

Consider the example of high finance. McDowell (2011) draws attention to how this institutional culture disadvantages women. Explicit forms of exclusion include overt sexism (e.g. overlooking women for promotion) and the prevalence of a masculine culture wherein demeaning or inappropriate actions are excused as supposedly harmless jokes. Covertly, the organization of work tasks, such as timing work hours and events that make balancing caring responsibilities and paid work challenging, has a greater impact on women because more women are in caring positions than men.

These covert and explicit issues do not only impact on those women who already work in the sector. They can also discourage women from wanting to work in high finance because of this institutional culture. Thus, the highly masculine culture is self-perpetuating, and will continue to dominate these workplaces, meaning that women will continue to be effectively excluded from participating in this highly paid and high-status profession.

## TYPES OF SOCIAL INSTITUTION

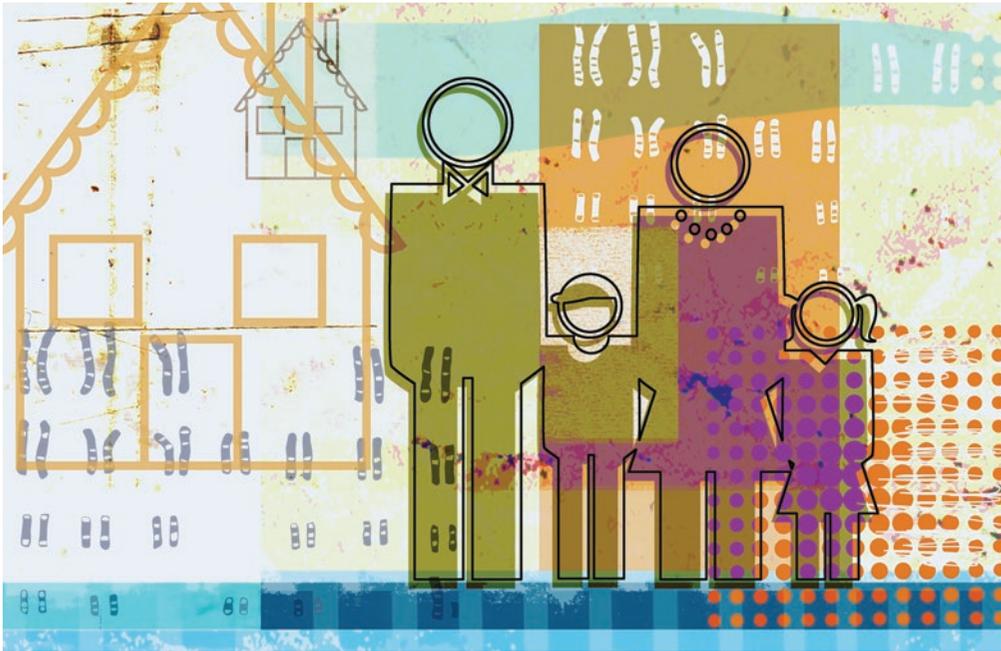
We now turn to look at four key social institutions that shape our behaviour and our interactions with other people – family, education, media and work. These institutions are a vital part of social life in the modern era, but they are still culturally and historically located. That is to say, although the four institutions we examine in this chapter are universal to almost all societies now and throughout history, the way they look and work is dependent on time and place. The Western concept of family, for example, is notably different now from 200 years ago because we live in a different economic, social and technological time. Similarly, the family in nomadic tribal communities today are quite unlike those in the Western world. The nature of the institutions we describe below have all only very recently emerged in their current forms in Western societies following the industrial revolutions there during the 18th and 19th centuries.

## FAMILY

The word ‘family’ can evoke many images: one’s own parents or guardians; a friend’s parents; imagined future children; or maybe a fictional family from TV or a novel. The dominant Western cultural image of family is what has been called the ‘**nuclear family**’ – a married heterosexual couple and their two biological children who live together in one house. Despite the many different forms that families take in the Western world, this is still the most common representation.

The small nuclear family unit has traditionally been assumed to be the most emotionally and economically stable model, and to provide children with a balanced upbringing by having two parents of different sexes. Non-nuclear family types have always existed, and these include same-sex parents, families headed by a single parent, reconstituted families with step-parents and stepchildren, families in which children have been adopted, among many others. We are much more accepting of these diverse family forms today than in the past. Historically, people whose family

**Nuclear family:**  
a heterosexual  
couple  
and their  
genetically  
related  
offspring



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In what ways might the idea of a so-called 'nuclear family' be unhelpful and even unhealthy?

circumstances did not conform to the nuclear family model were highly stigmatized and some, particularly single mothers, experienced a great deal of ill-treatment (see Keating 2009).

