Parsonian Theory Of The Nuclea Essay, Research Paper

During this essay I will start by looking briefly at the background of Talcott Parsons. I will continue by outlining his theory of the role of the nuclear family in modern society beginning with a definition of the nuclear family, how it evolved and what purposes it serves, both for the individual family members and for society as a whole. I will then discuss challenges to Parsonian theory from feminism and from other sociological theorists. Finally I will consider what relevance Parsons theory has today.

Talcott Parsons was born in Colorado, USA in 1902. He graduated from Amherst College in 1924 and went on to spend a year at the LSE before gaining his PHD at Heidelberg University in 1927. In 1931 he began to teach sociology at Harvard University. He stayed there until his retirement in 1973 and died in 1979 in Munich. His work was very influential within the United States during the 1940s and 50s and is generally considered to constitute an entire school of social theory. It drew on elements from European theorists such as Durkheim, Weber, Marshall and Pareto and was concerned not with the internal field of the personality like Weber but with the external institutions that are developed by society. He is still considered a leading exponent within the functionalist paradigm. (Electric Library, 2000)

It is important to define the concept of the nuclear family, both as Parsons intended it to mean and, contemporarily as society sees it today. For Parsons nuclear family meant parents who lived with their dependent children. His model was basically the white middle-class suburban family (Jackson 1999 p.161), and was opposed to extended family where more than two generations live together or in close proximity usually forming a single household. Parsons also saw the nuclear family as relatively isolated , that is to say when a couple marries there is never, nor can there be it would seem, a complete break with the family of origin (Morgan 1975 p.27). So although the nuclear family was privatised (socially and geographically isolated from kin) it was not standing completely alone. Contemporarily, there is much debate about whether the nuclear family still exists and if so in what form. If we use Parsons definition only a quarter of UK families fit the traditional pattern.

In order to examine Parsons theory of the role of the nuclear family in modern society it is helpful to look at his theory of how the nuclear family evolved. According to Parsons, prior to the industrial revolution the family was not only a place of residence but also a unit of production and consumption (Morgan, 1975, p.26), where extended family lived together. That means that the family as a unit produced the food they ate, the clothes they wore and the conditions they lived in usually through farming or craft production, although there has been doubts cast on these assumptions through new historical research during the 1970s and 80s revealing that households based on extended families had not been common in pre-industrial western Europe (Jackson 2000 p.162). There is no doubt however that the industrial revolution brought changes to the pattern of work for much of society. Industrialisation brought with it a process of differentiation whereby institutions that had previously performed many different functions now specialised in only one or two. For example whereas a family may at one time have been cart-makers and made the entire cart from start to finish, with industrialisation factories sprung up which specialised in one or two specific items (such as wheels for the cart). This took the production function out of the home into a place of specialisation. It also meant that men (and women) moved away from their extended families into the areas where the factories and therefore, work was. For Parsons this meant that the functions the family now performs on behalf of society are more indirect (Morgan 1975 p.27). But the family still performs two important functions on behalf of the individual as a member of society. These are firstly the socialisation of children and secondly the stabilisation of adult personalities.

Before looking at these functions in detail I shall outline briefly how for Parsons the family is an essential institution within society. In The Social System published in 1951 Parsons claimed that society (a whole society such as the United States) was a complete social system and identified four functional requirements that must be met if society is to exist harmoniously and progress. These requirements are adaptation, goal attainment, integration and pattern maintenance (Seidman 1994 pp 108-109). So the institutions within society have emerged to meet these requirements. Adaptation requires the material conditions of society to be met and the institution of the economy supports that. Goal attainment is where the political institutions decide how society is to be organised and the direction it should take and the way resources are to be used to achieve this. The legal system ensures we meet the aim of integration by maintaining regulation and therefore increasing social solidarity. This one of course, pre-supposes that there is a value consensus within society about what should be considered illegal or immoral. Pattern maintenance is about reproducing the appropriate skills, values, motives and needs within the individuals of society. The family, along with the education system and the church are the institutions responsible for ensuring this occurs. This systems theory continues where Parsons claims all sub-systems within society such as the family or the church must also meet the four functional requirements. In his book Contested Knowledge Seidman illustrates this by giving us the example of the family where they must manage economically (adaptation), make major decisions (goal attainment), being responsible for family relationships (integration) and obviously transmit cultural values (pattern maintenance), (Seidman, 1994 p.109).

