abusive.

Then the big one. What about spanking a child for misbehaving? Is that abuse? I must be culturally conscious here. There is, of course, the assumption made by us older folks that the problem with kids today is their parents don't spank them anymore. This is demonstrably false. Yes, fewer parents are spanking their children for misbehavior, but more than [1/3 of children](#) still get spanked. Spanking is still going strong. Spanking as an accepted norm is [culturally and](#)

[socio-economically](#) relative. There are a lot of folks out there who claim, "my parents spanked me and I turned out just fine." So I will say this with respect to different cultural and group norms around the subject. The scientific evidence is clear on this. There is no scientifically valid excuse for using violence (often referred to as "corporal punishment"), including [spanking](#), on a child. There are other, more effective ways to discipline children.

Does this mean that spanking and corporal punishment is abusive? That's much more complicated because we do have social norms that validate the use of spanking as a tool for disciplining children. Parents who use spanking may believe, based on their own socialization, that they are doing the right thing by their children. So, spanking may not be "abuse", but it is harmful and ineffective and should stop.

That's my aside on spanking...I usually get pushback on that one, but that's okay. I have science on my side!

Of course, physical abuse is not the only kind of abuse. There is [emotional](#) abuse. **Emotional abuse** is a process by which one person consistently demeans or dehumanizes another's sense of self. In essence, the abuser is destroying the other person's or other people's ability to self-advocate. Emotional abuse often [takes the form](#) of insulting, demeaning, and criticizing. Other patterns of emotional abuse include constant monitoring and control of the other's behavior, social isolation, gaslighting, and more. **Verbal abuse** is related, often going hand in hand with emotional abuse. It's also related to **psychological/mental abuse** in which one partner makes the other feel mentally inferior and dependent upon the abuser.

Different schools of thought have [variations](#) of this abuse theme. There's financial abuse, in which victims lose control over their own financial independence. Cultural abuse happens one a partner uses one's cultural norms to control them. This is especially a problem when abusers threaten to out LGBTQ+ partners before they are ready.

Power and control is almost always a central feature in any abusive relationship. Remember, healthy relationships should be negotiated among equals for the sake of being mutually needs-satisfying. Healthy relationships should respect the rights and autonomy of the members involved. If that is not happening, we have a potentially abusive relationship.

Central to power and control in a marriage or relationship has to do with sex. Sex and sexuality are often some of the most intimate personal, and vulnerable experiences in our lives. That makes sexual abuse especially invasive and traumatizing to one's sense of self. Again, sex should be mutually needs satisfying, and entered into openly by all parties involved. If that is not the case, then something is wrong. Open consent is the key. But consent isn't the only key because consent can be coerced. This is why making rules regulating sexual consent is so difficult. Sex and interpersonal sexual rituals are often subtle and complex.

To ensure healthy sexual relationships, all involved should have equal power to say "no." Honest and open communication is the key here. If you do not feel comfortable talking to your partner about sex, about your parameters and comfort levels around sex, and about your sexual needs...you shouldn't be having sex with that person. Obviously, having sex against one's will is

abusive, but human beings will, very often, shape their own wills around their partner's...this is also unhealthy. If you are "consenting" to sex in order to make the other person happy, because you fear the relationship will end if you don't, or any other reason outside of your own sexual needs and desires, that is an unhealthy situation. It may also be a result of an abusive relationship, as abusers will use emotional and psychological abuse to coerce sex just as effectively as they may use the threat of or exercise of physical abuse to force sex.

I also want to offer another personal aside on this. Most of the rape and sexual assault victims I've dealt with in my career have been male. When we think of sexual assault and rape victims, we often think of women and then children. Men indeed commit the majority of sexual assaults, and most of these are against women. Nobody is safe from sexual assault and more subtle forms of sexual abuse, including men. Remember, sexual abuse is not limited to physical force. Men are subject to the same kinds of sexual predation as women. There's nothing special about women that they will not become abusers and use methods of sexual coercion. Male sexuality is just as complex as female sexuality, and it is not true that men just want sex all the time however they can get it. In many cases, our assumptions about men and male sexuality are a huge obstacle to men recognizing their own sexual victimization, and especially getting help when they are victimized.

An interactionist approach to understanding abuse is valuable. Abuse is a complex performance involving the abuser and the abuse. Both play a role in the abuse performance (using Goffman, Hochschild, and other Dramaturgists). It's important to understand the process by which one becomes a victim of abuse as much as it is necessary to identify the process by which one becomes an abuser.

First, the [abuser](#). Very often, abusers have a background of either witnessing abuse or being victims of abuse themselves. They have socialized abusive behaviors. They also may be experiencing outside stressors. For instance, among men, feeling disempowered in other aspects of their lives correlates with asserting power over their partners. This isn't to excuse such behavior, but it is important to understand that abuse is not simply bad people doing bad things. There are intensive social patterns involved that may be an inroad to helping the abuser change. It should be recognized, however, that **it is not the responsibility of the victim of abuse to get the abuser to change**. The victim needs to get away from the victimizer and fix themselves first.

Let me repeat this. **If you are the victim of abuse...you have exactly zero responsibility to help the abuser to stop being abusive.** You are the last person in the world who will be able to do that because the abuser does not respect you. Your job must be to get away...this is complicated when children are involved because you are responsible for your children.

The abuse victim may also have a history of prior abuse and a social history of abuse within the family. The victim may also be socialized to see abusive behaviors as "normal." Abuse victims often have weak associations with family or friends, making them more emotionally dependent upon their abusers. Socially isolated individuals are especially prone to abuse.

