12.1B: The Functions of a Family

The primary function of the family is to perpetuate society, both biologically through procreation, and socially through socialization.

Learning Objectives

- Describe the different functions of family in society

Key Points

- From the perspective of children, the family is a family of orientation: the family functions to locate children socially.
- From the point of view of the parents, the family is a family of procreation: the family functions to produce and socialize children.
- Marriage fulfills many other functions: It can establish the legal father of a woman’s child; establish joint property for the benefit of children; or establish a relationship between the families of the husband and wife. These are only some examples; the family’s function varies by society.

Key Terms

- **family**: A group of people related by blood, marriage, law or custom.
- **Sexual division of labor**: The delegation of different tasks between males and females.

The primary function of the family is to ensure the continuation of society, both biologically through procreation, and socially through socialization. Given these functions, the nature of one’s role in the family changes over time. From the
perspective of children, the family instills a sense of orientation: The family functions to locate children socially, and plays a major role in their socialization. From the point of view of the parents, the family’s primary purpose is procreation: The family functions to produce and socialize children. In some cultures marriage imposes upon women the obligation to bear children. In northern Ghana, for example, payment of bride wealth signifies a woman’s requirement to bear children, and women using birth control face substantial threats of physical abuse and reprisals.

Family Background Matters: From the perspective of children, the family is a family of orientation: The family functions to locate children socially, and plays a major role in their socialization. From the point of view of the parents, the family is a family of procreation: The family functions to produce and socialize children.

Other Functions of the Family

Producing offspring is not the only function of the family. Marriage sometimes establishes the legal father of a woman’s child or the legal mother of a man’s child; it oftentimes gives the husband or his family control over the wife’s sexual services, labor, and property. Marriage, likewise, often gives the wife or her family control over the husband’s sexual services, labor, and property. Marriage also establishes a joint fund of property for the benefit of children and can establish a relationship between the families of the husband and wife. None of these functions are universal, but depend on the society in which the marriage takes place and endures. In societies with a sexual division of labor, marriage, and the resulting relationship between a husband and wife, is necessary for the formation of an economically productive household. In modern societies marriage entails particular rights and privilege that encourage the formation of new families even when there is no intention of having children.
Chilean Family: In societies with a sexual division of labor, marriage, and the resulting relationship between a husband and wife, is necessary for the formation of an economically productive household.