Parsons also defines separate roles within the family that are needed to address these functional requirements. When looking at the family he noted that in all small groups there is a tendency for some person or persons to take on leadership roles and for others to take on more subordinate roles (Morgan, 1975 p.28). So within the family there are leaders and followers and there is also a division between those that fulfil the instrumental and expressive roles. The instrumental role (almost always taken by the father) deals with the goal attainment and adaptation requirements and the expressive role, taken by the mother takes care of integration and pattern maintenance. Put in crude terms this corresponds with the idea that dad provides materially and makes the important decisions and mum looks after the children and provides the emotional support within the family.

I will now look at the socialisation of children and the role the family plays in this. In simple terms if harmony is to be maintained within society, Parsons saw it as essential for all members of that society to share the same norms and values. In the case of the United States, for example, the values of motivation and achievement are prized and the child s personality is moulded in terms of the central values of the culture to the point where they become part of him and her (Haralambos, 1995 p.322). The family through the process of primary socialisation, which occurs from birth up until the child goes to school, teaches these norms and values initially and ensures they are internalised. Eventually the child will go into the education system and ultimately to work. Along with the peer group these institutions also play a part in socialisation. This is known as secondary socialisation, although most of Parsons work concentrated on the primary aspect and he could conceive of no unit other than the family that can provide this.

But Parsons also looked at socialisation from the point of the individual being socialised (Morgan, 1975 p.30). This fits in with his functionalist framework overall, the family socialises the child for the benefit of society i.e. to eventually produce an adult to fit those adult social roles required of it and the family also works for the benefit of the child by providing a safe, secure environment for the child to mature within and ultimately become autonomous. All of Parsons work on the family follows this theme, the dual benefits to both individuals and the society as a whole. So Parsons claims that the child, by learning to identify his/her parents through the instrumental and expressive roles that their gender dictates is not only socialised into the family but also into the wider society where these gender roles are perpetuated and enforced.

The next essential function of the family for Parsons follows on from this, the stabilisation of adult personalities. Parsons allows that the different roles men and women assume can lead to stresses and strains. Incidentally Parsons did answer the obvious question of why each gender should automatically take on the specific duties expected of it, he saw it in terms of biology in that the bearing and rearing of children establishes a prior close relationship between the mother and the child (Morgan, 1975 p.36). Once this has happened it seems natural that the woman should continue this role. But for the male Parsons sees two main causes of stress within society, lack of job satisfaction and relative isolation from the rest of the society leading to little opportunity for interaction with other adults (especially in mixed company) outside of the family. This applies to the woman too and she also has the additional stress of conflict between her role as a wife and mother and her need to be an individual person in her own right. Parsons solution to this was that the woman could take up cultural or other serious interests (Morgan, 1975 p.37) and perhaps take on a glamour role by way of dress, make-up etcetera, which would make her feel apart from her domestic self. The family therefore, provides the ideal safety net for these stresses, perhaps more for the man, but it allows adults security, warmth and safety. It can also act as a release valve. Through being parents adults can act out childish elements of their own personalities which they have retained from childhood but which cannot be indulged in adult society (Haralambos, 1995, p.323). An example of this aspect would be playing games with the children and their toys. So personalities are kept stable because of the family.

Briefly, Parsons sees the family as having another function, that of maintaining sexual taboos, specifically incest, which works for society as well. Since a child, or more likely an adolescent cannot direct his or her erotic interests toward the family they are compelled to look outside the family for any kind of sexual relationship and, ultimately begin their own family.

Before criticising Parsons theories, it is essential to note where they are located historically. Parsons major work on the family was first published in 1956. He was writing at a time when middle-class families in America did have the mother staying at home, caring for the children. He was also writing at a time before any of the great liberation movements of the twentieth century such as the women s movement or gay or civil rights had really taken hold. His theories were also written against the backdrop of social events that threatened Western liberalism (Seidman, 1998 p.109). American parents of the 1950 s had lived through the depression of the 1930 s, the Second World War and were ensconced in the Cold War and the perceived threat and very real fear of communism. The ideas about the family expressed by Parsons fit in very well at a time when economic prosperity and the emergence of state welfare systems were what Americans were focussing on. Radical ideologies were viewed with suspicion and cynicism.