Abusive relationships are often just as complex as normal, healthy relationships. Likely, the relationship did not start as abusive, but rather the abuse evolved. The abuse may start "testing

the limits". Just as everyone tests limits by breaking relatively small norms before escalating to more serious violations. The abuser may start with verbal or emotional abuse. This kind of abuse impacts the victim's ability to self-advocate. The victim may even start making excuses for or enabling the abuser. Telling her friends, "He's having a bad day," or "he has been under a lot of stress." Physical violence may start with a shove. "It's no big deal." "He promised he will never do it again." The physical violence often escalates to smacking, punching, using a weapon, and repeated assault.

It's common for the abuser to express regret for his actions, promising to change. Change often does not happen. Unless the abuser is willing to submit to professional help, the cycle of abuse will almost certainly continue. Interspersed in the abuse cycle is deflecting language on the part of the abuser. In other words, the abuser will blame the victim for the abuse. A typical script might sound something like this, "Why do you make me hit you!" "You know that makes me angry, but you still do it!" "I don't want to hit you, but you keep...!" Fill in the blank. It does not matter. This is a common pattern in abusive relationships.

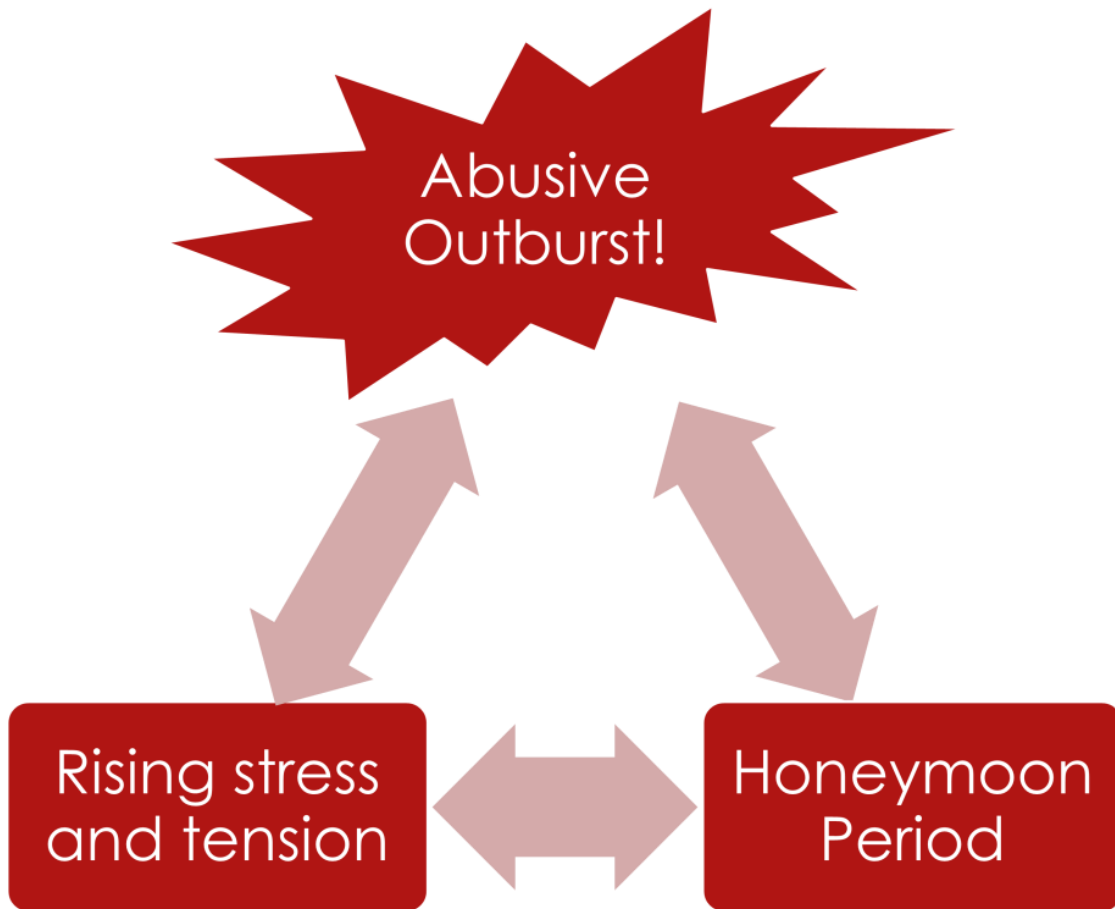
Abusers will often isolate their victims. They keep their victims away from other loved ones, like friends or family. Even workers. During the pandemic, many experts who work with domestic abuse were very worried about the consequences of people socially distancing in homes with an abuser.

Why doesn't the victim just leave?

This is a destructive question. Victims remain with their abusers for any number of reasons. Often, physical abuse is just one manifestation of the abuse cycle. A victim has likely been subject to emotional and psychological abuse to such an extent that they do not see themselves as worthy of love. They believe they deserve the abuse that they are receiving. Their personalities, sense of self, has been subsumed to a victim role.



Often, however, the reasons are less subtle. Victims are afraid to leave because of threats from the abuser. Victims with children are especially prone to this kind of coercion. Victims may not have the financial or social means by which to leave. They lack money or have nowhere to go should they leave their abusers. This is especially true once the victim has been successfully socially isolated.



The Abuse-Honeymoon-Stress pattern is a common cycle in abusive relationships.

