Sociology of the family
edited by Michael Anderson
Sociology of the Family
Selected Readings
Edited by Michael Anderson

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This volume presents a set of Readings on the sociology of the family. Its main emphasis is on family systems of the kind which occur in Western industrial society, and on the problems which any rigorous study of them inevitably involves. The geographical exclusiveness of this volume does not mean that I think we can fully understand the wide variations that are found in the family systems of Western societies by looking at them in isolation from the rest of the world. Rather, what is being suggested is that we must not merely try to place Western family types in certain broad theoretical boxes which they share with many other societies, but also must recognize that these societies have certain special characteristics and that, in consequence, hypotheses and methodological tools have to be somewhat more refined and more elaborate if we are to understand the variation in patterns of family relationships which obtain within the Western types themselves. This volume gives some idea of how far we have come along this road. A forthcoming volume in the Penguin series will set these Western systems in their broad cross-cultural setting.

The family in these societies remains a vitally important element in social structure. Its members bear prime responsibility for both the timing and number of conceptions of new members of the society, and for their nurture and early socialization. It is the normal unit in which resources are pooled and distributed for consumption, around which residence is organized and domestic tasks performed. Its members are for each other the principal source of affective and ascriptive relationships in an otherwise predominantly competitive society. To them falls also the main burden of meeting the many idiosyncratic needs of society's members which fall outside the scope of bureaucratically organized agencies. The family in these societies is, in sum, a collectivity which makes multiple and pressing demands on almost every individual, demands which inevitably influence his ability to participate in and meet the role demands of other collectivities of which he is a member. No social organization which
is associated with such emotive issues as 'love', marriage and 'the home', and with such frequent matters of social concern as divorce, child rearing or sexual compatibility can be considered as unimportant in the layman's definition of his social world, nor in the sociologist's field of potential topics for research.

Yet, in spite of its apparent importance, and in spite of its many challenging unsolved problems, the reputation of the sociology of the family among professional sociologists is still rather low. Many see it as an academic deadend which contributes little or nothing of importance to the discipline as a whole; as concentrating on trivial and value-laden problems of more concern to journalism or social work than 'hard' sociology; as methodologically naïve and conceptually under-developed.

It is indeed certainly true that the sociology of the family took much longer than most other fields to escape from a past dominated by impressionistic ethnography and a concern with social problems shot through with preconceptions, into a new 'scientific' approach pushing towards explanatory theory-building and based on rigorous hypothesis testing. Only recently has it begun to break free into a theoretical and methodological style of its own adapted to the problems with which it must grapple. For, far more than most of its critics have realized, one reason for the slow development of a rigorous and challenging sociology of the family lies in problems largely unique to the very nature of its topic of study.

One source of difficulty lies in the special force in this field of the paradox with which every sociologist has to contend, namely, that he knows at the outset too much about what he is supposed to be studying. Normally he has been and still is a fully participating member, in the society he is studying, of a family unit of his own. He has been socialized from birth into certain beliefs about the family, and has internalized his society's rules. Thus he finds it difficult to stand back, view the family critically from without, and see beneath the manifest structures and functions of the system to the constraints which lie behind the traditional and normatively prescribed patterns he knows so well. Contrast, say, the industrial sociologist, who comes to an organization a stranger to many of its empirical features and must turn im-
mediately to his sociologically trained perceptions for guides by which to order what he observes.

A second source of difficulty is closely related to the first. Because the family sociologist is so deeply involved in the system, and because family values have such strong, emotionally charged moral overtones, it is hard for him to view family behaviour in a value-free way. As a citizen he has learned to see certain forms of behaviour as social problems. He has thus found it very difficult to see behind these to the sociological problems, and too often has gone on to pose these problems in commonplace, man-in-the-street terms. He has tried to answer the question ‘Why do divorces occur?’ without asking the prior and more general question, why should couples want to stay married. He has asked whether industrialization is breaking up the kinship system, without asking first why actors should be committed to relationships with kin anyway. Societal pressures for quick solutions to problems that are themselves usually seen from the standpoint of a traditional consensus only present a further obstacle.

