Understanding the Post-Modern Family

Through Different Conceptual and Theoretical Approaches

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to understand what the term "post-modern family" encompasses through different sociological lenses and theories. The improvements in modern technology, changes in our economy, and adjustments made to our policies have shifted the family unit from being a "unit of production" to a "unit of consumption." In fact, the family as an economic unit has raised awareness to the different family structures that were hidden before. No longer are we able to define what the term "family" is in our current society due to the wide range of family structures that can be observed. This paper will shed light on some of these post-modern family structures, their differences from a "traditional family structure," and how these changes have been impacting our society.

Conceptual Orientation

The paper will address issues such as the blurring of roles among partners and the impact socialist exchange has on a relationship by examining role theory and social exchange theory.

Understanding the Post-Modern Family

What is the "post-modern family"?

If we attempt to use the concrete definition of a family being "a social unit made up of father, mother, and children," only approximately 35 percent of all U.S families will be able to be classified as a "family unit" (Goode, 2014, p.21). Our society has evolved into such a complex system of relationships that the family unit no longer exists just to satisfy the purpose of it being "a unit of production." Some family structures exist because of the legal and monetary benefits that can be obtained through declaring the relationship, while other family structures are not restricted to any borders, including the concept of sexuality. No longer are children the children of their parent's marriage, nor is a mother a full-time housewife and the father a "breadwinner" (Skolnick, 2014). Though immigrant families still seem to

follow the traditional family structure and values, many current American families follow a post-modern family structure, where there is an increase in the number of divorced families, gay/lesbian couples, and even cohabiting or common-law couples.

One of the key characteristics of the post-modern family is the use of vague labels, or even the defying of labels in some situations. No concrete labels exist for post-modern families because they are too diverse and simply indefinable. The participants in a post-modern family structure "create and re-create some forms of familistic social patterns even when some of those traditional elements are missing" (Goode, 2014, p.22). For them, the family structure exists to fulfill a certain social purpose, that will have little risk and result in as few consequences as possible.

For example, one type of post-modern family structure is co-parenting, which is "an arrangement whereby divorced parents accept equal responsibility for [the] care and maintenance of their children." Though co-parenting may take form in a variety of different ways, it typically means shared or joint custody, where the children live with each of the parents alternatively. The concept of co-parenting exists mainly for the well-being of the child; instead of separating the child permanently due to a divorce, the co-parenting structure allows for the child to spend time with each parent while growing up (Brommel, 1986, p.260-261). Therefore, the co-parenting structure exists to fulfill the purpose of being a parent/guardian for their child, but nothing more and nothing less.

Examining the Post-Modern Family through Role Theory

A recurring theme in post-modern family structures is the blurring or even changes in gender roles between the parents. This may be a result of the shift from a family being a "unit of production" to a "unit of consumption," which no longer requires strict gender roles to achieve its needs. Role theory is the idea that "individuals learn certain expected behaviors in society through symbolic interactions" (Olson, 2006, p.77). In other words, the actions of the people around you influence and impact your actions. In a traditional family structure, a mother usually plays the role of the caretaker and the father

the role of the breadwinner; both roles are usually not overlapping. These roles are passed down through generations, with parents having been raised with established roles for the mother and the father. However, in the post-modern family, gender no longer seems to play a significant factor when considering roles.

Under the law, "husbands and wives are now assigned the same economic functions," which may be part of why there seems to be an equal relationship among the partners. Both parents are now "considered responsible for their own economic well-being, as well as their spouse and children," whereas just a few decades ago, women were considered men's property. The unequal expectations and roles we had for males and females contributed to the gendered roles in a family. 100 years later, fathers are now expected to contribute to the role of being a caretaker by participating in their child's everyday activities, such as even providing physical and emotional care for them, rather than just financial care (Eichler, 1997). Mothers are now out in the workforce, sometimes earning an even higher salary than their spouses and reversing the role of the breadwinner. Though the gendered roles of being a mother and a father were thought to be internalized unconsciously, the decrease in gender gaps in our society has changed the roles we associate "mother" and "father" with.

Role theory is an interesting concept when examining homosexual relationships, which is another form of a post-modern family. Whereas in a traditional heterosexual relationship, there was more power in the husband because he was earning the money to support the family, in a lesbian couple, "the balance of power is not related to income." Both women in a lesbian couple may have internalized the roles of being mothers, so they strive to minimize "any form of power domination" as possible. However, for gay male couples, income and money are essential in "determining which partner is dominant" (Brommel, 1986). Similar to how lesbian couples internalize the role of being a caretaker, gay males internalize the role of being a breadwinner and associate power in a family with income.

The blurring of gender roles in post-modern families may be caused by interrelated factors.The "status of being married or not is no longer as sharply differentiated as it used to be, either in terms of interactions between a couple, or in terms of rights and obligations" (Eichler, 1998, p.43). We now see cohabiting couples, common-law relationships, and even homosexual relationships, where the gendering of roles is neither crucial nor essential to establishing stability and the purpose of a family unit.