Emotional confusion may play a role. Often, abusers are not constantly abusing their victims. Abuse is sporadic interspersed with expressions of love and devotion, called a "honeymoon" period. Victimizers often hope that the loving and devoted personalities will win out over the abusive personality, and they can return to the good relationship they once had...even if they never had a good relationship. Human emotions are complex and not subject to reason.

Children are especially prone to abuse as their status in society and in families is understood to not be equals to adults. Also, if both parents are abusive...that leaves children with very little recourse. Another vulnerable group is the dependent elderly.

This is brutal stuff. The good news is that rates of domestic and child abuse have been [going down](#) significantly. The reasons for this are manifold. First is that the rates of marriage have decreased overall. Domestic abuse advocacy has also been very successful in raising awareness about abuse, encouraging the state to create structures by which desperate victims can get help. Women have also become more financially independent, eliminating one of the factors keeping abused women in abusive relationships.

Despite this, the numbers are still way too high. Most people will experience some form of intimate partner abuse in their lifetimes. Many of us know of people who are in chronic, abusive

relationships and marriages. If you are in or are witness to an abusive relationship, please get help by contacting the [abuse hotline](#). If you recognize the factors described above as part of the relationship you are in, get out. You are not to blame for the abuse, and there is nothing that you can do to change the abuser. If you do not feel you can get out for whatever reason, turn to experts for help. Again, use the hotline, and talk to your counselors or social workers. You can get out.

If you see abusive tendencies in yourself. Maybe you have been told that your behavior is abusive. If you have ever hit an intimate partner or friend or recognize some of the abusive patterns above in yourself and you want to change...you can. You can get help as well. Talk to your counselors, see a psychologist or spiritual advisor. Your first step is admitting that you have a problem. Your second step is to immediately end the relationship you are in so you can focus on getting the help you need and making the changes you want to make. Remember, it is not your partner's responsibility to help you change.

More Student Questions

I received a few more questions that happened to go with what I was planning on writing about today, namely the sociological perspectives on Domestic Violence. So, let me address the questions first.

Could you relate abuse to Foucault's Power/Knowledge? I'm still a little confused about the theory but would you say that abuse gives the abuser the power to control what the abused knows, which in turn allows them to further the practice? Like, for example, could I say that mental abuse can mess with the abused's head which limits their knowledge, and the abuser to increase their power?

Um...Ish!

I see where you're coming from. The idea is that the abuser shapes the discourse on the nature of the abuse, "why do you make me hit you!" and is thus able to shape how the victim understands the abuse as non-abusive, or that the victim comes to believe they deserve the abuse. You could make the argument, and certainly use Foucault in that way...I have.

Doing so is a bit problematic, however. I think the confusion is how we associated Foucault with Postmodernism, which is often very much an interactionist perspective. Foucault influenced postmodernism but wasn't himself a postmodernist. He falls into what is called the poststructuralist school (don't get too caught up in that nuance). Regardless, Foucault is talking about societal-level discourse, the stuff everyone in a society is exposed to, and who shapes it. So, he's more structural than most postmodernists. Like most postmodernists, however, he sees the power of discourse as breaking down and reproduced within the individual...the individual internalizes the accepted discourse and then disciplines themselves based on that discourse. That's what makes him postmodern...ish.

So, you can use Foucault because there are many discourses involved. Especially discourse regarding masculinity that still draws from traditional and media-reinforced discourses on dominance. That may lead the victim to assume that "he's just lashing out," or "just having a bad day."

But it's not all bad news, either. Remember when we were talking about deviance way back and we discussed the "Rule of Thumb." The Rule of Thumb is now a way of expressing a general rule that gets you more or less what you need to know, like "righty tighty, lefty loosy" or "people tend to become more conservative as they age." But the Rule of Thumb used to be an actual rule in English Common Law that limited the size stick a man can use to beat his wife to the size of his thumb. Any bigger, and that was considered abuse. Historically, it was understood that a man may need to beat his wife to assert his dominion over her. Shakespeare's play, *The Taming of the Shrew* is an example of a relatively progressive work of literature in which the hero, Petruchio, "tames" his irascible wife, Katherine, by using psychological and emotional torment rather than flat out beating her.

The discourse today has changed to the point where we can now define these behaviors as abusive. For Foucault's interests, how we define abuse is shaped by experts in the field of abuse and healthy relationships who study the issues and decide the parameters, then shape the discourse around the concept of abuse. Individuals are then expected to open themselves up to surveillance by reporting the issue to the state, attending counseling, etc. We can see this as a huge benefit for victims who now have recourse to help where there was no such discourse before.

We can also see this as problematic as extreme cases of abuse are clear, but not all behaviors are extreme. For instance, my wife wants to have steak for dinner, but I want fish. At what point does my self-advocacy for wanting fish cross the line into emotional or psychological abuse? I could control the discourse to the point where my wife will concede to fish to "make me happy." Is that abusive, or is that just part of the give and take of marriage?

Is it possible to relate the Looking Glass Self theory to abuse? Like, would you say that according to the theory, abuse is a result of how abusers see themselves? I'm not sure if this makes sense but, for instance, abusers see themselves as 'powerful' because the abused oblige with them, so they continue the practice and reinforce their pride. I'm not sure if I just said total nonsense or if it makes some sort of sense but yeah.