Nonetheless there were, and continue to be, challenges to Parsonian theory of the family. Eli Zaretsky, working from a Marxist viewpoint refutes the idea that a family can provide the psychological and emotional needs of an individual. He claimed that capitalism causes individuals to become alienated so they have no choice but to retreat to the family; despite the fact it may not provide what an individual needs. He also sees the family as a major prop to the capitalist economy (Haralambos 1985 p.328) since the family consumes the products of capitalism and allows the bourgeoisie to continue producing surplus value. He claims that the capitalist system only forces families to reproduce the next generation of workers and does not allow for a genuine separation of private family life and public life.

Even within the functionalist school Parsons has been criticised, specifically for the scope of his analysis. H.Rodman, a Parsons sympathist acknowledges that his work includes the possible exceptions of the rural family system, the upper-class family system, and the lower-class, particularly but not exclusively black, family systems. Together, one might assume, these add up to a large body of exceptions (Morgan, 1975 p.39). This is a criticism shared by many others that Parsons fails to explore possible differences between these groups and his white middle-class model. There have also been questions raised about Parsons assuming all women stayed at home. In fact working class women have always had to work.

Parsons theories on the socialisation of children were also criticised. He sees this process as being a one-way interaction from parent to child, with the child s personality being moulded by powerful parents (Haralambos, 1995 p.323). He ignores the fact that strong-willed or questioning children exist who may not be so easily persuaded or that indulgent parents exist who may not force their children to internalise their culture. By not considering the diversity of families Parsons also ignores the fact that different values and cultural norms may be transmitted from parent to child. The values prized in mainstream US culture may not be shared by all of its citizens. Criticisms also arose about whether the family was the only institution capable of socialising a child.

From a phenomenological perspective Berger and Kellner argued in 1964, in one of the major challenges to functionalism that rather than marital roles being pre-defined, marriage was an arena in which individuals could construct their own social reality (Jackson, 2000 p.161). That is to say that each individual couple decide which tasks and roles they would adopt and undertake. This would seem quite idealistic and along with Parsons assumes that marriage and the nuclear family is normal and works, (however couples decide to manage it).

Which brings us on to perhaps the most vociferous critics of Parsons work, the feminists. Many of the newly emergent feminist writers of the 1960s, while perhaps not directly criticising Parsons theory did question the widely held assumption that families and marriage were beneficial to society and women in particular, and that women were best suited to Parsons expressive role . Issues such as domestic violence and financial dependence on men were brought to the public s attention. Writers such as Betty Friedan exposed the myth that women were content to stay at home, raising the family, she wrote about the boredom and emptiness of their lives (Jackson 2000 p.162). This led up to the more intense feminist critique of the 1970s. By then sociologists such as J.Bernard published The Future of Marriage, which argued that within any marriage there were two differing experiences, the husbands being considerably better than the wife s. Radical feminists such as Delphy and Leonard looked at the experience of women from a Marxist perspective, emphasising the fact that men benefit from exploiting women s labour. They saw the family as a major player in maintaining the patriarchal system, since within the family women work for men. The domestic labour they perform, the raising of the children is all done without any formal payment or contract and yet it is the male who remains head of the household and makes the decisions affecting the family. Delphy and Leonard believe then, that wives contribute much more work to family life than their husbands. Despite this, they get fewer of the material benefits of family life than men (Haralambos, 1985 p.333).

