
The Role Of Gender In Family Life In The UK And Cross-Culturally

Differing conceptual ideas of family life are clear throughout historical and contemporary societies and thus minimal agreement is apparent. However, the family can be seen as 'the solidarities which exist between those who are taken to be related to one another through ties of blood or marriage' (Schneider, 1968). Discussed is the idea that traditional nuclear families, formed of married or cohabiting heterosexual couples and their children, base significant importance on gender with regard to parenting and socialisation of the next generation and generally the family itself. However, differing interpretations of what can be considered a 'family' provides multiple routes combining differing gender roles and patterns. Whilst the traditional, functionalist-centred view of family as a universal institution fulfilling positive functions for society is important, the focus of this essay will be based upon the social constructionist transition of gender within modern family structures and how differing interpretations form, both across the UK and cross culturally.

As stated previously, family was of significant importance in traditional British society, with values such as cohesion and solidarity associated with family being reinforced through ties of blood or marriage. Marriage therefore was conventionally based upon heterosexual relations, raised to a sacrament, with the expectation of eventually forming a nuclear family consisting of a mother, a father and their children. Functionalist theorists further this concept within family life, highlighting the gendered division of labour between males and females. The male holding the 'breadwinner' identity and performing instrumental roles, reinforced the idea that economic prosperity was valued, minimising the risk of requiring support from the state, which has been emphasised through Parsons' warm bath theory. Comparatively, the female performed expressive roles within the private sphere to prevent the risk of maternal deprivation of offspring. Furthermore, the homemaker role within the nuclear family is significant in regard to 'primary relationships', explaining the closest and most enduring ties between people, reflecting the mother's role as not only the child bearer but also the mechanism in which the traditional values of society are reinforced. Moral order and value consensus are further upheld and passed on through generations via cultural transmission. Likewise, a 'concerted cultivation' (Matsuoka, R. 2019:161-178) is expressed via an expected authoritative parenting style, carried out predominately through the female figure allowing for the child to develop high levels of self-esteem and independence. This allows for mothers to 'produce moral maternal selves, suggesting alongside others that the making of ethical selves is a relational classed process' (Perrier, 2012:655-670). Intersecting gender with class, middle class mothers were found to debate with their children, whose opinions were treated on a similar level, linking the individual themselves to the workings of a functioning society (Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989:1). Therefore, throughout family life, gender roles, especially that of the mother, are intrinsically regarded as essential, with parenting styles and the process of socialisation being reinforced through traditional functionalist-based means of family form. However, this focus on middle class families presents an overly simplistic view of parenting by ignoring possible gender roles associated with other social groups such as those from working classes, limiting the effectiveness of the approach.

A consequence of the functionalist-based gendered roles in family life, with the male as the

head of the household, is the violence that stems from those who form primary relationships. Domestic violence, the 'physical abuse directed by one member of the family against another', often targets the female figure, with 'heterosexism and gender role socialization perhaps being the biggest contributing factors' (Brown, 2008:457-462). Feminists argue that the patriarchal structure of the family allows males to take control and exert their power over the female, essentially constructing a subordinate status. The fact 'two women per week are killed by their husbands' (ONS, 2019) portrays the strong emotional ties associated with family life that can break down and lead to erosional standards of morality. The traditional breadwinner identity can transform significantly, reflecting the roles exerted by men and women, depicting marginalisation within the home and thus gender inequality stemming from the family itself.