The Exchange Theory and Family Relationships

The social exchange theory is crucial for understanding post-modern families because of the increase in relationships that exist simply to fulfill a certain need, whether it be emotional, sexual, or even financial. The socialist exchange theory, based on behavioral psychology, defines social exchange as "the exchange of activity, tangible or intangible, and more or less rewarding or costly, between at least two persons" (Ritzer, 2005, p. 736). In the context of family relationships, this social exchange may take the form of time, emotional stability, and/or money. With the traditional family structure, the social exchange was that the husband brought home the money and the mother took care of the house. However, in post-modern families, the social exchange is not always as clear.

The number of cohabiting couples has significantly increased over the past generation. Cohabitation is when a couple has been "living together at least four nights a week and for a total of five months in the previous year." Though these couples may be living together, they are not formally married, most of the time because they view the cons of a formal marriage as outweighing the pros. Even in a relationship like cohabitation where there is not a legal document to set guidelines, the women in cohabitating relationships still "view money as a way to achieve equality in their relationships," similar to how the power dynamic works in other post-modern family structures. These women are attempting to avoid economic dependence on their partners by seeking their own independence. Interestingly enough, these couples also seem to "fight less about finances than do married couples" (Brommel, 1986, p. 257-259). By not relying on their partner's income, the women are asking for

freedom in exchange. The social exchange that exists between cohabiting couples allows them to have flexibility in their relationship while minimizing the potential cost, such as power dominance.

On that note, the exchange of finances for freedom or flexibility is one of the main trends that occurs in many post-modern family structures. For example, a common-law marriage is an example of a specific family structure that is based on the concept of money and the law. In a regular marriage, once the couple signs the relevant documents, the rights and responsibilities will be changed; a common-law relationship is much more complex. Common-law marriage is usually the "ultimate legal solution" for cohabitating couples because it "entails in principle all the legal effects of formal marriage" but with limited rights or responsibilities (Lind, 2008, p.4, 6). There are also benefits to declaring a relationship as common-law rather than just being a cohabiting couple. In the case of employment benefits, it may be more beneficial for an employee to declare to their employer that they are in a common-law marriage. Though this "may not entitle a person to inherit in case the employee dies intestate," it may be factored in in some situations, such as if a case "comes before the court" (Eichler, 1997, p.45). The potential benefits that may arise are not as much compared to the potential benefits partners can earn from a legal marriage. However, since some couples feel as if a legal marriage may be too costly, demanding, and emotionally draining, the small number of pros in a common-law marriage outweigh the potential cons in a legal marriage for them.

Another phenomenon that can be observed in our current society is the increase in the availability of opportunities for working women, which has caused a decline in the rates of marriage in recent couples. A social exchange that is not in favor of women is what is causing the negative attitude towards marriage for these working women. In recent years, women have had higher formal education/income than many men, specifically their husbands or potential spouses. For men, marriage does not hinder their work life; in fact, it may even benefit them because it secures them for a path in "uninterrupted earnings." However, for women, marrying means that they will be expected to be some

form of caretaker for the family, despite the blurring gender roles. They also do not have as much geographical mobility compared to men, forcing them to give up their job in some situations. If a woman has to keep on changing jobs, it "may have a permanent negative effect on their earnings" (Eichler, 1997, p.36). Therefore, for a working woman, it may not be as desirable to marry at such a young age in our current society, especially if she has a strong position in her career. Even if she does decide to marry, she will not be getting much in exchange from her partner, even in terms of finances. The increase in opportunities in our society for women has blurred the concept of gender roles and expectations, such as a woman being expected to be a caretaker. Yet, these opportunities are also what might be pushing women away from entering a family unit.

The Future of Family Structure

With family structures becoming indefinable and complex, it raises the question of what the future of our families will look like. The traditional family structure still exists in other countries and cultures, so what is it about Western culture that rapidly increased the rates of the post-modern family structure? Is it really because of the number of opportunities that have opened up, especially for women? Is it just because of how accepting our society has become in terms of what is considered the norm? Perhaps social media becoming such an integral part of our life plays a huge factor as well, with just an app making it easy for us to connect emotionally and sexually with anyone and everyone we want.

With the family structure changing, it also raises concerns about how it would affect the children of our society. Since we internalize our roles in society through experiences, by having parental roles become less gender-oriented, for example, our children would also associate their roles in the family less based on gender. Surveys conducted in Europe and the United States have even shown that "few want to go back to traditional male and female roles, much less to legally defined inequality" (Giddens, 2014, p. 33). Our future relies on our next generation, so if children are raised to understand that gender equality

is able to be achieved, then there may be hope for our society to become equal and united. In other words, the post-modern family structure may be helping our society progress in a positive direction while highlighting what our society still needs to work on.

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