

THE DIVISION OF LABOUR IN THE HOME



The division of labour in the home is a central topic in sociology, examining how household tasks are distributed among family members. This issue reflects broader social dynamics, including gender roles, economic structures, and cultural norms. In this summary, we will explore the contributions of five key sociologists: Talcott Parsons, Ann Oakley, Young and Willmott, Jonathan Gershuny, and Anthony Giddens. Their research highlights shifts and continuities in domestic roles over time.

Talcott Parsons (1950s): Functionalist Perspective

Talcott Parsons was a prominent functionalist who believed in the naturalness and necessity of traditional gender roles in the family. According to Parsons, the family's stability depends on a clear division of labour:

- **Instrumental Role:** Taken up by men as breadwinners, focusing on economic provision and external responsibilities.
- **Expressive Role:** Taken up by women as caregivers, emphasizing emotional support and nurturing within the household.

Parsons argued that this division was biologically rooted and functionally beneficial, ensuring societal stability and the efficient socialization of children. However, his views have been widely criticised for:

- Overlooking the increasing participation of women in the workforce.
- Ignoring the diversity of family structures and cultural variations in gender roles.

Young and Willmott (1973): The Symmetrical Family

Young and Willmott's study of British families presented a more optimistic view of domestic roles. They argued that the family was becoming more symmetrical, characterized by:

- Joint conjugal roles where men and women share tasks like housework and childcare.
- Increasing equality in decision-making and shared leisure time.

Their findings suggested that industrialization and social mobility had blurred traditional gender distinctions. However, feminists have critiqued their work for being overly optimistic, arguing that true equality in domestic labour remains elusive.

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Ann Oakley (1974): Feminist Critique

Ann Oakley's research challenged the functionalist perspective and highlighted the gender inequalities inherent in domestic labour. Her groundbreaking interviews with housewives revealed that women's contributions were often undervalued and largely invisible:

- Women bore the brunt of unpaid domestic labour, often alongside paid employment.
- The notion of the "symmetrical family" was, in her view, largely a myth, with men contributing minimally to housework.

Oakley emphasized that gender roles are not natural but **socially constructed** through cultural norms and expectations. Her feminist critique laid the groundwork for understanding how domestic work reinforces gender inequality, sparking debates about the value of unpaid labour.

Jonathan Gershuny (1990s): Time-Use Studies

Jonathan Gershuny's research used time-use diaries to track trends in household labour over decades. He found:

- A gradual shift toward more equal sharing of domestic responsibilities, especially in households where women worked full-time.
- The concept of "**lagged adaptation**": Men's involvement in housework increased as women's participation in paid employment grew, though this change was often slow.

Gershuny's work highlighted the role of economic and social change in reshaping household roles. However, he acknowledged that significant inequalities persist, particularly in traditional or lower-income households.

Anthony Giddens (1990s): Late Modernity and Intimacy

Anthony Giddens explored the transformation of personal relationships in the context of late modernity. He argued that traditional roles were giving way to more egalitarian arrangements based on:

- The democratization of the family: Relationships built on equality, negotiation, and mutual respect.
- Emphasis on emotional connection and shared decision-making rather than rigid gender roles.

Giddens highlighted how social and cultural changes, including feminist movements, had created space for greater flexibility in domestic arrangements. However, critics note that his perspective may idealize relationships, overlooking the persistence of traditional norms in many contexts.

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Comparing Perspectives and Ongoing Challenges

The sociological exploration of domestic labour reveals both progress and challenges:

- Traditional vs. Modern Views: Parsons emphasized stability through traditional roles, while Oakley critiqued these roles as inequitable.
- Shifts Toward Equality: Young and Willmott identified symmetry in middle-class families, and Gershuny documented slow but steady progress in sharing domestic tasks.
- Cultural and Structural Barriers: Despite shifts, feminist critiques underline the continued undervaluation of domestic labour and persistent inequalities in many households.

Conclusion

The division of labour in the home mirrors broader societal shifts, from industrialization to the feminist movement. While progress toward equality is evident, traditional norms and economic constraints continue to shape domestic roles. Sociological research provides valuable insights into these dynamics, helping us understand and address ongoing challenges.

Student Questions

- How did Parsons justify the division of labour in the family as biologically determined and functional for society? Do you agree with his perspective? Why or why not?
- How did Ann Oakley's findings challenge the notion of the "symmetrical family"? Can you identify examples in modern society that support her critique?
- What evidence did Gershuny provide for the gradual shift toward shared domestic responsibilities? What factors might accelerate or hinder this trend?
- According to Giddens, how have intimate relationships changed in the era of late modernity? Do you think his concept of democratization is realistic in all contexts?