

## THE FAMILY AS A SOCIAL GROUP: AN OUTLINE FOR INQUIRY\*

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The basic assumption underlying this paper is simple: the greater and the more systematic the knowledge is which the social worker has of the family as a social group, the more competent he/she will be in defining the problems that affect it and in devising solutions for these problems. The aim of this paper is similarly modest: to stimulate (1) a deeper and more comprehensive observation on the family, and (2) a more coherent framework for organizing one's information on the subject. It attempts to achieve these objectives by summarizing some of the basic concepts and generalizations about the family from the anthropological and sociological literature and by suggesting some implications of the materials presented.<sup>1</sup> The use of questions as headings for the different sections into which the material is divided is in keeping with the aim of stimulating rather than telling. At the conclusion of the paper some suggestions for further inquiry are presented.

This paper is not meant to be a substitute for a more thorough study of the literature nor for a more detailed and exact method of empirical research; indeed specialists are continuously at work, adding more precise data and more informed analyses on the subject. But the non-specialist will want to start somewhere. This paper is an attempt to help provide him that beginning.

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\*Paper prepared for the Ecumenical Worship and Study Session in connection with the XVth Conference of the International Council on Social Welfare, Manila, September 1970. Dr. Arce is assistant professor and chairman, Department of Sociology, Ateneo de Manila.

### I. *What are the forms that the family takes?*

The family as a form of social grouping based on kinship is found in all known human societies, but the form exhibits a great deal of variation. The *nuclear family*, composed of a married couple and their children, is considered universal in that it is distinguishable as a unit and functions as such. Very often, however, this form is expanded to include two or more of either spouse. In the societies where the latter form is found the family is *polygamous*.

When the household factor (kinsmen living under a single dwelling or in adjacent dwellings, with accompanying shared economic and social obligations) is used as a major criterion in defining the family, one other modal form emerges. This is the *extended family*, composed of two or more nuclear families related either through the parent-child or sibling relationships. One example of such a family would be that constituted by a father and son and their respective spouses and children; another would be that of two brothers and their respective spouses and children.

These are the major variants. In many cases, additional individuals may reside with the family: adopted children, or relatives not circumscribed by the definitions above are common examples. Alternately, families may be incomplete. In the nuclear form, for example, this happens when the father or mother is dead, or when the couple have no children.

Family form tends to be integrated with other social patterns in the society. The emphasis on the nuclear family, for instance, is regarded as especially compatible with the requirements of an industrial society.

II. *Internal to the family, what are the component units, their relationships and activities, and norms?*

Within the nuclear family four basic units are generally differentiated on such bases as functions and expectations; these are husband, wife, son, and daughter. The relationships among these units can be reduced to eight basic types: husband-wife, father-son, father-daughter, mother-daughter, brother-brother, sister-sister, brother-sister.

One can make a list of the behaviors that are expected, allowed, proscribed, and actually observed, for husband (father) in a given family. A similar list can be made for the son. These comprise one set of norms and behavior. Another set governs the way the son relates to his father, and vice versa. Compiling such lists for every member of the family and for every set of relationships, one can arrive at the functions, expectations, and activities attached to each component unit in the family and the way each unit relates to the other. For every society has a definition of each unit in terms of norms and actual behavior, and the relationships among units. For instance, it has been found that "Across societies, the husband is more likely to provide material support and at least *de jure* authority within the family and the wife is more likely to provide affection and moral support" (Berelson and Steiner 1964:314). Among the Tagalog (Philippines), parental authority is said to be shared by elder siblings over younger siblings while the patterns of distribution of affection go in the opposite direction.

Many factors enter into the delineation of functions and relationships of family members; the more fundamental ones are age and sex, and, in the case of children, place in the order of birth.

Examining the internal details of the family can yield more precise information needed to answer such vital questions as: Why is one family more stable than another? How can a family cope (or be helped to cope) with a situation where an important member, such as a father, can no longer discharge his obligations?

