Functionalists believe that the family is one of the key institutions needed for the continuation of a harmonious society. George Murdock claimed that the family provides four key important functions; these are reproduction, sexual stabilisation of adults’ personalities, socialisation of the youngest members of society and continuation of its member’s economic needs. He feels that the nuclear family is the family best equipped to do this because it is universal and able to provide the correct social agenda required to reduce social disruption. Parsons strongly supports the work of Murdock, believing that the family acts as a warm bath, relieving emotional and psychological stress by providing a loving and caring environment. He feels that this is one way in which an adult’s personality is stabilised and in turn a way in which society is able to be kept healthy.

However many sociologists disagree with this consensus view, particularly feminists (Marxist feminists) who feel that the family is patriarchal and that rather than the family providing a caring environment for all it only benefits men who are able to release their anger and alienation on to their oppressed wives. They thus so feel that the warm bath theory is incorrect as it ignores the dark side of family life, for example domestic violence.

Furthermore Marxists are critical of the family as they believe that is not in place to meet the needs of individuals but rather the needs of a capitalist society (in order to keep the bourgeoisie in power). They argue that the family fulfils key ideological functions which are able to train individuals to believe that inequality is normal and that life is unfair whilst acting as a unit of consumption and ensuring that wealth of individuals remains constant through the inheritance of property from one generation to another. This continually ensures there is little movement up and down the social scale. Criticisms of Marxism are that they focus to largely on class inequalities and so proceed to ignore gender or ethnic inequalities which also have a prevailing effect on the family.

Functionalists also disagree with this Marxist view as they believe that families do not meet the needs of capitalism but are better suited to fit the society that they are in. For example Parsons suggests that in pre-industrial age extended family was predominant as extra financial and emotional support was needed from a third generation whereas in modern industrial society there was the need of a nuclear family in order to obtain social and geographical mobility. Despite the change in family type and era however both were able to meet the functional prerequisites (as mentioned above) needed for a smooth running society. Many disagree with this (such as young and wilmott) however as they believe that the nuclear family arose due to better living conditions, improved housing and the welfare state which provided support.

Overall in modern society there is a diversity of families, and not just the nuclear family, which all of these perspective presume to be dominant, thus so it is more conclusive to believe that each perspective contributes to the understanding of the family equally but not fully as each assumes passivity and thus ignores the choices that individuals in each family may or may not undergo when deciding the family that they will be in; each family type is different, eg lone parent compared to same sex and so will all have different functions.