OCR Examination-style questions

1 Identify and explain characteristics of the nuclear family. (17 marks)

2 Identify and explain reasons for the decrease in family size over the past 30 years. (17 marks)

3 Identify and explain reasons for the decline in marriage over the past 30 years. (17 marks)

The role of family in society

In this section we examine the role of the family in society from two different viewpoints: functionalism and Marxism.

Functionalism

Traditional functionalist approaches adopt a **consensus approach** to understanding both society and the role of the family, and this involves thinking about two types of cooperation:

- **inter-institutional** (between education and work, for example)
- **intra-institutional** (between husband and wife, for example)

The functions of the family represent a delicate balance between these two types. We can initially illustrate this using Murdock's (1949) four family functions:

- **Sexuality**: The control of sexuality (adult family members only engage in sexual relations with each other) provided 'stability through exclusivity'; by showing commitment to both each other and their family, adults would focus their efforts on ensuring the survival of their group. By 'looking inward' to the needs of their family, adults would also be 'looking outward' to the needs of the social system.
- **Reproduction**: Families 'reproduce society' by creating new members to replace those who die.
- **Socialisation**: Children are taught the values and norms of their society.
- **Economic provision**: To perform reproductive and socialisation functions, family members had to organise themselves to ensure the group's survival (providing, at the most basic level, food and shelter for the group). To do this they had to develop a particular **division of labour**:
  - **Domestic**: This related to the internal organisation and running of the family group (involving, for example, cooking, cleaning and childcare).
  - **Non-domestic**: In modern societies some form of paid employment was needed to buy the food and services required by the family.

The fact that historically non-domestic work was mainly done by men and domestic work by women creates a problem for functionalists (one that points to an important

criticism of this approach). Functionalists argue institutions always exist for a *purpose* and that purpose can be read from what they *do*. To know the purpose of the family we look at what it does now and then 'think backwards' to discover some underlying explanation about how and why it has reached this stage in its development. This formulation involves two important ideas:

- **Evolution**: This is the idea that present family arrangements are always the highest point in any evolutionary scale.
- **Design**: Benton (1984) argues the evolutionary development of the family could not be the product of chance because it was locked into an institutional system of **purpose** and **need**; something existed because it was functional.

While this explains why **social systems** develop, it encounters critical problems when it has to explain very specific functional relationships, such as the division of labour within the family. When functionalists in the 1950s and 1960s looked at the family division of labour, it clearly showed **segregated conjugal roles** — a gendered division of labour whereby men (providers) and women (nurturers) performed very different and clearly separated roles. Since this system had to be functional, functionalists had to identify the 'design principles' that explained segregated conjugal roles — which they did in terms of instrumental and expressive orientations:

- **Instrumental orientations**: Outside the family we deal with people in an objective, unemotional way, based on what they can do for us and what we can do for them. An employee, for example, gives their time and labour to an employer and, in return, they receive money. For this arrangement to work the employee and employer do not have to like or love each other (their relationship is not based on affection); if the employer stops paying, the employee won't continue to work 'for love'. Similarly, a lazy, incompetent or thieving employee wouldn't be tolerated by an employer. For men to be successful in their provider role outside the family, they need instrumental orientations.
- **Expressive orientations**: Inside the family people deal with each other on the basis of love and affection (in expressive or affective relationships). They do things like childcare not because they expect to get something in return but because it expresses an emotional commitment. The fact women gave birth and nurtured children suggested they had expressive rather than instrumental orientations to both their children and their partner and this explained why they were 'better suited' to a domestic labour role within the family.

TOPFOTO

In the 1950s it was usual for mothers to stay at home to look after their children

Evaluation

Functionalist explanations of the domestic division of labour suffer from two main problems.