III. *What is the relation of the family to the larger kin group?*

"Kin groups," says an anthropologist (Murdock 1949:53), "represent, so to speak, the individual's second line of defense." When the individual is not able to obtain assistance from the immediate members of his family, he can, in most societies, turn to his other relatives and receive the assistance that he needs.

The reciprocal obligations between the family and the larger kin group are anchored on principles of descent. Three major types of descent systems are generally recognized. In the *patri-lineal* system the emphasis in tracing relationship and the accompanying social obligations is through the father's line. In the *matrilineal* system the emphasis is on the mother's line. In the *bilateral* system the emphasis is about equal for both father's and mother's line.

Besides reciprocal help there are other social patterns that are defined by rules of descent. Some of these patterns have to do with succession to a title or office, the handing down of ancestral property, the acquisition of certain statuses, rules on marriage, and the terms used for various types of kinsmen with the implications for behavior that these differentiated terms carry.

The nature of the relationship between the family and other kinsmen influence the way the family, and indeed the society, organizes itself for various activities. Where the ties between the family and the larger kin group are very strong, the family in need of assistance will usually seek and find it from other kinsmen. Where the bond is weak and the family requires assistance, other persons or institutions, such as

friends, neighbors, or welfare agencies, may have to step in.

#### IV. *What relationships does the family have with the larger society?*

The family, as a basic social institutions, exerts great influence on the functioning and organization of the larger society. To begin with, the family performs essential functions for the society. Some of the functions are these:

1. **Biological reproduction and maintenance.** Societies vary greatly in the way they regulate sex and structure families. But in all societies the family is viewed at least as one legitimate unit for reproducing and nourishing new members.
2. **Socialization.** The family is normally the primary agent for the training of the child in the values, norms, expectations, and patterns of behavior in the society. In some societies, this training also includes the imparting of specific occupational skills.
3. **Status placement.** The place of the child in the society's stratification system is at least initially derived from the family. Even in societies where the rate of social mobility is high, initial placement has great influence on the future statuses that an individual may acquire.
4. **Emotional maintenance.** This function has to do with providing the individual member with the security that he/she needs psychologically.

Beyond these functions there are others that the family helps to fulfill, even though the family's contribution varies from society to society. Some of these functions may be in the economic, political, religious, or educational realm. The economic function is evident in many simple or peasant societies where the family may be a fairly self-sufficient unit, producing, distributing, and consuming the goods that it needs. Moreover, in many simple

societies the effective political units are familial units, the larger political community being an amalgamation of these smaller units. Indeed, many functions and activities which in more complex societies are identified as purely economic, or political, or religious, or educational are merged with the functions and activities of the kin group, and the family is at the core of this group.

But the larger society is not simply, if at all, a passive recipient of the family's influence. It, in turn, exerts profound influence on the family through its many institutions. Various pieces of legislation on such well-known matters as divorce and child labor are examples of how the political system can affect both the structure and functions of the family. Educational institutions in many countries have taken over a significant part of the child's socialization and training. Family planning programs utilize a variety of institutions—political, educational, medical—to influence the way families discharge their function of biological reproduction and maintenance. The work of social welfare agencies among certain types of families in a society may likewise be viewed as part of the society's attempt to influence the way these families organize themselves and discharge their functions.

It is evident that a more precise understanding of the mutual influence between family and society is important for those who are involved in applied work with families. To help a family overcome a particular problem the applied worker must know not only what solutions the family itself can provide; he must also know what the society can and should do to help.

#### V. *What changes are noted in the family as the society moves from traditional to modern?*

Modernization in contemporary societies is generally accompanied by widespread industrialization. While the direction of change need not be replicated the world over, the evidence thus far reveals striking similarities in the shifts that occur. It is about changes in the family in such

modernizing societies as the Philippines that the observations in this section are made (see, for example, Hollnsteiner 1970).

