

Roles and Relationships Within the Family

As well as studying the place of the family unit in wider society, sociologists also research what happens within the family. The key focus is on the different roles and expectations of men, women and children within the family.

The Rise of the Nuclear Family led to Joint Conjugal Roles

Conjugal roles are the roles of husband and wife (or partner and partner) within the home. Elizabeth Bott (1957) studied how jobs and roles within the family were allocated to men and women in modern industrial Britain.

Sure, her study is old, but it's a good foundation for the debate, so don't dismiss it — learn it.

Bott (1957) identified two ways household jobs can be shared

Segregated roles	Husbands and wives lead separate lives with clear and distinct responsibilities within the family. The man goes out to work and does DIY. The woman stays home, looks after the kids and does all the emotional stuff.
Joint roles	Husband and wife roles are more flexible and shared, with less defined tasks for each. Usually leisure time is shared. Responsibility for making decisions is also shared.

Willmott and Young (1973) studied the changing structure of the British family from extended to nuclear (see p.79). They reckoned that the increase in the nuclear family meant that joint conjugal roles would develop. They predicted that equal and shared responsibilities would be the future norm in British families.

Willmott and Young's picture of widespread equality in marriage was criticised as soon as it was published.

Oakley (1974) pointed out that their study only required men to do a few things round the house to qualify as having joint roles. Their methodology overlooked the amount of time spent on housework — making 10 minutes' washing-up equivalent to an hour's hoovering, an hour's ironing and all the rest of the housework too. Oakley's research found it was pretty rare for men to do a lot of housework.

Conjugal Roles are Still Unequal Although Most Women have Paid Jobs

Since the early studies by Bott, and Willmott and Young, new family structures have developed. There are now lots more families where both partners work outside the home. Sociological evidence shows that an equal share of paid employment hasn't led to an equal share of domestic labour.

- 1) Edgell (1986) tested Willmott and Young's theory and found none of his sample families had joint conjugal roles in relation to housework. However, he did find increased sharing of childcare between men and women.
- 2) Oakley (1974) found that women took on a double burden — taking on paid jobs and still keeping the traditional responsibilities for home and children.
- 3) Boulton (1983) concluded that men may help out with specific bits of childcare like nappy-changing, but women are still primarily responsible for children.
- 4) Ferri and Smith (1996) found that two thirds of full-time working mothers said they were responsible for cooking and cleaning. Four fifths of the same group said they were responsible for laundry.

These are all small-scale studies — it's important to look at research using a much larger sample.

The British Social Attitudes Survey 1991 was a large-scale study that questioned about 1,000 people about housework. It showed a very clear division of labour — women did most of the housework. For example, washing and ironing was mainly done by women in 84% of households, shared equally in 12%, and mainly done by men in 3%.

Industrialisation led to the Creation of the "Housewife"

- 1) Oakley thinks that the role of the housewife was socially constructed by the social changes of the Industrial Revolution, when people started going to work in factories instead of working at home.
- 2) Married women were often not allowed to work in factories. A new role of housewife was created for married women.
- 3) Middle class households had female servants to do domestic work. Working class women did it themselves.
- 4) The cultural values that said women should be in charge of housework were so dominant that domestic work came to be seen as "naturally" (biologically) the role of women.

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Decision-Making and Sharing of Resources can be Unequal

As well as looking at the **division of labour** and tasks in the home, sociologists have researched how **power is shared** in the home. The traditional role of the **man holding power to make decisions** was so widespread that the phrase "**who wears the trousers**" is often used to mean who's in charge.

Edgell (1980) interviewed middle class couples

He found that **men had decision-making control** over things both husband and wife saw as important, whilst women had control over **minor decisions**. Half of husbands and two thirds of wives expressed a view that **sexual equality** was a **bad thing**.



Alas, no one knows who was wearing these trousers. It's a mystery.

Pahl (1989, 1993) researched money management by 100 dual-income couples

She concluded that the most common form of financial management was "**husband-controlled pooling**", which she defined as: the money is shared but the husband has the dominant role in how it's spent.

Explanations for Inequality are based on Theories About Power in Society

Guess what? There are **functionalist**, **Marxist** and **feminist** theories on power in society.

- 1) For **functionalists**, men and women still largely perform **different tasks and roles** within the family because it's the **most effective way** of keeping society **running smoothly**.
- 2) **Marxist** sociologists interpret the fact that men and women have different roles as evidence of the **power of capitalism to control** family life. They say women and men have unequal roles because **capitalism works best that way**. Even with more women working outside the home for equal hours to men, the capitalist class needs to **promote women** as "naturally" **caring and nurturing** to ensure workers are kept fit, healthy and happy. This role for women is maintained **ideologically** through the **media**, e.g. in adverts.
- 3) From a **feminist** perspective, inequality in household roles demonstrates **inequality in power** between men and women. A **patriarchal** society will produce **unequal conjugal relationships** because society's **systems and values** will **inevitably** benefit men at the expense of women.

So, all explanations of conjugal roles lead back to **different theories** about **power in society**.

These explanations all agree that different roles for men and women in the family help to **maintain the status quo** (keep things the way they are at the moment) in society — the disagreement between them is over **who benefits**.

Practice Questions

- Q1 Define the term "conjugal roles".
- Q2 Describe the differences between joint and segregated conjugal roles.
- Q3 What is meant by the "double burden" of women in modern society?
- Q4 How was the role of "housewife" socially constructed, according to Oakley?
- Q5 Identify two areas of inequality in conjugal relationships other than household chores.

Exam Questions

- Q1 Evaluate the evidence that conjugal roles are still unequal in modern British society. (24 marks)
- Q2 Assess the view that power is the key to understanding relationships within the family. (24 marks)

I'll have a cup of tea while you're on your feet, love....