Sociologists have extensively researched the family, its role in society and the ways that families are changing. The family is understood as a key informal social institution supporting the broader social structures of society. It is understood as an informal institution because it is not an officially sanctioned or organized body, though, as we will see later, it occupies an ambiguous position, being simultaneously public and private. The primary role of the family is the socialization of children (see p. 8), which teaches children the appropriate ways to behave, ensures social order and, thus, maintains the broad social structure.

### Types of socialization

Socialization is an important concept in sociology of the family. As we saw in [Chapter 1](#), socialization is a learning process where people learn the norms and expectations of a particular society. It is often split into *primary* and *secondary* socialization. Primary socialization occurs early on in life and is usually led by a child's family. During primary socialization, children learn from their parents or carers the attitudes, values and actions that are appropriate in a particular society. Secondary socialization occurs after the initial learning through the family unit and involves children learning to behave appropriately around people with whom they do not have an emotional connection – for example, at school. As such, secondary socialization entails a degree of negotiation and decision-making by children as they learn to participate successfully in society. Socialization is not just limited to childhood, it is a lifelong process in which we are constantly learning the most appropriate ways to successfully be part of a society.

## Functionalism and the family

Talcott Parsons (1902–1979) is perhaps the best-known sociologist of the family. As a structural functionalist (see [Chapter 3](#)), he was interested in describing the ways in which institutions work to maintain the structure and function of society. For Parsons, the nuclear family unit evolved to fit the economic and social needs of industrial capitalist societies (Parsons & Bales 1955). Within this ideal nuclear family, men took on the ‘instrumental’ role of breadwinner and family leadership, while women became responsible for the emotional wellbeing and domestic work in the family through their ‘expressive role’. Though many women also worked outside the home, men tended to have the higher-paid jobs while women still bore the responsibility for all the domestic work. According to Parsons, these gendered roles were complementary and enabled the nuclear family to fulfil its two main functions – primary socialization (see [textbox](#)) and the stabilization of adult personalities.

The gendered division of labour meant that the family had become a sanctuary for men from the stresses of work, one in which they were looked after by their wives. Through this care, men’s emotions and personalities stabilized, supposedly making them better workers and reducing the amount of conflict in society in general. This understanding is referred to as the **warm bath theory** because the family unit is thus like a soothing warm bath that men can relax into after a day at work.

Notably, the family is not seen as a sanctuary for women. Instead, women are expected to create and maintain a supportive physical and emotional environment within the family, not to benefit from it. Here, the family is a site of gender inequality (see [Chapter 7](#)).

For many years, the nuclear family was regarded as the ‘ideal’ family form. Other types of family were stigmatized and discredited, and this oppression was often hidden within moral ideals. Homophobia, for example, was frequently phrased in terms of the immorality of homosexuality, with much of this framed as concern that gay relationships would undermine the nuclear family. Indeed, the political aims of these claims are apparent when one considers other similar prejudices: such as, for example, that having children with someone from a different racial group (known as **miscegenation**) was illegal in the US until 1967.

Functionalist perspectives on family endorsed the nuclear family model, but they have been widely critiqued. David Cooper (1971), a Marxist scholar, argued that the idealized functionalist image of the nuclear family ignores the true purpose of the socialization of children, which he contends is to indoctrinate them into their role within the exploitative capitalist system. Furthermore, Parsons’ understanding of the family is outdated, failing to account for the diversity of family forms that exist today (Scott & Schwartz 2008), particularly mixed-race couples, same-sex couples, single parents and adoptive parents. It also ignored the harm caused to these groups of people, when such families were heavily stigmatized and censured.

Perhaps the most pervasive critiques of the functionalist perspective have come from feminist scholars, who argued that the traditional nuclear family reproduced patriarchal norms. Part of this was because of a different focus on the family (Delamont 2003): while functionalist approaches examined the structure and role of families within society, feminists investigated the relationships and interactions *within families*. As we discuss in [Chapter 7](#), second-wave feminist scholars of the 1970s drew attention to the limitations that traditional gender roles placed on women’s

**Warm bath theory:** used by Parsons and Bales (1955) to compare the nuclear family to a warm bath which men could relax after a long day working outside the home

**Miscegenation:** having children with someone from a different racial group

employment opportunities outside the home and the financial power that this gave husbands over their wives (Greer 1970). Anne Oakley (1974) drew attention to the unrecognized value of the domestic work that women in traditional gender roles performed. Others argued that women who worked outside the home had to undertake a ‘triple shift’ of paid labour, unpaid domestic work and **emotional labour**: taking care of the family’s wellbeing, such as the emotional stabilization of men (Duncombe & Marsden 1995). This can be read as a critique of the warm bath theory in functionalist approaches. Indeed, for functionalists, the nuclear family was thought to reduce conflict in society, but, for feminists, the family itself was understood as the site of conflict.

