# Discussion – Whether Nuclear Family is Natural or Universal

The generally accepted definition of nuclear family attests to a household comprising of two parents and their dependent children. The definition is widely recognized and appreciated by most sociologists though they still hold the position that it may or may not be universal family or natural family where all the communities base their norms around. In the arguments advanced by George Murdock, the definition rightly captures the image and composition of the nuclear family that is universal and accepted as the appropriate kind of family (Murdock, 1968). Nonetheless, the other specialists notably Kathleen Gough reject this position and say that certain societies do not subscribe to the rule.

## Functionalism Argument

Murdock (1968) compared the family setups of more than 250 societies worldwide. By this global study, he concluded that that the nuclear family was universal and it existed in every society and therefore must be a social institution which functioned for the good of the society (Chapman, Holborn, Moore & Aiken, 2016). According to George Murdock, a family is a social group that shares the same residence, are tied by common economic opportunities, cooperation, and reproduction (Chapman et al., 2016). The family has two adults of opposite sexes and who enjoy the social approval of sexual relationship with one or more children that are their own or adopted. According to Murdock, this particular family carried out four integral functions that are critical to the operations of society (Chapman et al., 2016). The functions included reproduction where the society needed to have new members to ensure that they survive. Notably, this is considered as procreation that happens within the confines of martial and family. Second is the sexual function that is meant to serve the society and individual. Moreover, Murdock noted that untamed sexual behavior could potentially lead to socially disruptive society. According to Murdock, when marital sex exists, there is a strong emotional bond that happens between a couple, and individuals feel the obligation to be faithful and committed to sexual life (Chapman et al., 2016). The third function is an educational function. Through education, culture is transmitted from one generation to the next. Education entails effective socialization of the children to dominant values, norms, customs and rituals of the society. According to Murdock, education is the primary role of a family (Chapman et al., 2016).

The last function of a family according to Murdock is an economic function. The economic function requires the adult members of the family to show their commitment to care, protection, and maintenance of the dependents through being productive workers and feeding the family. The economic function is the yardstick that determines the family standard of living in regards to shelter or housing, food, and quality care. According to Murdock, a nuclear family is more of universal human social grouping. This implies that as a sole prevailing form of the family or even as a basic unit from which complicated forms are merged, the nuclear family still exists distinctly and remains a strong working group in any societal setup (Chapman et al., 2016). Nonetheless, there are those who have criticized the position held by Murdock. Those who criticize him note that Murdock fails to appreciate that families happen as result of culture and not biology. The definition by Murdock (1968), fails to take cognizance of the nuclear family as natural. Also, the position taken up by Murdock denies certain members of the society the family status. In fact, through his argument, parenting such as single, surrogate, homosexual and foster are not considered as part of the family (Chapman et al., 2016).

## Feminist Position

There is also feminism position on whether the nuclear family is natural or universal. Notably, women’s expectations of marriage have radically changed since the 1970s compared with the positions and the perceptions that were held a few years ago (Chapman et al., 2016). A good number of divorce cases, approximately 65% are being initiated by women implying that women have high expectations of marriage more than men (Chapman et al., 2016). For most of the divorce-related cases, the issue of concern has been the unreasonable behavior of the men, a notion that supports feminist perspective.

Considering the position taken by feminists one would state that there is no existing family leave alone the purported family being referred to as an institution. The line of argument is strongly supported by Nancy Gonzalez in her work. According to Nancy, there are several existing Matrifocal families. The matrifocal families are the ones that have a mother at the center. The mother is the head of the family unit and lives with the relatives. Seemingly, this is a position that is supported by the feminists. The feminists advocate for divorce in instances that they consider men as irresponsible. It is through a divorce that the family ends up having the mother as the provider. Some of them refer to the families as the New World Black Families. In the arrangement, the mother is the one that supports the woman economically in instances when the father is absent. The definition is taken up by Gonzalez, in this case, does not recognize the position adopted by Murdock as far as family setup is concerned. The nuclear family, in this case, is natural and not universal. Nonetheless, as much as feminists are forced to file for divorce and end up being the providers of their families, some sociologists have attempted to the reason for such occurrences. For instance, there is a position that maintains that some of the divorces happen due to the feeling of plantation slavery. The reasoning, in this case, is that the father figurehead position was eroded after being a subject to the authority of plantation owner. For some, the reason for lack of support is unemployment and poverty. The father is unable to provide for the family is likely to put him in a position where he is considered irresponsible. Currently, it is common and treated as the norm to see the single parents who a large number are women. Most of the women hold strong feminist positions. The argument advanced, in this case, showcases a family as natural and not universal. If anything, there is no single definition and requirements that make a nuclear family be accepted across.

## Cross Cultural

The Nayar society in south India disapproves the definition that nuclear family is universal. In totality, the society setup dismisses Murdock’s theory (Browne, 2015). In this society, the husband and the wife never lived together, and there was no commitment to one another. The children were not necessarily of the husband, and the husband had no obligation of supporting them economically (D'cruz & Bharat, 2001). The system suited the society and is an example that different societies define family in a varied manner. The family in Nayar functioned well as the children got the care, socialized, were supported economically and cared for by the cohabiting parents (D'cruz & Bharat, 2001). Socialization remains one of the significant ideals and culture would be imparted to the children and values given to them into the future. As much as the roles mentioned by Murdock are performed in this kind of setup, there is no requirement of reproduction, cooperation and sharing of economic opportunities hence dismissing the stand that a nuclear family is universal (Browne, 2015).

## Postmodernism

In the postmodern society, there is the rise of gay and lesbianism. In fact, same-sex couples with children are becoming a norm though rare (Browne, 2015). There are cases of gays and lesbians having children through surrogate mothers. There are legislations and pieces of laws that have been passed which support this kind of marriage. For instance, Civil Partnership Act of 2004 gave legal recognition to the relationship of same-sex couples who get into a civil partnership, involving similar arrangement to legal marriage (Browne, 2015). The term universal is not applicable to this kind of family as it does not apply to each one. As much as there is a child or children with two adults, the adults are not of opposite gender as would be in the case supported by Murdock. In fact, there are some cultures that do not support the gays or lesbians. The position then alludes to a position where the nuclear family is not socially accepted and seen is not the norm throughout the world. There only sections of the society that support this kind of position.

## Conclusion

From the argument, it is not clear whether a family is natural or universal. Different arguments and claims have been raised to support the positions advanced by the authors of the opposing arguments. For some, the nuclear family can be considered as a universal institution while for some it is natural institutions. Those who support the natural position are mainly the proponents of feminism. The feminists allude that most single mothers end up being so because the fathers prove to be irresponsible. Being irresponsible in this case may be a factor of unemployment of poverty. The universality of a nuclear family is dependent on how it is defined. Some relationships are universal given that there is evidence of co-residence, intimacy, sexuality and emotional ties and bonds. Nonetheless, the relationships still take different forms that can be changed and challenges while some can still embrace them. The views of Murdock and the evidence that he has provided was primary to the definition of nuclear family and assertion that such a family is universal. It is on Murdock’s assertion that the other sociologists carried out their research to affirm or dismiss the theory. For the others, performing the four essential roles noted by Murdock was important though not a reason to define a nuclear family. There are family setups that enjoy bonds and togetherness yet the four essential roles are not performed.

From the arguments, it seems that different people and sociologists hold varied views concerning what a nuclear family is. Given that there is no clear definition or description of the nuclear family, there will be no precise stand whether or not a nuclear family is universal or natural.

## References

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