First, if the domestic division of labour changes (as it has over the past 30 years), how can this be explained away? The answer lies in two ideas:

- Instrumental and expressive orientations are based on a **biological essentialism**; that is, males and females have fundamentally different biologies that orientate them in different ways. The division between males as providers and females as carers is a natural expression of biological differences.
- This is connected to the idea of **dysfunction**; while people can 'go against their nature' (women can reject childcare, men can embrace ironing), this type of family arrangement is not functional for either the family or society.

The second problem is that the emphasis on consensus and harmony, apart from ignoring the 'dark side of family life' (from physical violence to child abuse), ignores power imbalances; traditional domestic divisions of labour suit men (they enjoy a wide range of free family services) and they have the power (physical or economic) to impose this kind of arrangement. Women, from this viewpoint, are domestic labourers not through choice but necessity — they fear male power.

? Suggest one feature of segregated conjugal roles.

These criticisms aside, Parsons and Bales (1956) suggested modern families had become increasingly **specialised**. Whereas in the past the family had been multi-functional (performing a wide range of functions), the development of social institutions such as education and medicine or the expansion of existing institutional roles (such as a welfare state) meant the family lost many of its former functions. These changes, for Parsons (1959), were consistent with family evolution because they meant family groups were free to concentrate on two essential functions:

- **Primary socialisation**: Families are socialisation 'factories whose product is the development of human personalities'. This function links to social order and system stability as the mechanism through which new family members came to understand and learn the values and norms they would need to play their adult role.
- **Stabilisation of adult personalities**: This involved adult family members providing physical and emotional support for each other. Family relationships provided both the motivation for paid work and also the various emotional and sexual comforts that came from the development of relationships based on love and affection.

Weiss (1988) notes how these two ideas can be broken down into a number of specific family functions:

- social control of members
- consumption and distribution of goods and services

- affective nurturance, whereby children (and adults) are nurtured by people who have bonds of love and affection with them
- maintenance (physical and psychological) and care of family members
- procreation or adoption to add new members

Fletcher (1973) drew these functional strands together by arguing modern families performed two types of function: core and peripheral functions.

Core functions are the things that cannot be performed by either individuals working alone or by any other institution in society:

- **Procreation and child-rearing**: Family groups provide a vital and necessary context for both childbearing (procreation) and child-rearing. Child-rearing involves ensuring the physical and psychological survival of the human infant and its development as a member of a wider society (**primary socialisation**); a child's natural parents are seen as best positioned to carry out this process because they have a 'personal investment' in their child's survival and development.
- **Provision of a home**: The family provides both a 'physical home' (nurture and shelter for the child) and an 'emotional home' in terms of the child's psychological well-being (children feel wanted and loved).
- **Regulation of sexual behaviour**: Norms relating to permissible sexual relationships contribute to social order and stability.

Peripheral functions are things that, while still performed by some families at some times, have largely been taken over by other institutions:

- **basic education** — teaching children skills like reading and writing
- **healthcare** (for minor sickness and ailments)
- **recreation** — a function which may still be performed by families in a residual way (through family outings and holidays: 'special events' that serve to bond family members as a group)

Neo-functionalism

As a structural approach functionalism looks at how **social structures** (such as families) influence **social actions** (the behavioural choices we make). This influence is important (and desirable) because we have to learn how to behave as part of a group; a society cannot function if its individual members are continually 'doing their own thing' without regard to others.

Neo-functionalist ('neo-' meaning 'new') approaches reflect more recent functionalist thinking about the various processes involved in **linking the individual to society** through family groups. Horwitz (2005), for example, argues we can understand family functions in the context of the following:

- **A micro-macro bridge**: The family connects the 'micro world' of the individual with the 'macro world' of wider society. The linkage between social structures (the macro world) and social actions (the micro world) explains the relationship between the individual and social structure in terms of, for example, the family's role in the primary socialisation process. As Horwitz argues, 'Families help us to learn the explicit and tacit social rules necessary for functioning in the wider world.'
- **Social relationships**: The family is 'a school for learning social norms'; by initially learning rules of social interaction with family members, children create a template 'for other intimate relationships and the more anonymous relationships' found in wider society.
- **Social order**: Social rules (such as 'instructing children in general concepts of right and wrong and explaining appropriate behaviour') are transmitted to each new generation. Horwitz suggests that 'The family is a superior site for learning these rules of behaviour' for three reasons:
  - **Intimacy**: Rules transmitted and enforced by people who share a deep emotional commitment are more likely to be effectively taught and learnt.
  - **Incentives**: The emotional closeness of families provides incentives to behave in ways that make interaction 'smoother' (cooperation is desirable if people are to avoid too much personal stress and strain). What others think about a child's behaviour (and the parents who raised them) is a further incentive for 'good behaviour'.
  - **Subconscious learning**: Within a family rules can be learned 'subconsciously' by children observing and imitating others' behaviour. A parent 'might be unable to explain the rules that guide her behaviour when interacting with a stranger, but the child can observe and later imitate the behaviour and in so doing, adopt the implicit rules that are at work'.

Evaluation

Dysfunction

It's difficult to see how the 'dark side' of family life (child abuse and neglect, violence, sexual assaults, family breakdown and divorce) fits into the harmonious and consensual picture painted by functionalists; it's also hard to see how these could be functional for either society or those involved (hence the idea of family *dysfunctions*). There is extensive evidence in our society for a range of **family dysfunctions**:

- **Violence**: Jansson (2007) notes domestic violence incidents peaked in 1994 at around 1.2 million cases and are currently running at around 275,000 cases a year. Dodd et al. (2004) report that 16% of all violent incidents involve domestic violence.
- **Assault and rape**: Women are most likely to be sexually assaulted by men they know, and 45% of reported rapes were carried out by a current partner.
- **Murder**: In 2000, just over 40% of female murder victims (92 women) were killed by present or former partners. The comparable figure for men was 6%. Rooney

and Devis (2009) report that 'The highest homicide rates are in infants' — the vast majority of which occur within the family.

Diversity

Family structures and relationships have changed considerably since the middle of the twentieth century. Their contemporary diversity makes it difficult to talk about 'the family' as opposed to a multitude of different types of family arrangements and relationships.

Conflict theories

Marxist and feminist conflict theories argue family relationships are based on oppression and exploitation rather than harmonious and functional cooperation.

Influence outside sociology

Kingsbury and Scanzoni (1993) argue that, while traditional functionalism represents 'a framework that has become virtually obsolete throughout general sociology', it has remained influential outside sociology; many politicians and political parties draw on functionalist ideas when talking about contemporary family life.

Prideaux (2006), for example, argues that 'New Labour, when dealing with welfare, utilise functionalist diagnoses and remedies for the perceived ills within British society.' David Cameron (2011) also echoes functionalist ideas when he argues:

> Strong families are where children learn to become responsible people...you learn how to behave, you learn about give and take. You learn about responsibility and how to live in harmony with others. Strong families are the foundation of a bigger, stronger society.

? Suggest two functions of the family that are now performed by other institutions.

Marxism

Marxism also adopts a **systems approach** but, unlike functionalism, it doesn't see society as functioning 'for the benefit of all'; rather, societies operate in the interests of the rich and powerful (the bourgeoisie or 'owners of the means of production'). Capitalism, as we've previously outlined, is a system based around social class, social inequality and social conflicts. The family's general role is, for Marxists, one of supporting the economic system in various ways — a role that has three dimensions: ideological, economic and political.

Ideological role

The family propagates ideas (an **ideology**) favourable to both capitalism and a ruling class. Althusser (1970), for example, argues the family is an **Ideological State Apparatus** (ISA): through primary socialisation the child comes to learn values (such

as the importance of competition and the work ethic) and norms (such as work itself, both paid and unpaid) that will eventually allow it to take its place in capitalist society.

Zaretsky (1976) argues socialisation involves the transmission of a ruling class ideology that encourages largely unquestioning acceptance of 'the capitalist system' and the rights of a ruling class; the family, in this respect, transmits both **ideas** (such as social inequality being necessary and inevitable) and **values** (such as the importance of obeying authority — initially that of the parent and later that of the employer).