**Emotional labour:** work that involves emotions rather than just doing activities

### *Children, families and emotion*

Children are often considered to be a central part of families. Family gatherings are frequently characterized, certainly in cultural representations of them, as having young children as the centre of attention. And yet the notion of children as central to family is not without its problems. Not everyone has children; not everyone *can* have children and not everyone *wants* to have children. We have asked some lecture classes how many students want children, and the great majority raise their hand. Yet when one or two say they actively do not want children, there is often a gasp from some of the other students – the thought of not raising children is that shocking to them. Indeed, there is a lot of societal pressure on people, particularly women, to have children and those without children often find themselves subject to negative stereotypes and stigma (Park 2002). Given this, the term ‘child-free’ has been suggested for use instead of ‘child-less’ as the latter attaches negative connotations to a life without children (see Gillespie 2003).

However, the emotions around having children are not restricted to whether to have them, but *when* to have children if you do. There are many negative stereotypes about young parents, particularly mothers (Yardley 2008), but women who have children later in life are also subject to negative stereotyping (Whitley & Kirmayer 2008). This, again, involves not just the parents deciding to have children but also wider society: for example, if people have children too young, it is widely assumed that the State will have to support them, through benefits and welfare packages (Brown 2015).

No matter the age of parents when their children are born, the experience of being a parent is also emotionally charged. Children are assumed to be future citizens and, therefore, how they are raised is deemed public business – even before they are born. Given this, Longhurst (1999) draws attention to the scrutiny that pregnant women often find themselves subjected to, particularly receiving unwanted comments on their behaviours and unwelcome touching of their stomachs. You can also see this kind of public interest in action if you think about guidance for pregnant women on what not to eat, drink and do; although the guidance is about what *mothers* should (not) do, the intention is the wellbeing of the foetus.

### *Policy debates and the family*

Although families are usually seen as private, they are subject to a great deal of public scrutiny. This does not mean that every family unit will be highly scrutinized, but



## VOX POP **Becoming a young mother: Holly's story**

I found out I was pregnant when I was 16 and I had my son at 17. It wasn't planned and I wasn't prepared for a baby at all, but I decided to keep it. My family were pretty upset when I told them I was pregnant and my dad didn't speak to me for about a month. I think they thought I'd ruined my life, but after my son was born, they fell in love with him.



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I took a year away from college and then started doing my qualifications part time because I get financial help with the nursery fees. I'm starting university this year, so I don't feel like I'm doing anything different to my friends that didn't have babies young. I just feel like I'm doing it a few years later but the whole pregnancy and babies thing is out of the way for me now.

There can be lots of negative attitudes about young mums and you do get comments from people about it. When you first have your baby, you're really worried about being a rubbish mother and I stayed at home for months because I was really not confident. But then you realize that everyone has that no matter what age you have your babies. Now I just don't care. My son is fed and happy and that's all that matters. If people comment, I just ignore them or tell them to mind their own business.

(Note: 'Holly' is a pseudonym, and neither she nor her child are shown in the accompanying photograph.)

### Reflection

- » What do you think about Holly's story?
- » Do you agree that there are lots of negative attitudes about young mothers? If so, what are these? How are they spread?
- » If adolescence is criticized as a 'bad' time to have children, and so is waiting 'too long', do you think there is ever a societally acceptable 'good' time to have children – and if so, why is that time deemed 'better'?

that the notion of 'family' is subject to a great deal of debate. Take the example of *in vitro* fertilization (IVF), which is the technique of fertilizing a woman's egg outside the body. The process involves harvesting eggs from a woman's body, implanting sperm directly into the egg in a laboratory and then re-implanting the zygote (the cells which form when an egg is fertilized) into a woman's womb with the intention of establishing a successful pregnancy. IVF is used by couples who are unable to conceive naturally either because of fertility problems or because they are a same-sex couple. IVF has been heavily debated for several reasons.

There are debates about who should pay for IVF (see [Chapter 10](#) for discussion of social policy). In countries with nationalized healthcare systems, the crux of this