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Family structure and functionality

III- The family and unavoidable functions

It is not difficult to find examples of how some have gained and others have lost in the deinstitutionalization of family structures. On the positive side, it is most often the career potential of the emancipated women that is mentioned. On the other hand, it is not hard to find examples of individuals who have stood to lose from the proliferation of looser family structures. But usually it is the children who are mentioned as the losers, when they live in fear that their parents will one day leave each other.

It is not easy to weigh the winners against the losers, if the measure could be reduced to an accounting of the increase or decrease in individual suffering. However, this goal only indirectly tells us something about what we are trying to make a point about – namely, the influence of culture on society, either enhancing or hurting its ability to function. Usually, functional analyses have to be based on other types of data than calculations of individual happiness. Before we try to determine whether a given form of modernity leads to conditions inside or outside functional limits, we must decide whether the family has any functions that are so important that no society can do without them. Then we must decide whether these functions depend on a specific institution – in other words, whether a transfer of tasks from the family institution to other institutions is functionally realistic.

We may begin by asking what the family's social functions are. From a historical perspective, or a comparative social anthropological perspective, we could compile a long list of functions that have been associated with the family. The family has been a governing factor in people's sense of belonging and their sense of security; it has helped ensure the production of food and other necessities of life; it has cared for the young and the old, the sick and the helpless; it has figured in the exchange of goods and services and been a link between the individual and society at large. Modernity has led to a differentiation and specialization of these functions. Nowadays we expect more of the family as an emotional room and as a base for leisure activities. The question is whether we can still find functions that require a specific institutionalization of the family. We must ask which family-related tasks are so important that a society would lose important requisites for its functionality if these tasks were not institutionally safeguarded.

Talcott Parsons answered this question by pointing to three or four family-related requisites which no society – especially not modern ones – could do without indefinitely. These involved reproduction, the primary socialization of children, and being an identity-preserving primary group, which most people would depend on. In addition, the regulation of sexuality has been mentioned as a separate "requisite". No society can survive without erotic ties between people, or without a regulation of

these ties. This implies regulations that make people responsible for their offspring.

Reproduction is the most indisputable task, and the one that can most easily be dealt with in terms of functional analysis. Without an infusion of new recruits, any society will die out. The extent to which this can take place through immigration from other societies and cultures is limited, if new generations are to pledge primary allegiance to a society with a given historical tradition and be willing to defend and carry on that tradition. In olden times, people gave birth to a considerable number of children who did not survive into adulthood. We could conceive of more humane, and yet functional, alternatives to those conditions. But we could also conceive of a development that points beyond the functionality, even if the first generation could experience this development as a positive thing. Overpopulation is one form of dysfunctional adjustment that can threaten a society, particularly if the emigration option does not exist. Another dysfunctional adjustment would be underpopulation, caused by a birthrate below the reproductive limit for long periods of time.

Functionally speaking, we may safely assert that a society must have regulations for dealing with children during the first years of their life. This is necessary not just to ensure their immediate needs, but also in order to introduce children to a societal tradition and help develop their personalities so that they can function in society, preferably in a personal way.

Finally, the family must be held up as the closest and most durable primary group of a society's citizens, even if most people will belong to both an orientation family and to a reproductive family. The family must not only see to the material and social needs of its members, their contact network and private life; it must also be a coordinating unit for the individual's experiences. In the words of Talcott Parsons [20], the family assumes importance as an emotional base for popular participation in society,

These, we can assume, are important functions that a modern society cannot do without, at least not without incurring destructive consequences. We must then ask what this means for our understanding of the function of marriage as an institution: Is it reasonable to assume that these functions could be taken over by government bodies, by kindergartens and training centers, so that the marriage-regulated family becomes but one of several options for popular social attachments, designed especially for those who prefer security to liberty?

The answer to this question depends on the extent to which a population needs institutional guidance before enough people will make life choices that are functional for society. Moreover, the answer depends on whether it can be argued that marriage, as opposed to other forms of unions, possesses structural qualities which recommend it as the most functional choice even in modern societies. Let us stress two characteristics of constituent families: both the internal norms, which are related to the couple's roles and obligations toward one another, and the external delimitation, which is meant to protect the family sphere against a normative invasion from other institutions of society. In our type of society, this means, first and foremost, protection from economically derived market norms, and from equality norms that spring from political and bureaucratic organizations. Both are capable of destabilizing the family unit.

Structural circumstances can be expected to have an impact on how family functions are dealt with. In every society, reproduction depends on a lot more than biological urges. In modern society, where the birth rate is even more dependent on the couples' will and active decisions than in earlier societies, reproduction can assume the character of a long-term investment. Institutional frameworks, which can bolster faith in the durability of couples' relationships and prescribe duties and forms of cooperation for both parties, are expected to be important for the number of births. In our part of the world, these expectations appear to be borne out. Family statistics show that married couples generally give birth to more children than couples belonging to more informal units. To the degree that the difference between a marital and a non-marital reproduction is crucial to a population's reproduction over time, this becomes a measure of the functionality of marriage. Generally speaking, it is also important for the preservation of the family that there are norms and legal tenets for how different conflicts should be handled. Even this could require institutional guidance.

A successful primary socialization is important for a subsequent secondary socialization into specific sectors of a society. Even though primary socialization may be perceived as being based on a private relationship between parents and their children, this relationship is nevertheless dependent on institutional frameworks. The way in which mothers and fathers relate to their children usually has to do with examples. No functional society can remain indifferent the *kind* of examples given to the new generation. This has implications for the learning of sex roles. A father is a man who has a specific relationship with a certain woman. A mother is a woman who has a specific relationship with a man. This implies role models different from those which can be derived from an identification with any kind of man or woman. This explains, among other things, why homosexuals and single people do not enjoy the same functional status in adoption cases as do couples of the opposite sex.

The family's task as lasting primary group depends on its being subject to those institutional frameworks that can ensure this kind of durability. The institutional structure can also provide frameworks for the family's rights and obligations in relation to other societal institutions.

The argumentation for the functional advantages of marriage could be carried even further. Nevertheless, the question many in our day would pose is this: Could other forms of couples relationships become commonplace and receive more or less the same functions as marriage has enjoyed, yet at the same time be more in accordance with modern notions of freedom? This leads us to a closer look at what we know about the differences between marriage and cohabitation.

Reference:

20 Parsons, Talcott (1971): *The System of Modern Society*. Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, NJ, pp 100-101.