Economic role

The economic role of the family has a number of dimensions.

In terms of **reproduction**, families produce the new members of society that capitalism needs in order to reproduce itself over time. These include those destined to be:

- wage workers (who can be exploited for profit)
- professionals (doctors etc.)
- captains of industry
- presidents of global corporations

The family also provides **free services**. The costs of replacing 'dead labour' (both those who literally die and those who become too old or sick to work) are taken on by the family group in terms of the following:

- **Production costs**: The major economic costs involved in raising children fall on the family (while employers eventually reap the most economic benefit).
- **Consumption costs**: Althusser (1970) argues the family has moved from being a **unit of production** (family members produced the things they needed to survive) to a unit of **consumption**; it buys most of what it needs. This means, Zaretsky (1976) argues, that families are important targets for advertisers; by encouraging consumption the family has progressively become a major source of **profit**.

The family's role in maintaining social inequality is, for Marxists, illustrated in the following ways:

- **Channelling exploitation**: Women — where they still do the bulk of domestic labour tasks (even when in paid employment) — provide 'free services' for men that keep them 'fit and healthy' for their exploitation in the workplace.
- **Legitimising exploitation**: If women see domestic labour as an integral part of 'being female' (just as paid labour is an integral part of 'being male'), 'exploitation' — in both the home and the workplace — comes to be seen as 'right, proper and natural'.
- **Inheritance**: Social inequality is perpetuated by the rich passing their wealth from parent to child. The family is the vehicle for legitimising this process. Wealthy families are also in a position to 'buy' a start in life for their offspring (private education, university funding, financial assistance with housing and so on). For Marxists, the

idea of marriage as a legal contract is also a means through which wealth can be legitimately passed down the family line.

Political role

Families are a **stabilising force** in capitalist society because the responsibilities people take on lock them into capitalist economic relationships. Family members have to work to provide both basic necessities — food, clothing and shelter — and the consumer goods that go with modern lifestyles (computers, the family car and so on). The need to take responsibility for family members (both adults and children) also acts as an emotional stabilising force.

Zaretsky (1976) argues for the growth of what Goldthorpe et al. (1968) call the **privatised family**, where family members are focused on the home, the production and care of children, their personal relationships and so forth. This encourages family members to focus on their own private concerns (such as how to pay the mortgage) rather than wider social concerns (such as why some people in our society earn millions of pounds a year while others sleep in shop doorways). By 'seeing the world through a private family lens', political engagement and action against 'the economic system' are discouraged.

In this respect the family becomes a **safety valve** for (male) frustrations. Most men are relatively powerless in the workplace, a condition disguised by allowing them to be powerful figures within their family. This is a safety value which directs frustration away from employers, workplace conditions and social inequality and on to family members.

It also reflects the **dark side of family life**. Marxists see violence and abuse within the family as the inevitable consequence of the power relationships encouraged by capitalism; while most men are exploited and lack power in the workplace, they can exercise power within the family — and when they meet resistance this can result in domestic violence. Home Office statistics for 2007 show that:

- Around 150 people each year are killed by a current or former partner.
- One incident of domestic violence is reported to the police every minute (and this is a massively under-reported crime).
- 25% of women (and 15% of men) suffer from domestic violence at some point.
- 90% of repeat victims are women.

? Suggest two ways the family group 'helps to support the capitalist economic system'.

Neo-Marxism

A further **cultural** dimension to our understanding of the role of the family in reproducing social inequality is highlighted by contemporary (neo-) Marxists when they suggest some of the specific advantages and disadvantages families give to their children.

