

# PARSONS ON THE FAMILY



## Parsons and Functionalism

Talcott Parsons (1902–1979) was a leading figure in functionalist sociology, which views society as a system of interconnected parts that work together to maintain social stability and order. Parsons believed that every institution in society performs essential functions to meet its needs, contributing to the smooth running of society as a whole. For example, the education system prepares individuals for their future roles in the workforce, religion reinforces shared norms and values, and the economy ensures goods and services are produced and distributed. The family, according to Parsons, plays a particularly critical role in both socialising individuals and providing emotional support.

Parsons' approach can be understood through his concept of the organic analogy, where society is likened to a living organism. Just as the heart, lungs, and other organs perform specific roles to keep the body alive, institutions such as the family, education, and religion perform specific roles to keep society functioning. Parsons argued that the family, especially in industrial societies, plays a key role in maintaining social order by ensuring individuals are integrated into society and emotionally supported.

## Instrumental and Expressive Roles

Parsons identified two key roles within the traditional nuclear family, which he believed were based on biological differences between men and women. These roles are the instrumental role and the expressive role.

The instrumental role, typically performed by men, involves providing for the family's material needs. This role includes being the breadwinner, taking on paid employment, and fulfilling practical and goal-oriented tasks. Parsons saw this role as essential for the family's economic stability and survival, allowing the family to meet its financial and practical needs.

The expressive role, on the other hand, is usually performed by women and focuses on emotional care and nurturing. This role involves providing love, support, and affection to family members, as well as maintaining harmony within the household. It also includes the socialisation of children, ensuring they learn the norms, values, and behaviours expected of them in society.

Parsons believed that these roles were complementary and together contributed to the family's stability. The division of labour between instrumental and expressive roles ensured that both practical and emotional needs were met within the family. However, critics argue that these roles reinforce outdated gender stereotypes and do not reflect the realities of modern family life, where roles are often shared or reversed.



### Instrumental Role:

- Typically associated with men in traditional nuclear families.
- Focuses on providing for the family financially and acting as the breadwinner.
- Represents goal-oriented, practical tasks that ensure material stability.



### Expressive Role:

- Typically associated with women.
- Involves nurturing, emotional care, and maintaining harmony within the home.
- Provides emotional stability to family members and fosters close bonds.

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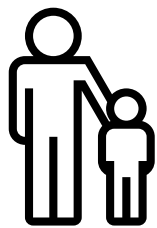


## Functions of the Family

Parsons identified two primary functions of the family that are crucial in modern industrial societies: the primary socialisation of children and the stabilisation of adult personalities.

Primary socialisation is the process by which children learn the norms, values, and culture of their society. Parsons described the family as a “personality factory,” shaping children into socially adjusted individuals who can integrate into society. For example, children learn essential behaviours such as sharing, following rules, and respecting authority. This process ensures that societal values are passed down to the next generation, contributing to social order and continuity.

The second function, the stabilisation of adult personalities, focuses on the emotional support that the family provides to adults. Parsons argued that family life acts as a sanctuary from the stresses and pressures of work and wider society. He likened this to the “warm bath” theory, where the family provides a relaxing and nurturing environment that allows adults to recharge and return to their societal roles feeling refreshed. This function is particularly significant in industrial societies, where individuals often face high levels of stress due to work demands and the fast pace of modern life.



### Primary Socialisation of Children:

The family is the “personality factory” where children learn the basic norms, values, and culture of society. This ensures that children grow into responsible, socialised adults who can integrate into wider society.



### Stabilisation of Adult Personalities:

The family provides emotional support for adults, helping them deal with the stresses and pressures of daily life. Parsons likened this to the “warm bath theory”, where family life helps to refresh and stabilise adults so they can return to their societal roles.

## The Functional Fit Theory

Parsons also developed the functional fit theory, which explains how the structure of the family adapts to meet the needs of society. He argued that different family structures emerge depending on the specific requirements of the society in which they exist.

In pre-industrial societies, the dominant family type was the extended family, which included multiple generations living together or in close proximity. The extended family performed a wide range of functions, such as providing childcare, caring for the elderly, and supporting agricultural work. It was well-suited to the needs of a subsistence-based economy, where family members relied on one another for survival.

However, with the advent of industrialisation, society required a more mobile and flexible workforce to meet the demands of urban living and industrial economies. According to Parsons, the nuclear family became the dominant family type in industrial societies because it was better suited to this new way of life. The nuclear family, consisting of two generations (parents and their dependent children), is smaller and more geographically mobile, making it easier for individuals to move to where jobs are located.

Furthermore, industrial societies developed specialised institutions, such as schools, hospitals, and welfare systems, which took over many of the functions previously performed by the extended family. This allowed the nuclear family to focus on its two core functions: the socialisation of children and the emotional support of adults.

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## Criticisms of Parsons' Views

While Parsons' ideas were influential, they have faced significant criticism. One major criticism is that his views are outdated and rely heavily on traditional gender roles, which no longer reflect modern family life. Today, many families are dual-earner households where both partners share financial and caregiving responsibilities. Additionally, Parsons' assumption that women are naturally suited to the expressive role has been challenged by feminists, who argue that this reinforces gender inequality by limiting women's opportunities outside the home.

Another criticism is that Parsons' focus on the nuclear family overlooks the diversity of family structures in contemporary society. Single-parent families, same-sex families, and blended families, for example, can also perform the functions Parsons identified. Furthermore, Parsons is criticised for overlooking conflict and inequality within families, such as domestic abuse or power imbalances between men and women. Marxist sociologists argue that the family also serves the interests of capitalism, for example, by reproducing the labour force and maintaining social inequality.

Finally, Parsons is accused of over-emphasising consensus in society, assuming that all families work harmoniously to fulfil their functions. Critics argue that this idealised view ignores the ways in which some families fail to socialise children effectively or provide emotional stability.

## Questions

Explain how Parsons viewed society as a system.

Define the instrumental and expressive roles in the family according to Parsons.

Identify and explain the two main functions of the family in modern industrial society.

Summarize Parsons' functional fit theory and give an example of how the family structure has changed over time.

Critically evaluate Parsons' views: What are two strengths and two weaknesses of his ideas on the family?

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## Extension Activities

### Activity 1: Research Task

Compare Parsons' functionalist view of the family to another sociological perspective, such as feminism or Marxism. How do these views differ in their understanding of the family?

### Activity 2: Class Debate

"The nuclear family is the ideal family type for modern society." Divide into groups to argue for and against this statement, using Parsons' ideas as a basis.