A third set of problems concerns respondents. The culture defines family relationships as intimate and personal matters, and many respondents are naturally reluctant to be interviewed about their family lives. It smacks of the worst kind of nosy-parkerism. The strong normative overtones which characterize family roles may also affect data reliability, with respondents tending to conceal serious tensions and to reply in terms of what they perceive as socially approved behaviour.

In addition to these problems of research method, there are major theoretical difficulties. Firstly, unlike most other social organizations, individual nuclear families have a life-cycle typically advancing from courtship, to marriage, to child rearing, to children leaving home, and then to dissolution. This poses many interesting research problems, but these in turn demand theoretical and conceptual frameworks capable of handling them; we are not often in sociology concerned with exploring the establishment, dissolution and orderly change in the organizations we study. The life-cycle also means that we usually cannot analyse the family, only the family at a particular point in the life-cycle, and the changes between these points. The impact of
social change will vary with the family's life-cycle stage, as well as with the actor who is under consideration. Moreover, many of the variations in relational patterns that we must explain are not so much qualitative differences as variations in the timing of well-nigh universal increases or decreases in the intensity of an actor's involvement in a particular role.

Secondly, the family, unlike most other social organizations, largely lacks both clearly indentifiable boundaries and formal structure, and any one set of clearly specified functions; in other words, it lacks the conceptual benchmarks on which we usually base our analysis of difference and change. Instead, the kinship system is best seen as a recruitment base, organized around blood and marriage ties, with its theoretically almost infinite expansion limited only by intermarriage. It is a base from which, in different societies and different sub-groups within societies, different individuals at different periods of their lives, as a response to varying needs and constraints, come to interact with each other with varying degrees of frequency and affective content. It provides, to a widely diverse extent, almost any conceivable function, while sharing most functions with other organizations or primary groups. As a result of this variation, any one set of descriptive categories – which may be ideally suited for the analysis of one family system at one stage of the life-cycle in one place at one time – may be totally unsuited for the analysis in anything like its full subtlety of the same system at another time, and of adequately exploring the intervening changes. The only possible solution for this is to take each dyadic relationship separately, and to explore it over its normal life-cycle.

Finally, families are made up of small groups, and some of these groups in some cultures and sub-cultures perform important affective functions for their members. In many cultures, including most traditional societies, this fact need concern the sociologist but little, since role performance is fairly rigorously controlled by normative sanctions from without, and by internalization of a relatively homogeneous and traditional culture. In addition, because the family in these societies usually lays relatively greater stress on instrumental rather than affective functions, interpersonal compatibility of an affective kind is less important. But modern Western societies are rather different. Because they
are heterogeneous and changing societies, there is considerable normative uncertainty. Nuclear family units are relatively insulated from all but very vague supervision and control of their behaviour by outsiders. The adequate performance of emotional functions is a primary criterion by which the nuclear family’s success is judged. All these differences obviously vary in incidence from sub-culture to sub-culture even within Western societies, and the reasons for this are obviously a research issue. But the consequence is a much greater degree of variability in family patterns even within socio-economic and life-cycle sub-aggregates than is the case in traditional societies. Even where normative controls and reference groups are important in influencing behaviour, one still has to ask how and why their influence is being maintained. The differing role demands that are made on different individuals from outside the family, and the different resources that each can muster for the implicit or explicit bargaining process by which the precise pattern of any individual family relationship is increasingly determined, are among the other major sources of the variations that must be explained. Because these role demands and resources are largely socially determined, their mode of operation becomes a major focus of the sociological study of the family. Under certain circumstances, too, some social-psychological variables come to play a much greater part in determining the precise patterns of relationships observed, and these, or at least the situations under which they operate in any particular way, also become a topic of concern.

These would have been formidable problems for any area of sociology to overcome. That they were only really tackled so recently can, I think, be related to at least two sets of factors. Firstly, it was only from the later 1950s, when social action and interpersonal attraction theories, and role bargaining and exchange perspectives began to reach a more advanced degree of formalization, that many of the necessary theoretical tools became available. Further advances in some areas still await further development of one or other of these approaches.

One might, however, have expected that the sociology of the family would have pioneered some of these new or revamped perspectives, rather than, with notable exceptions, waiting for their development elsewhere. That this did not happen can