Cultural capital refers to a variety of non-economic resources that can be 'spent' to give some families advantages over others. Parents, according to Bourdieu (1986), are differently positioned to 'invest' in their children. Middle- and upper-class parents, Silva

and Rosalind (2004) argue, are able to equip their children with the knowledge and skills that make their transition to the adult world of work easier. Bourdieu argues cultural capital operates through the family to give some children a 'head start' in education, in several ways:

FOTOLIA
Middle-class mothers often spend time helping children with homework

- One way concerns the ability of parents to motivate their children by transmitting the **attitudes and knowledge** needed to succeed educationally. Conversely, Willis's (1970) research suggests that a lack of cultural capital consigns working-class children to educational failure and explains 'why working-class kids get working-class jobs'.
- **Institutional investment** involves the time, money and effort parents put into their child's education; the greater the investment the more likely children are to achieve the qualifications they need for the highest-status universities (which, in turn, ease their route into highly paid employment). Reay et al. (2004) note that middle-class women perform high levels of **emotional labour** in constantly monitoring their child's performance and progress at school — questioning teachers, attending school open evenings and even campaigning to remove 'underperforming' teachers. Their cultural capital provides the resources needed to perform this role successfully.
- Parents invest in cultural **goods and services** — books, computers, extra tuition, getting their child into the 'right school' and the like — that give their children an educational advantage. Sullivan (2001) tested this effect on GCSE performance and concluded cultural capital was 'transmitted within the home and does have a significant effect on performance'.

? Identify and explain one way cultural capital is transmitted from parents to children.

Cultural capital is related to further forms of **family capital**: social and symbolic capital.

Social capital refers to people's connections to **social networks** ('who you know') and the value of these connections for what Putnam (2000) calls '**norms of reciprocity**' (what people are able to do for each other). Middle- and upper-class families have greater access to important social networks, in schools or the workplace, that give their children advantages. For example, the current (2011) deputy prime minister, Nick Clegg, gained work with the European Commission because his father 'had a conversation with his neighbour', who just happened to be a former foreign secretary. This social network is not available to very many people.

In this respect, Cohen and Prusak (2001) argue high levels of social capital involve 'the trust, mutual understanding, shared values and behaviours' that bind wealthy families into social networks that are reinforced by mutual self-interest and cooperation.

Symbolic capital relates to upper-class children in particular developing attributes like self-confidence and a strong sense of entitlement and self-worth. This manifests itself in **personal qualities** such as an authoritative manner (directing the efforts of others in the expectation of being obeyed) and personal charisma (used to manipulate others' behaviour).

Criticisms

- **Dark side**: Conflict is overstated and consensus underplayed. While the family clearly has a 'dark side', this involves a minority of men (and women). Most family relationships are neither violent nor abusive.
- **Over-determining**: Marxists over-determine the relationship between capitalism, social class and female oppression within the family. Some radical feminists (see below), for example, argue that patriarchy (male domination of women) predates capitalism, having been a feature of all human societies: the 'problem', therefore, is not so much capitalism as men.
- **Choice**: Marxism underplays the idea that many women choose to play family roles, such as provider of childcare, because they find them personally fulfilling.
- **Sexism**: The emphasis on class relationships ignores (or reduces the significance of) other forms of oppression, such as sexism and racism. For Marxists, capitalism is the root cause of oppression and exploitation within both society and the family — abolish capitalism and you end the exploitation of women. If, as radical feminists argue, men are the problem, then abolishing capitalism can't abolish sexism.

OCR examination-style questions

1 Outline and evaluate functionalist views of the role of the family in society. (33 marks)

2 Outline and evaluate Marxist views of the role of the family in society. (33 marks)

Family diversity

'The family', according to De Vault (1991), is a 'falsely monolithic' concept; rather than seeing it as a simple, homogeneous ('all the same') social group, we need to understand family diversity — from **organisational diversity**, based around family structures, to the concept of **life course**, focused around changing family roles and relationships.

Organisational diversity

Although we've previously outlined a range of well-established family structures, we can further illustrate organisational diversity by outlining three examples of family structures that have seen rapid development over the past 30 years: lone-parent, reconstituted and beanpole structures.