Most significantly, changing societal acceptance and expectations regarding gender have allowed multiple family forms to develop, a stark contrast to the traditional ideals of the 1950s based upon rigid gender roles for maintaining the 'collective conscience'. In this sense the family and family life are an arbitrary social construction, with what we understand to be family differing across historical, cultural and social contexts, leading to majorly different social categorisations. Traditionally, the lack of a male father figure was stigmatised throughout media discourse and social policy; however modern statistics state 1.7 million single parent homes exist in the UK (BBC, 2019), increasing the acceptance of the situation itself. Whilst policy protection over this section of society through tax and benefits systems (Duncan and Edwards, 1999:145) reflects shifting ideological outlooks, fundamentally this change has led to the increase in the role of women within the family, with many acting as the 'breadwinner', resulting in 'living patterns being less bound by traditional lines of the 'nuclear family''. Increased educational and employment opportunities for women (Allan and Crow, 2001:10) as well as Beck's idea of individualisation (1992) provide convincing explanations towards changes away from conventional gender roles. Although not upholding the value consensus, the 'undoing' of typical gender roles causes political strain with critics such as West and Zimmerman (2009) arguing that gender cannot be undone as 'gender differences are linked to power and are continually reinforced through accountability processes'. This increase of single parent homes and unconventional gendered roles reflects the differing responsibilities accepted within families and thus the importance of gender in family life.

Families of choice, other than single parent families, increasingly emphasise the changing gender roles within family life, drifting further away from traditional functionalist-based responsibilities explained earlier. As Giddens (2008:347) observes 'gay partnerships reflect the positive and creative forms of everyday life that homosexual couples are increasingly able to peruse together'. Therefore kinship, in the traditional sense of ties through blood and marriage, may not apply to homosexuals to the extent of heterosexual family relations, however the legalisation of gay marriage in 2014 highlighted the ability of many same sex couples to take on the roles within a socially constructed 'family', backed by legal jurisdiction as well. This phenomenological approach sees many same sex families reject 'communal expectations' and focus more upon pure relationships based upon intimacy, combining gendered desires. This concept of same sex families therefore suggests that the 'reflexive project of self' (Giddens 1992) and the 'undoing' of gender is extremely significant, in many cases increasing gender equality 'even in couples that initially hold entrenched, gendered beliefs' (Giddens, 2008:365).

Cross culturally, gender has a similarly intrinsic role, however displayed significantly different to that of the UK. The Nuyoo, in Southern Africa, bases marriage upon the 'desire for a woman to carry out the tasks that would complement [her husband's]', ensuring the steadiness and

lasting nature of the household' (Monaghan, 2000:89), with gender further incorporated through the transferring of a 'Brideprice' and 'Brideservice' based upon the transmission of wealth and labour. This idea of transferring the female as an object reinforces the concept of sexual desires within family life and the males' apparent right to sexual pleasure with the female. Ward Goodenough reinforces this concept, seeing marriage as 'a transaction and resulting contract in which a person establishes a continuing claim to the right of sexual access to a woman'. However, family mechanisms differ cross-culturally, with lineage, both patrilineal and matrilineal in the Nuer and Minangkabau, portraying that family life and kinship are not necessarily related to blood ties but can be traced through male and female ranks. As Monaghan (2000:100) highlights, 'western societies tend to form kin-groups on the basis of descent from a common ancestor but trace through blood ties', which signifies differing understandings cross culturally and thus the social construction of gender itself as bound to culture.

In conclusion, the role of gender in family life across both the UK and cross-culturally is not only socially constructed but also takes on multiple forms. Familial forms therefore are not static with 'modification and change being not entirely normal but are built into the very nature of family life' (Allan, Crow and Hawker 2011). This subjective nature in contemporary societies is in stark contrast to that of the traditional functionalist-based consensus with the male as a 'breadwinner', which in many mechanistic societies reinforces patriarchal ideologies. Discussed predominantly, non-conventional gender roles such as single mothers and same sex couples imply family life has not only flexibility but also culturally bound characteristics that reinforce constructionist perspectives. Whether it be based upon kinship or lineage, gender plays a significant role in not only the mechanisms of family life, but the overriding culture associated with the family itself. We must nevertheless inquire as to the extent to which in the future the 'emptying of functions' in the family (Eriksen, 2004:101-119), where multiple of the conventional tasks are performed by the public sector, will become a dominant force in shaping social norms and familial relations.

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