Some of the changes have to do with functions. Some traditional family functions diminish in importance while others become more emphasized. For instance, the economic production function, which is very important in simple and peasant societies, assumes less importance as modern technology (such as the use of machines) and more highly specialized groups (such as marketing or agricultural production corporations) render the labor of the family as a unit superfluous if not inefficient. Other functions, such as socialization, are similarly diminished as nursery and other types of child-training schools are established. On the other hand, the function of providing emotional maintenance is more emphasized; in an industrialized society gratifying interpersonal relationships become a major factor in drawing family members together.

Change in the relative importance of different functions is related to structural changes within the family and beyond it to the larger kin group and the society. Modernization has the effect of increasing physical and social mobility. As the individual moves from rural areas to urban centers in search of better opportunity structures, physical barriers are interposed between him and the larger group of kinsmen. At the same time, mobility up or down the social class ladder becomes easier as new social status positions, based mainly on the expansion of occupational opportunities, are opened up.

One result of this increased mobility is the weakening of ties between the individual and his kinsmen, and the reduction of effective kinship groupings to the nuclear family level. Large kinship groupings which traditionally act as units somehow become unwieldy as industrialization becomes widespread. Moreover, in the heterogeneous urban-industrial setting, there are simply more non-kinsmen to choose from in organizing meaningful social relationships.

Within the nuclear family itself, relationships change as commitments and activities in other

institutions draw members away from the family sphere. The authority of the father in the traditional agricultural, self-sufficient family unit is eroded as the mother and adult children are able to find gainful work outside the family farm plot. Family members also find that other needs, such as that for education and for recreation, can be at least partially satisfied outside the family.

These changes in structure and function of the family are, in turn, related to changes in values, norms, and attitudes which reflect the increasing independence of the individual. Marriage is more likely to be the result of choice on the part of the contracting partners than the arrangements made by kin groups to which they belong. The erosion of the traditional authority structure has been mentioned above. New norms of authority are more likely to be permissive than obligatory. This and the likelihood that children's training outside the home will include knowledge and skills unknown to the parents are significant factors that contribute to tension between parents and children.

The family thus caught in the process where society-wide changes are forcing a re-evaluation of its functions, a re-structuring of its relationships, and a re-definition of its norms will manifest strains and stresses. These manifestations may easily be mistaken for family disorganization or loss of functions. In fact, they may not be. In the latter case, the emphasis in assisting such families might best be on *readjustment* to the changes occurring before the tensions become so severe as to induce disorganization.

The family in a state of disorganization is one that ceases to discharge any of its functions as a unit, or where a member is unable to perform his role adequately. The family may cease to provide emotional support because of a serious lack of communication among its members. Or parents may be separated, divorced, or deceased. Or a member of the family may be incapacitated by a serious mental or emotional illness. In this case, the assistance to the family

might emphasize *reorganization*: (1) reorganization of the role structure within the family so that the functions of the absent/missing parent or the seriously ill member can be reasonably fulfilled by the remaining members or substitute members; (2) reorganization of relationships so that the functions of the family as a unit are similarly fulfilled.

*Indications for further data-collection and analysis*

To repeat, this paper is not meant to tell but to stimulate. Many of the statements made above need to be developed, refined, and qualified. Presentation and evaluation of supporting and contrary cases need to be made. The appropriate concluding portion of the paper, then, should ask questions.

What statements above are relevant to the analysis of the family in the reader's society/community, or to the specific aspect of the family that he is interested in? To what extent are these statements true? What further qualifications, refinements, and elaborations might have to be introduced? How should one go about gathering the data that are needed? When all the initial statements, qualifications, refinements, and elaborations are considered, what implications can be drawn?

Can a typology of family problems faced by social workers in specific kinds of work locations be developed? To what extent can each component type be understood, and strategies for solutions developed, by studying the structure and functions of the family involved?

*Note*

1. The contents of this paper include findings from many sources, but references in text acknowledge only direct quotations.

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**THE PHILIPPINE ECONOMIC JOURNAL**  
The Journal of the Philippine Economic Society

Number Nineteen

First Semester 1971

Vol. X, No. 1

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