When you are looking at the patterns of abuse within the marriage, it is always better to use an interactionist approach like Looking Glass Self. Indeed, abusers are talented at turning the Looking Glass Self into a weapon against the victim. In this case, the victim learns very quickly what behaviors will elicit an abusive response and will do anything to avoid those behaviors. Over time, that becomes automatic. Of course, it doesn't work. It's not enough for the victim to be obedient, because the point is the demonstration of dominance. The abuser will find a reason to continue the abuse.

And you can look at the Looking Glass Self from the point of view of the abuser. Using abusive techniques gets the abuser what he/she wants, thus reinforcing the behavior as part of their identity. This is one of the critiques of spanking. Hitting a child for misbehavior doesn't teach that the behavior is wrong. It just teaches the child to not get caught doing the behavior. It also teaches the child that violence is an effective and acceptable behavior for getting what you want. This is why children who were spanked are more likely to become violent or abusive than those who weren't.

Often, in domestic abuse relationships, you see people who have a history of abuse, as either abusers or victims. When we are victims of abuse and incorporate submissive and enabling behaviors into our identities, they are hard to shake. This is also an explanation for why we often see people who move from one abusive relationship to another. They get away from the abuse, but they've incorporated the abuse as part of their identities. Victims of abuse, especially chronic abuse, need to build an identity around healthy relationships. Just leaving the abuser does not necessarily accomplish this. People who have a background of healthy relationships, on the other hand, are less likely to get caught in the abuse trap.

When you say "among men, feeling disempowered in other aspects of their lives correlates with asserting power over their partners", could you relate this to Zaretsky's/Althusser's (can't remember which one) theory that gives the Marxist theory of the warm-bath theory? It was like how men go home to act as the bourgeoisie of the family after coming home tired, working as a proletarian for the bourgeoisie.

You're thinking about Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of Family, Private Property, and the State*. And yes, that's exactly what Engels was talking about. As men are exploited and "emasculated" in the workplace, they come home and assert that masculine dominance over their wives and children that they cannot assert on the job. This also aligns with Marxist Feminism.

We see some support for this as well. William Julius Wilson did research on the effects of economic hardship on black communities and identified a link between economic disempowerment and domestic abuse. We now have extensive data on working class white communities experiencing deindustrialization that validates Wilson's thesis that economic breakdown causes social pathologies. As working-class white communities experienced the closing of factories and the loss of well-paying, traditionally masculine jobs, the rates of domestic abuse increased.

So, I've spent a lot of time answering the questions. This was worthwhile. I'll do the perspectives on Domestic Abuse tomorrow.

Sociological Approaches on Family Dysfunction: Structuralist Approaches

As you can see, the fact that AICE is starting the focused component of the sociology course with the family indicates that the family, as an institution, is pretty important. Just as a reminder, it is the agent of [Primary Socialization](#). In other words, it is the first institution within which a human being has meaningful interaction (In most cases, hospitals are now the first institution, but that interaction is brief). So, the relationship between families and the larger society is crucial. Presumably, healthy families mean healthy socialization of children, who then grow to be healthy, well-socialized adults. These well-socialized adults, in turn, provide for a healthy society. I don't think this assumption is controversial.

One debate, however, is the nature of the relationship between healthy societies and healthy families. That can be elaborated by studying dysfunctional or unhealthy families. The debate is, to what extent is dysfunction in the family a source of social [anomie](#) on one hand and a consequence of social dysfunctions on the other. Where one stands on this debate influences where one stands on social policies that influence families.

Structuralist Approaches

Remember, the structuralist perspectives in sociology are the Functionalist (and you now know about Neo-Functionalism) and Conflict perspectives. Structuralists try to understand society's influence on human behavior by looking at larger social forces, or structures. Both perspectives assume that larger social structures are causal in their influence on human behavior.

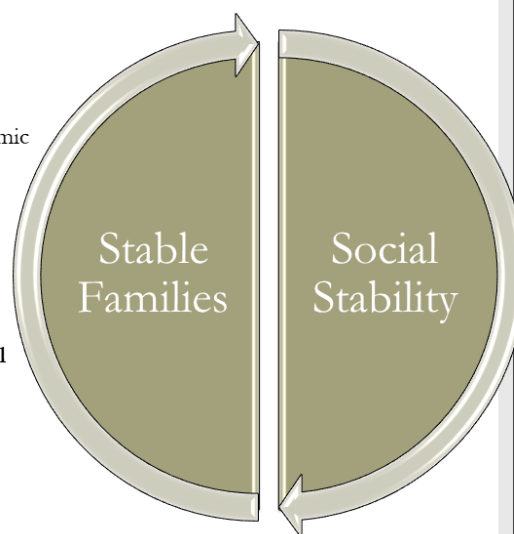
Functionalist Approach

- **Nuclear Family satisfies individual needs:**
- Companionship
- Security: Emotional, Physical, Sexual, Psychological, Economic
- Raising Children

Children Receive adequate socialization

Moral commitment and Social Responsibility

Psychic Income: Psychological satisfaction from personal commitment, love and affection



Consensus Models

Functionalist/ Neofunctionalist:

Overall, the positive influences outweigh the negative.

Negative influences are exceptions to the rule.

Functionalism: Negative impacts of the family are caused by social anomie

Neofunctionalism: Negative impacts from the family cause social anomie

The family is a central institution in the functionalist approach. This can be evaluated using Talcott Parson's *Functional Prerequisites*, or AGIL. In the family, we can see each of these functional prerequisites as they relate to society as a whole. **Adaptability**, the family is the loci of both economic production and consumption. **Goal Attainment**, the family is where individuals learn and are incentivized to conform to the larger goals, values and norms of a society. **Integration**, the family integrates its members into the larger society by providing education and training according to social norms and values. But most importantly, the family is the main functional component of **Latency**, or the reproduction of society by literally reproducing the human beings who will compose the society and passing on the norms and values of that society to the next generation.

