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Q1(e)

What are the 'basic and irreducible' functions of the family as proposed by Talcott Parsons? Explain.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx

Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx - Historical materialism, mode of production, alienation, class struggle; Emile Durkheim - Division of labour, social fact, suicide, religion and society; Max Weber - Social action, ideal types, authority, bureaucracy, protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism; Talcott Parsons - Social system, pattern variables; Robert K. Merton - Latent and manifest functions, conformity and deviance, reference groups; Mead - Self and identity.

Core demand of the question

- **State Parsons's two basic and irreducible functions of the family:** **primary socialisation** and **stabilization of adult personalities**
- Explain each with the conjugal family and sex-role argument
- Add a short critical note so that explanation is not a hymn to the 1950s household

Revision summary

Parsons said the modern family had two basic and irreducible functions.

Primary socialisation trains the child in society's values and roles.

Stabilization of adult personalities gives emotional support in an industrial economy.

He tied these functions to instrumental and expressive sex roles.

Feminist and Indian family studies criticise the male-breadwinner assumption.

The two functions remain the syllabus core of the question.

Introduction

Talcott Parsons, writing with Robert Bales on the American family, argued that the modern nuclear family had lost many older economic and political tasks. Two functions, he said, remained basic and irreducible. The first is the **primary socialisation** of children. The second is the **stabilization of adult personalities**. The claim belongs to structural functionalism. It must be explained in his terms before it is criticised.

Body

Primary socialisation

Primary socialisation is the child's first training in the values, roles and motives of the wider society. Parsons held that the isolated conjugal family, with a small number of children, could give intense emotional training that a large kin group scattered across work and farm could not. The child internalises a superego and learns to take roles. George Herbert Mead's play and game stages sit nearby, but Parsons stressed the family's fit with industrial society. The family, in this view, is a factory of personalities that the occupational system needs.

Stabilization of adult personalities

Adults, especially in a competitive industrial economy, face strain. The family is a place where the adult can receive emotional support and restore balance. Parsons linked this to a gendered division: the husband as instrumental leader toward the occupational world, the wife as expressive leader inside the home. The marriage is a personality system that manages tension. Without this function, he feared, adults would carry unresolved strain into work and politics.

A necessary critical note

Feminist sociologists such as Ann Oakley and later Sylvia Walby argued that the expressive role was unpaid labour and a structure of patriarchy, not a natural function. Cross-cultural families, joint households in India, and dual-earner couples show that socialisation and emotional support can be shared more widely. I. P. Desai and A. M. Shah studied Indian household forms that do not match the isolated American nuclear type. Parsons named two functions that families often do perform. He over-stated their uniqueness and tied them too tightly to a male-breadwinner model.

Flow diagram

Parsons nuclear family -> Primary socialisation
Parsons nuclear family -> Stabilization of adult personalities
Primary socialisation -> Child roles and values
Stabilization of adult personalities -> Adult tension management

Conclusion

Parsons's basic and irreducible functions are the child's first socialisation and the emotional stabilisation of adults. They explain his picture of the modern conjugal family. A full answer states those two functions clearly and then notes that later work has questioned their gender and their claim to be the only forms that can do this work.

Facts & figures

Primary socialisation

The family's task of giving the child a first internalisation of social values and role skills.

Stabilization of adult personalities

The family's task of managing adult emotional strain, especially for workers in industrial society.

Instrumental and expressive roles

Parsons's gendered split: husband toward occupation, wife toward emotional care inside the home.