I will conclude by looking at whether Parsons theory has any relevance today. Parsons conclusions were reached through looking at a certain type of family. That white middle class family rarely exists today. The changes in society since his time of writing have led to a whole range of different types of family becoming normal . These changes have eroded the norm of families dependent on a sole, male breadwinner (Jackson, 2000 p.163). It could be argued therefore that Parsons theory of one of the functions of the family being the stabilisation of adult personalities is no longer relevant since the high divorce/re-marriage rate suggests that families are no longer the haven of psychological calm or well-being Parsons theorised they were, although the evidence produced by the feminist writers of the 1960s showed that for women at least, they never were. As for the socialisation of children, well that remains an important function of any parent or primary carer of children, although not necessarily within a traditional family environment. Although children from non-traditional families are often demonised by the media and blamed for being anti-social, the Marxist explanation of alienation and the fact that many of these children come from under-privileged backgrounds, offer, for me at least, a clearer explanation of any deviant behaviour, rather than the lack of a stay at home mother or working father.

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It is important to define the concept of the nuclear family, both as Parsons intended it to mean and, contemporarily as society sees it today. For Parsons nuclear family meant parents who lived with their dependent children. His model was basically the white middle-class suburban family (Jackson 1999 p.161), and was opposed to extended family where more than two generations live together or in close proximity usually forming a single household. Parsons also saw the nuclear family as relatively isolated , that is to say when a couple marries there is never, nor can there be it would seem, a complete break with the family of origin (Morgan 1975 p.27). So although the nuclear family was privatised (socially and geographically isolated from kin) it was not standing completely alone. Contemporarily, there is much debate about whether the nuclear family still exists and if so in what form. If we use Parsons definition only a quarter of UK families fit the traditional pattern.

In order to examine Parsons theory of the role of the nuclear family in modern society it is helpful to look at his theory of how the nuclear family evolved. According to Parsons, prior to the industrial revolution the family was not only a place of residence but also a unit of production and consumption (Morgan, 1975, p.26), where extended family lived together. That means that the family as a unit produced the food they ate, the clothes they wore and the conditions they lived in usually through farming or craft production, although there has been doubts cast on these assumptions through new historical research during the 1970s and 80s revealing that households based on extended families had not been common in pre-industrial western Europe (Jackson 2000 p.162). There is no doubt however that the industrial revolution brought changes to the pattern of work for much of society. Industrialisation brought with it a process of differentiation whereby institutions that had previously performed many different functions now specialised in only one or two. For example whereas a family may at one time have been cart-makers and made the entire cart from start to finish, with industrialisation factories sprung up which specialised in one or two specific items (such as wheels for the cart). This took the production function out of the home into a place of specialisation. It also meant that men (and women) moved away from their extended families into the areas where the factories and therefore, work was. For Parsons this meant that the functions the family now performs on behalf of society are more indirect (Morgan 1975 p.27). But the family still performs two important functions on behalf of the individual as a member of society. These are firstly the socialisation of children and secondly the stabilisation of adult personalities.

Before looking at these functions in detail I shall outline briefly how for Parsons the family is an essential institution within society. In The Social System published in 1951 Parsons claimed that society (a whole society such as the United States) was a complete social system and identified four functional requirements that must be met if society is to exist harmoniously and progress. These requirements are adaptation, goal attainment, integration and pattern maintenance (Seidman 1994 pp 108-109). So the institutions within society have emerged to meet these requirements. Adaptation requires the material conditions of society to be met and the institution of the economy supports that. Goal attainment is where the political institutions decide how society is to be organised and the direction it should take and the way resources are to be used to achieve this. The legal system ensures we meet the aim of integration by maintaining regulation and therefore increasing social solidarity. This one of course, pre-supposes that there is a value consensus within society about what should be considered illegal or immoral. Pattern maintenance is about reproducing the appropriate skills, values, motives and needs within the individuals of society. The family, along with the education system and the church are the institutions responsible for ensuring this occurs. This systems theory continues where Parsons claims all sub-systems within society such as the family or the church must also meet the four functional requirements. In his book Contested Knowledge Seidman illustrates this by giving us the example of the family where they must manage economically (adaptation), make major decisions (goal attainment), being responsible for family relationships (integration) and obviously transmit cultural values (pattern maintenance), (Seidman, 1994 p.109).

Parsons also defines separate roles within the family that are needed to address these functional requirements. When looking at the family he noted that in all small groups there is a tendency for some person or persons to take on leadership roles and for others to take on more subordinate roles (Morgan, 1975 p.28). So within the family there are leaders and followers and there is also a division between those that fulfil the instrumental and expressive roles. The instrumental role (almost always taken by the father) deals with the goal attainment and adaptation requirements and the expressive role, taken by the mother takes care of integration and pattern maintenance. Put in crude terms this corresponds with the idea that dad provides materially and makes the important decisions and mum looks after the children and provides the emotional support within the family.