For functionalists, dysfunctions in the family are a consequence of larger dysfunctions in the overall society. For instance, if something is wrong with the economic institutions, this will play out in families who are unable to get access to the resources they need to satisfy the family members. Political breakdown could lead to the dispersal of a family unit, such as we see happening in Palestine, Ukraine, Sudan, and other regions of war and political instability.



Economic disruptions are a major source of family dysfunction.

Dysfunctions in the family may also be the consequence of larger social and historical transitions. For instance, looking at Parsons' [Fit Thesis](#), we see a transition from extended family arrangements under feudalism shifting to a focus on nuclear family arrangements in modern societies. This transition didn't just happen one day. Nobody woke up and said, "Hey, let's stop all this feudalism and become modern." The transition happened over time.

During that time, societies experienced significant social anomie, many even fell to revolutions. This transition

from extended family structures to nuclear family structures certainly caused significant family disruptions.

As a result of social dysfunction, we can predict increases in negative consequences of family life, such as domestic abuse and violence, abandonment, high divorce rates, etc. As traditional norms break down, and have yet to be replaced by new norms, the resulting anomie leaves individuals free to express their resentments, frustrations, even fears in any number of ways. Of course, this perspective has some weaknesses. For instance, it is only in modern western societies that intra-family violence has really been understood as "abusive." Traditional western families in feudal arrangements left a great deal of room for "normative" levels of violence on the part of the dominant male in the family. Remember the "Rule of Thumb" and the "Spare the Rod" paradigm. When a husband beat his wife or child within the established norms of the society in which he lived, was this any less dysfunctional? Functionalists are not clear on this.

For functionalists, social dysfunctions are temporary. Remember, functionalists assume that societies seek stability and order. Dysfunctions are temporary. Society either figures out how to deal with the dysfunction by creating new norms, values, and institutions, or the society collapses, and new social arrangements develop. As with the transition from clan systems, to extended family systems, to nuclear family systems, eventually, the new system becomes "normalized." Arguably, we are going through another such transition as society shifts from modern systems to postmodern systems. The nuclear family is transitioning to more diverse and individualized family systems. Eventually, society will settle upon the norms and values that define a postmodern family.

Neofunctionalist Approach

You were introduced to Neofunctionalism in the section titled **From Modernism to Postmodernism**. Neofunctionalists see dysfunctions in the family more dynamically than do functionalists. Family dysfunctions can be seen in terms of negative feedback cycles or spillover effects. For instance, women have gained greater equality in the workplace and more economic independence in their personal lives. Few would argue that this is a bad thing. However, the spillover effect of this is that more women were able to get divorced from abusive husbands. As more women are demanding more divorces, the values constraining divorce become weaker and divorce becomes more "normalized." As divorce becomes normalized, the incentives for remaining married decrease, and divorce rates increase. Now, instead of couples getting divorced to get away from an abusive spouse, which few would argue with, couples are getting divorced based on more questionable standards of [confluent love](#), such as incompatibility, or emotional dissatisfaction.

On the other hand, based on the data we have seen, divorce rates did skyrocket in the late 1960s through the 1970s, but have since stabilized. Divorce rates have more or less remained constant for the last forty years or so. This is consistent with a functionalist analysis of dysfunction.

We can also see a Neofunctionalist analysis of social policies that make it easier for single-parent families, specifically those headed by women, as also contributing to instability in the nuclear family. State policies like Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, Medicaid, and other social safety net programs are important lifelines for low-income people. However, a possible spillover effect of these policies may be that it becomes easier for individuals, especially women, to take the financial hit from a divorce and create a single-parent family. We will dig into this more deeply when we talk about social policy.

Conflict Approaches

Conflict theorists agree with functionalists and Neofunctionalists that larger social forces contribute to family dysfunction. Functionalists/Neofunctionalists, however, see these dysfunctions as anomalous. In other words, family dysfunction is a negative consequence of something that has gone wrong in the larger society. Conflict theorists disagree. For conflict theorists, any dysfunctions in the family or the predictable consequences of inequities in the social system.

Families reproduce social power relations

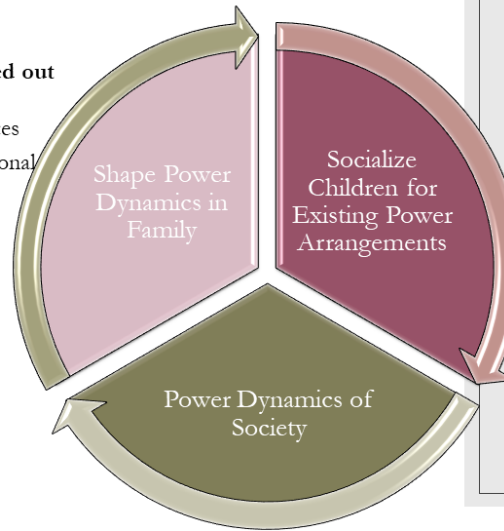
- Marxist: Capitalism
- Critical Theorists: Cultural Domination
- Feminists: Patriarchy

Social Power Dynamics are played out in the family

- Conflict over who controls finances
- Conflict over who controls emotional resources
- Male dominance

Consequences

- Domestic Violence
- Child Abuse
- Exploitation



Conflict

Marxism/ Feminism

Overall, the costs of family life cancel out the benefits of family life.