This is mainly about inequality in the family. You know, who does the housework, that sort of thing. Some sociologists look on the bright side and say that things are getting more equal. Others say they still aren't equal enough. Remember to look at the possible causes and social construction of inequality. And learn some of the statistics — it gets you more marks.

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This page examines emotional work within families and the dark side of family life — domestic violence and child abuse.

Women in Families can be Responsible for all the Emotional Work

Doing **emotional work** in a family means **reacting and responding** to other family members' emotions, **alleviating** pain and distress, and **responding to and managing** anger and frustration.

- 1) **Diane Bell (1990)** suggested that there is an "economy of emotion" within all families and that running the economy is the responsibility of women.
- 2) She says managing family emotions is a bit like **bookkeeping** — the woman's role being to balance the family's emotional budget.

- 1) **Duncombe and Marsden (1995)** found that women in families are often required to do **housework and childcare, paid employment and emotional work** — amounting to a "triple shift" of work.
- 2) They found that married women were **happier** when their husbands shared some of the burden of emotional work.
- 3) But they also found that emotional work is predominantly **gendered** — women have the **main responsibility** for managing the whole family's emotions.

- 1) **Gillian Dunne (1999)** studied **lesbian households**. She found that the distribution of **responsibilities** such as childcare and housework tended to be **equal** between the partners. The couples were **flexible and fair** in the way they shared work.
- 2) Dunne thought that in **heterosexual relationships**, the division of work in the household was usually **less fair** because of traditional ideas about **masculinity and femininity**.

Some Sociologists See Child Abuse in Terms of Power

Sociologists study the issue of **child abuse** by parents and carers in terms of **power relationships**. You need to be able to **explain abuse** as a form of power rather than explore **details** of abuse itself.

A parent or carer is able to abuse a child by **manipulating the responsibilities and trust** which go along with the role of parent or carer. Families are **private** and separate from the rest of society. This makes it less likely for children to report abuse.

Social policies have been **adapted** to give some **protection** to children. The **Children Act 1989** was set up so the state can **intervene** in families if social workers are **concerned** about children's safety.

Domestic Violence Affects Many Families in the UK

Research by Professor **Elizabeth Stanko (2000)** found that:

- 1) A woman is **killed** by her current or former partner **every three days** in England and Wales.
- 2) There are 570,000 cases of **domestic violence** reported in the UK every year.
- 3) An incident of domestic violence occurs in the UK every **6-20 seconds**.

The Home Office estimates that **16% of all violent crime** in the **UK** is domestic violence.

The fourth **United Nations Women's Conference in 1995** reported that **25%** of women worldwide experience domestic violence.

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Radical Feminists See Domestic Violence as a Form of Patriarchal Control

Radical feminist theory says violence against women is treated differently to other violent crime.

- 1) Dobash and Dobash's first UK study (1979) found the police usually **didn't record** violent crime by husbands against their wives.
- 2) Since 1979 the police have set up **specialist domestic violence units**, but still the **conviction rate is low** compared to other forms of assault.
- 3) **Before 1991**, British law said a husband was **entitled** to have **sex** with his wife **against her will**. In 1991 the **rape law changed** to say that a husband could be charged with **raping his wife**.
- 4) Evidence like that above is used by **radical feminists** to support their argument that **laws and social policies** in society have traditionally worked to **control women** and keep men's power in society going.

Radical feminists believe that violence against women within the **family** is a form of **power and control**.

"Violence was used by the men they lived with to silence them, to 'win' arguments, to express dissatisfaction, to deter future behaviour and to merely demonstrate dominance."
 — Family Violence Professional Education Taskforce 1991, *Family Violence: Everybody's Business, Somebody's Life*, Page 116, Federation Press, Sydney. By permission of the publisher.

The **social climate** helps to **maintain this situation** by making women feel **ashamed and stigmatised** if they talk about the violence. The shame and stigma are part of the **ideology of patriarchy** — the school of thought that says women should know their place.

Shame also comes from the idea that women **should know better** — not get involved with violent men in the first place. There's a tendency to **blame the victim**.

Dobash and Dobash found that most women who left violent partners returned in the end. This was because of **fear of being stigmatised** — and because they were **financially dependent** on their partner.

Abusive partners often **condition** their victim into thinking that nobody cares and there's nowhere to go. The pressure not to leave an abusive partner comes from the **relationship** as well as from society.

Remember not all feminists agree with the radical feminist view.

Radical Feminism is Criticised for Overemphasising the Power of Men

There are two main criticisms of radical feminist theory of the family:

- 1) It **overemphasises** the place of domestic violence in family life. **Functionalists** argue that most families operate **harmoniously**, while **postmodern theory** argues that individuals have much more **choice and control** to avoid, leave or reshape their family relationships.
- 2) It presents men as **all-powerful** and women as **powerless** when in reality women often hold some power over men. The journalist **Melanie Phillips (2003)** highlights the fact that **women abuse men too** and **male victims** are often **ignored** by society and the police. The pressure group **Families Need Fathers** campaigns for men to have **equal rights** in family and child law.

Practice Questions

- Q1 What is meant by 'emotional work' in families?
- Q2 What proportion of women worldwide experience domestic violence?
- Q3 What do radical feminists think is the cause of domestic violence?
- Q4 Give two criticisms of the radical feminist view of domestic violence.

Exam Questions

- Q1 Assess the view that domestic violence is part of the ideology and practice of patriarchy. (4 marks)
- Q2 Examine the ways in which feminist sociologists have contributed to our understanding of family roles and relationships. (4 marks)

Brrrr... not pleasant, is it...

could be forgiven for thinking that this stuff is all a bit depressing. But abuse does happen and you need to know how society deals with it and the different explanations people have for it, fair or unfair.