I will now look at the socialisation of children and the role the family plays in this. In simple terms if harmony is to be maintained within society, Parsons saw it as essential for all members of that society to share the same norms and values. In the case of the United States, for example, the values of motivation and achievement are prized and the child s personality is moulded in terms of the central values of the culture to the point where they become part of him and her (Haralambos, 1995 p.322). The family through the process of primary socialisation, which occurs from birth up until the child goes to school, teaches these norms and values initially and ensures they are internalised. Eventually the child will go into the education system and ultimately to work. Along with the peer group these institutions also play a part in socialisation. This is known as secondary socialisation, although most of Parsons work concentrated on the primary aspect and he could conceive of no unit other than the family that can provide this.

But Parsons also looked at socialisation from the point of the individual being socialised (Morgan, 1975 p.30). This fits in with his functionalist framework overall, the family socialises the child for the benefit of society i.e. to eventually produce an adult to fit those adult social roles required of it and the family also works for the benefit of the child by providing a safe, secure environment for the child to mature within and ultimately become autonomous. All of Parsons work on the family follows this theme, the dual benefits to both individuals and the society as a whole. So Parsons claims that the child, by learning to identify his/her parents through the instrumental and expressive roles that their gender dictates is not only socialised into the family but also into the wider society where these gender roles are perpetuated and enforced.

The next essential function of the family for Parsons follows on from this, the stabilisation of adult personalities. Parsons allows that the different roles men and women assume can lead to stresses and strains. Incidentally Parsons did answer the obvious question of why each gender should automatically take on the specific duties expected of it, he saw it in terms of biology in that the bearing and rearing of children establishes a prior close relationship between the mother and the child (Morgan, 1975 p.36). Once this has happened it seems natural that the woman should continue this role. But for the male Parsons sees two main causes of stress within society, lack of job satisfaction and relative isolation from the rest of the society leading to little opportunity for interaction with other adults (especially in mixed company) outside of the family. This applies to the woman too and she also has the additional stress of conflict between her role as a wife and mother and her need to be an individual person in her own right. Parsons solution to this was that the woman could take up cultural or other serious interests (Morgan, 1975 p.37) and perhaps take on a glamour role by way of dress, make-up etcetera, which would make her feel apart from her domestic self. The family therefore, provides the ideal safety net for these stresses, perhaps more for the man, but it allows adults security, warmth and safety. It can also act as a release valve. Through being parents adults can act out childish elements of their own personalities which they have retained from childhood but which cannot be indulged in adult society (Haralambos, 1995, p.323). An example of this aspect would be playing games with the children and their toys. So personalities are kept stable because of the family.

Briefly, Parsons sees the family as having another function, that of maintaining sexual taboos, specifically incest, which works for society as well. Since a child, or more likely an adolescent cannot direct his or her erotic interests toward the family they are compelled to look outside the family for any kind of sexual relationship and, ultimately begin their own family.

Before criticising Parsons theories, it is essential to note where they are located historically. Parsons major work on the family was first published in 1956. He was writing at a time when middle-class families in America did have the mother staying at home, caring for the children. He was also writing at a time before any of the great liberation movements of the twentieth century such as the women s movement or gay or civil rights had really taken hold. His theories were also written against the backdrop of social events that threatened Western liberalism (Seidman, 1998 p.109). American parents of the 1950 s had lived through the depression of the 1930 s, the Second World War and were ensconced in the Cold War and the perceived threat and very real fear of communism. The ideas about the family expressed by Parsons fit in very well at a time when economic prosperity and the emergence of state welfare systems were what Americans were focussing on. Radical ideologies were viewed with suspicion and cynicism.