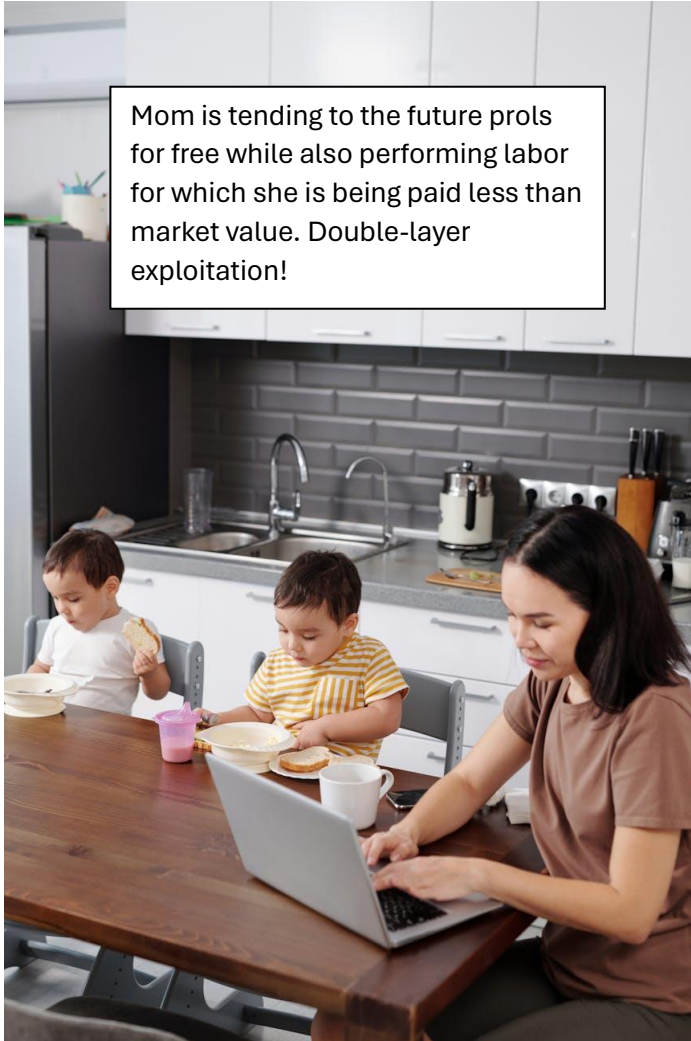
The benefits of family life are not evenly distributed.

- Wealthy benefit over not wealthy
- Capitalists benefit over workers
- Men benefit over women

Remember, conflict theorists see societies as the consequence of dominant groups holding power over others, and creating the norms, values, and structures necessary for maintaining power. So long as societies are premised on dominant and subordinate groups, dominance and subordination will be baked into every social relation, every social institution, and every social arrangement. The same is true for family structures. The norms and values regarding family structures are, according to Conflict theorists, defined by the dominant group for the sake of the dominant group.

For instance, in societies based on feudalism, in which land is passed on to the eldest son (primogeniture) based on bloodline (family dynastic traditions), families must be arranged according to patriarchal standards that include strict control of female sexuality. The father, who owns the land, must know beyond a doubt that his eldest son is genetically his offspring. This also necessitates concepts of legitimate and illegitimate birth. Any male offspring that the patriarch might have with a woman other than his wife cannot have any legitimate claim to his father's property, otherwise, there would be no incentive for a family to arrange a marriage between their daughter and the patriarch. Marriage must be the only avenue toward legitimacy.

Today, legitimacy is no longer a significant norm largely because wealth is now held in the form of capital, rather than land. Capital is a much more flexible kind of wealth than is land and can be more readily divided among heirs. Consequently, prohibitions against illegitimate birth are no longer binding in modern, capitalist societies. In fact, in many nations, a child may have a claim



Mom is tending to the future proles for free while also performing labor for which she is being paid less than market value. Double-layer exploitation!

to the father's capital regardless of legitimacy. The father can be required to pay child support and [palimony](#), without regard to the marital arrangement at birth. However, a holder of capital cannot be required to include any individual, regardless of birthright, as an heir to that capital. The capital is entirely under the control of the capitalist.

This ties in with Marxist Theorists. Remember, Marxism as a conflict theory holds that the dominant groups are always those who control the means of production. In modern society, the means of production are broken down into capital and owned by individual capitalists. Dysfunctions in the family are reflections of the inequities intrinsic to capitalism. Remember also that Marxists view capitalism as inherently exploitative. Capitalist systems empower capitalists to exploit those who do not hold capital. In other words, capitalists can extract the value of one's labor by paying less than the value of that labor.

The key example of this is the expressive labor often performed by women in a family. Remember that expressive labor is

the nurturing done in the family. In this case we have labor that sustains the health and focus of workers. Families house, clothe, feed, tend, educate, provide medical care to the individuals within the family. The individuals in the family then go to work and produce for the profit of the capitalist. From the point of view of the capitalist, expressive or nurturing labor is free. The capitalist gets a healthy, educated, and focused worker without having to pay for the care. Indeed, since things like health care, clothing, food, medicine, hygiene products, etc., are all consumer goods, capitalists literally profit from the expressive care provided by individuals within the family. That this labor is provided disproportionately by women only elevates the exploitative nature of the arrangement.