Nonetheless there were, and continue to be, challenges to Parsonian theory of the family. Eli Zaretsky, working from a Marxist viewpoint refutes the idea that a family can provide the psychological and emotional needs of an individual. He claimed that capitalism causes individuals to become alienated so they have no choice but to retreat to the family; despite the fact it may not provide what an individual needs. He also sees the family as a major prop to the capitalist economy (Haralambos 1985 p.328) since the family consumes the products of capitalism and allows the bourgeoisie to continue producing surplus value. He claims that the capitalist system only forces families to reproduce the next generation of workers and does not allow for a genuine separation of private family life and public life.

Even within the functionalist school Parsons has been criticised, specifically for the scope of his analysis. H.Rodman, a Parsons sympathist acknowledges that his work includes the possible exceptions of the rural family system, the upper-class family system, and the lower-class, particularly but not exclusively black, family systems. Together, one might assume, these add up to a large body of exceptions (Morgan, 1975 p.39). This is a criticism shared by many others that Parsons fails to explore possible differences between these groups and his white middle-class model. There have also been questions raised about Parsons assuming all women stayed at home. In fact working class women have always had to work.

Parsons theories on the socialisation of children were also criticised. He sees this process as being a one-way interaction from parent to child, with the child s personality being moulded by powerful parents (Haralambos, 1995 p.323). He ignores the fact that strong-willed or questioning children exist who may not be so easily persuaded or that indulgent parents exist who may not force their children to internalise their culture. By not considering the diversity of families Parsons also ignores the fact that different values and cultural norms may be transmitted from parent to child. The values prized in mainstream US culture may not be shared by all of its citizens. Criticisms also arose about whether the family was the only institution capable of socialising a child.

From a phenomenological perspective Berger and Kellner argued in 1964, in one of the major challenges to functionalism that rather than marital roles being pre-defined, marriage was an arena in which individuals could construct their own social reality (Jackson, 2000 p.161). That is to say that each individual couple decide which tasks and roles they would adopt and undertake. This would seem quite idealistic and along with Parsons assumes that marriage and the nuclear family is normal and works, (however couples decide to manage it).

Which brings us on to perhaps the most vociferous critics of Parsons work, the feminists. Many of the newly emergent feminist writers of the 1960s, while perhaps not directly criticising Parsons theory did question the widely held assumption that families and marriage were beneficial to society and women in particular, and that women were best suited to Parsons expressive role . Issues such as domestic violence and financial dependence on men were brought to the public s attention. Writers such as Betty Friedan exposed the myth that women were content to stay at home, raising the family, she wrote about the boredom and emptiness of their lives (Jackson 2000 p.162). This led up to the more intense feminist critique of the 1970s. By then sociologists such as J.Bernard published The Future of Marriage, which argued that within any marriage there were two differing experiences, the husbands being considerably better than the wife s. Radical feminists such as Delphy and Leonard looked at the experience of women from a Marxist perspective, emphasising the fact that men benefit from exploiting women s labour. They saw the family as a major player in maintaining the patriarchal system, since within the family women work for men. The domestic labour they perform, the raising of the children is all done without any formal payment or contract and yet it is the male who remains head of the household and makes the decisions affecting the family. Delphy and Leonard believe then, that wives contribute much more work to family life than their husbands. Despite this, they get fewer of the material benefits of family life than men (Haralambos, 1985 p.333).

I will conclude by looking at whether Parsons theory has any relevance today. Parsons conclusions were reached through looking at a certain type of family. That white middle class family rarely exists today. The changes in society since his time of writing have led to a whole range of different types of family becoming normal . These changes have eroded the norm of families dependent on a sole, male breadwinner (Jackson, 2000 p.163). It could be argued therefore that Parsons theory of one of the functions of the family being the stabilisation of adult personalities is no longer relevant since the high divorce/re-marriage rate suggests that families are no longer the haven of psychological calm or well-being Parsons theorised they were, although the evidence produced by the feminist writers of the 1960s showed that for women at least, they never were. As for the socialisation of children, well that remains an important function of any parent or primary carer of children, although not necessarily within a traditional family environment. Although children from non-traditional families are often demonised by the media and blamed for being anti-social, the Marxist explanation of alienation and the fact that many of these children come from under-privileged backgrounds, offer, for me at least, a clearer explanation of any deviant behaviour, rather than the lack of a stay at home mother or working father.