Contrast this with slave systems in which the slave owner must feed and clothe and tend to at least the most minimal needs of the slave. This is a direct cost to the slave owner. For the

capitalist, however, the workers themselves pay for the expressive labor within the family. Care work within the family is an asset to the capitalist. Consequently, dysfunctions within a family are only a matter of importance if they are costly to the capitalist class. For instance, domestic abuse is only a matter of elite importance if it results in less productive workers. Capitalists also require a basic level of education in their workforce. It's costly to provide the necessary training, and families cannot be relied upon to provide the level of education needed by capitalists. So, education is taken out of the hands of families and invested in public schools. Of course, capitalists would rather not pay for public schools, so they endeavor to shift as much of the tax burden from themselves to working-class people...which also serves to make the working-class individual more dependent upon their capitalist for wage labor.

Sociological Perspectives on Family Dysfunction -- Interactionist and Critical Approaches

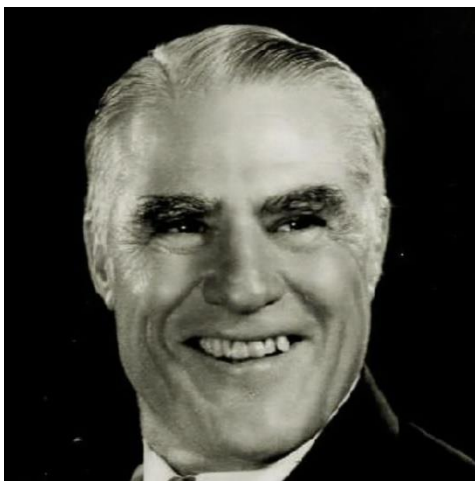
Interactionist Approaches

The structuralist approaches to understanding family dysfunction are valuable because they highlight the ways by which larger social forces can influence personal lives. They offer the most typical expression of what C. Wright Mills referred to as the Sociological Imagination, understanding personal issues as social problems within a historical context.

But Mills was also interested in the real-life human element of sociology as well, and this is where the structuralist perspectives fall short. The structuralist approaches to family dysfunction deny the role of human agency, or the ability to make choices, in forging relationships. In other words, the structuralist perspectives are too "deterministic". Yes, social factors like poverty increase the likelihood that a family will become dysfunctional...but there are plenty of poor families who do not. Capitalism may be exploitative of family labor, but we live in a capitalist society and that's not likely to change...so unless individuals in the family can make choices to mitigate the negative consequences, there's little value in Marxist theory.

That's where the Interactionist Perspective comes in. After all, families, like all institutions, are composed of people who actively make decisions within a social context. It is perfectly acceptable in the larger society to spank my kid for breaking the living room window while playing ball in the house. Indeed, there is a great deal of pressure to do exactly that. But that doesn't mean I have to do that. There may be other ways to discipline the child that do not include violence. I can choose something else.

In essence, families are symbolic interactions between their members. As each member recognizes the symbolic value of "mother" "father" "child" "pet" within the family and actively take on the roles of each. Dysfunction, according to symbolic interactions, happens when the negotiation between interactants breaks down.



Remember our buddy **Herbert Blumer** and his principles of symbolic interaction:

- 1. Human beings act toward things based on their perceived meanings.**
- 2. Meaning is derived through social interaction**
- 3. Shared meaning is negotiated between individuals and may be modified based on social context.**

Mom sees weekends as family time whereas Dad sees weekends as relax time. There's nothing specific about weekends that makes them one thing or the other. The meaning of weekends must be negotiated. Healthy families negotiate these meanings on a level playing field valuing mutual satisfaction. Unhealthy families, for instance, a family in which one member holds disproportionate personal power over the rest of the family, do not operate in this way. Or, both parties have equal power but are unwilling to compromise.

In the above example, Dad has traditional norms that hold that as "the provider" he should be able to relax on the weekend. Mom points out that in 2024, she's also working, and those traditional values no longer hold. Are larger social forces involved in the problem? Yes. But the parents in this case have to navigate this context.

Another problem arises in how individuals within a family understand the meanings of situations. We know from Mead that individuals take on the roles they see as children. If a child sees the Dad role as one in which violence is legitimized, then that child may see violence as a legitimate tool for negotiating shared meaning. This may lead either to abuse or the enabling of abuse. Conflicts may arise due to how the roles within the family are socially constructed.

One prominent avenue of dysfunction happens when men, socially constructed as "the provider" lose their jobs or experience economic setbacks. If manhood is premised on being able to provide, then not being able to provide equates to being less of a man. Combine this with the association of manhood with violence and aggression, and you have a recipe for disaster.

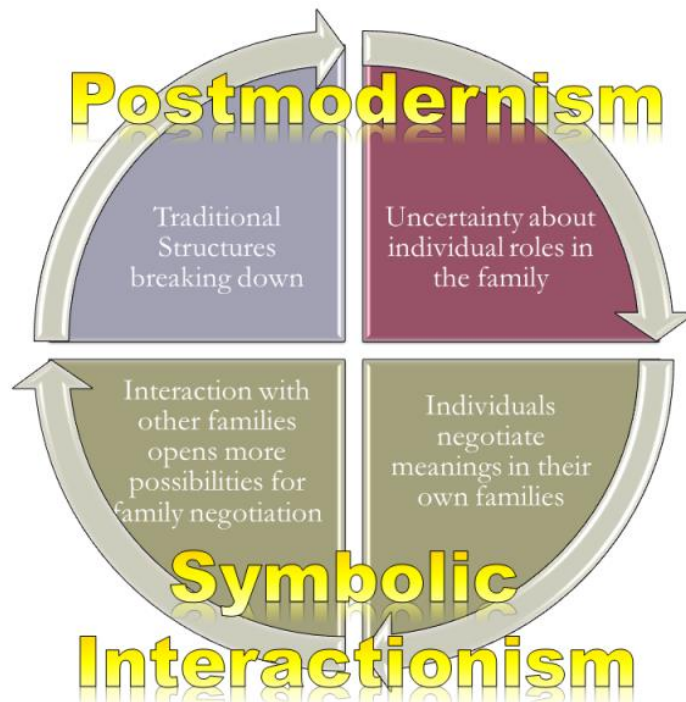
Regardless, decisions are going to be made. Not every man who experiences unemployment resorts to violence. Why? An interactions approach would look at other factors in that person's life that helped him shape meaning and how that meaning is being negotiated within the family. Communication is one factor. Can the members of the family communicate in a way that all members feel heard and respected? Identity is also a factor. Are the individuals within the family stable in their own identities to the point that they can sustain their identities in the face of conflict or change?

A great deal of conflict happens as children grow and develop and their concepts of self-change faster than their parents' concepts of who their children are. Mom and Dad compromise and say Saturdays are family days and Sundays are relax days. Now Junior is sixteen and he'd rather spend his Saturdays with his friends, or maybe he has a girlfriend or...or...or. How much say does Junior have in this new social circumstance?

Critical Perspectives

Just a quick reminder that what I call Critical Perspectives are responses to the Three Core Perspectives, Functionalism, Conflict, and Interactionism (Remember, calling them Critical Perspectives is a ME thing and not an AICE thing. It's how I make them easier to learn. I say this because if you use the term Critical Perspective in your AICE Essay, the reader may not know what you mean). They include Postmodernism and Feminism.

Postmodernist Approach



Interactionist/ Postmodernist

Individual negotiate family relations to mitigate the costs and maximize the benefits.

Cultural Globalization open families up to greater choices about how to structure families to meet individual needs. Traditional meanings are breaking down replaced by individual meanings.

Postmodernists understand the family as a shared story between the members that this social group is "the family." Most of you understand this intrinsically because you are involved in a story-making process yourselves. Maybe you have a reconstituted family with a biological parent and a stepparent in your household during the week and another biological parent and a stepparent in another household. You think the stepparent one is pretty cool, but stepparent two sucks, and the biological parent one doesn't seem to pay any attention to you. You may define the parameters of your family very differently...but it's still your family.

Conflict, in this situation, may arise when your story is that stepdad isn't your "real" Dad, but stepdad's story sees you in the daughter role. The goal for postmodernists is for all members of the family to share the same story about what the family is. That's no easy task.

Postmodernists see the breakdown of traditional family structures and the ascendance of individual family stories as liberating. On the other hand, liberty is often contested, and in such family arrangements, we can predict that there might be more conflict. On the other hand, it's not as if there was a shortage of conflict in traditional families, as has been discussed. For traditional families, however, there was little freedom to deal with conflict beyond the traditional bounds.

Postmodernists may also look at the role of technology, especially media, in family dysfunction. For instance, interconnectivity and home computers have destroyed the traditional modern boundaries of home and work. In many families, Mom and Dad "go to work", but upon returning home they take their work with them in the form of emails and DocuSign, etc. The distinction between the homeplace and the workplace has been distorted.



We also have media representations of men, women, children, and family arrangements that often contradict our lived experience. Look at many situation comedies in which an average-looking husband has a beautiful wife. In such arrangements, he is also a complete screw-up. What stories are being told about what it means to be a wife and a husband? Look at the children in such media presentations. What are the stories that are being told about the child "role"? When the stories we see around us all the time via media contradict our lived experience of family this may lead to conflict

Feminist Approaches

The above example can also be interpreted...[and has been interpreted](#)...from a feminist perspective. These media presentations demonstrate a much higher bar for women than for men in the marital context.

Feminist theorists understand family dysfunction because of patriarchal power, or disproportionate power held by men. We've touched on this with some of the examples above, the media example, and the masculinity example. As society defines men in terms of dominance, while family structures are now established on foundations of equality, there's an inherent conflict involved. We discussed many of the conflicts earlier. For instance, the Double and Triple Shifts are experienced by women as they perform Instrumental work outside of the household and then perform disproportionate amounts of domestic and nurturing labor in the home. If negotiating with a man who embraces traditional norms of masculinity, this may be a source of conflict and dysfunction.

Conclusion

You may have noticed how the structuralist approaches often overlap, and the Interactionist/Critical Approaches also overlap. Many of the examples I introduced could be examined effectively from an Interactionist, Postmodernist, and Feminist Approach. The Sitcom Husband, for instance, may help socially construct marital roles in such a way that it influences how individuals derive meaning for social actions like "husband" and "wife". That these are media images also fall under the preview of Postmodernism. I can find dozens of examples of frumpy television husbands with beautiful wives but cannot think of a single instance in which a frumpy television wife is married to an Adonis, is also ripe for Feminist Interpretation.

Also, many of the influences that individuals must negotiate between men and women or men and men or women and women or non-binary and men and... well, you get the point...are shaped by larger social forces that are structural in nature. It's important to understand how all of these

factors overlap. The goal of sociology is to understand the influences on real-life experience to maximize positive outcomes and mitigate the negative.

This is where we are going the next couple of days as we examine the Family as an Economic unit as well as a state institution.