

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE FAMILY

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Contents

1. Introduction
 2. Differences between a Domestic Group and a Family
 3. The Developmental Cycle of the Domestic Group
 4. The Universality Function of the Family
 5. Family Organization
 6. Types of Families
 7. The Family of Orientation and the Family of Procreation
 8. The Nature of the Family
 9. Social Development in Relation to the Family
 10. The Family and the Nature of Change
 11. Patriarchy and Women
 12. Family Law and Women
 13. Customary Law
 14. Conclusion
- Glossary
Bibliography
Biographical Sketch

Summary

A family is a social group and has been defined as the smallest identifiable social unit.

Many definitions of the family describe diverse domestic arrangements among human societies. Marriage is an institution that often results in a family. Marriage is considered the oldest and the most fundamental human institution. There are differences between a family and a domestic group. In many human societies, it is assumed that the family performs biological as well as social reproduction for the survival and continuation of society. A family can be categorized as matriarchal, patriarchal, or egalitarian according to the power distribution in the family. A family can also be categorized as matrilineal or patrilineal, according to residence rules. The family plays a crucial role for personality formation and socialization of every individual. While the basic function of the family remains the same all over the world, scholars have noted certain modifications and variations among different societies across time and space. In the age-old war between the sexes and between generations, the introduction of a new ideology plays a crucial role in family formation.

Patrilineal systems of family survive at the cost of women. The peripheral position of females in their natal group, their transfer to the husband's group, and their purely instrumental values as the bearers of children for their affinal groups, all have definite implications. The absence of rights over property, over the means of living, and over their children makes women vulnerable to oppression. For example, there are undoubtedly critical differences in gender ideology between South Asia and Southeast Asia. In recent years the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) has exploded onto the agenda of woman's issues. Women and men of different religions now discuss UCC vociferously and seriously as part of internal self-criticism and many talk about the need for reform of their civil laws. Customary laws are not codified and therefore do not constitute a single homogenous entity; they vary with the community. The family therefore is treated as a near sacred community with its own particular rituals and practices: It always thinks of its own well-being, looks after the old and aged, and is the fundamental unit of human society.

1. Introduction

A family is a social group. A social group is an aggregate of individuals in which definite relations exist between the members, and each individual is conscious of the group boundary and its symbols. In other words, a social group has at least a rudimentary structure and organization (that includes normative rules, status, roles, rituals, etc.) and a psychological basis in the consciousness of its members. The family is not the only social group that influences social and cultural development of human resources; a village, a nation, a trade union, or a political party are all such social groups.

There are many definitions of the family to describe the diverse domestic arrangements among human societies. One definition of family implies aggregation of at least two opposite sexual individuals who are generally expected to produce children. Traditionally, this social group called the family, which includes the simple or conjugal or nuclear family, is found in all human societies. The family has been described as the smallest identifiable social unit. It is defined technically as a group of individuals united by the ties of marriage, blood, or adoption constituting a single household, interacting with each other in their respective social positions, which may include husband and wife, mother and father, son and daughter, brother and sister. This type of family is formed and extended as well by an institution called marriage and holds its members by bonds of kinship. Marriage is the first cultural institution among human groups. It defines the procedures for establishing and terminating the husband-wife relationship, the reciprocal obligations and accepted restrictions upon those involved. This institution is cultural, characterized by exchange of rights, duties, and certain economic cooperation and thereby human society may be differentiated from the animal society. Marriage is an institution, not a group, but it results in a family that is certainly a grouping.

The only relationship sanctioned outside this social group of blood relatives is the marital relationship—that is, a married couple. A husband or a wife—though not a blood relative—is also a family member (in a patrilineal society, a wife is a non-blood relative; in a matrilineal society, a husband is). In fact, the institutions of family and marriage are intimately related in many societies where one cannot get a family without

marriage. It is considered that marriage gives mating a reliable basis and grants to each spouse special, though not always exclusive, sexual rights in the other. Families established outside marriages are considered “illegitimate” in many societies that do not socially recognize such groups as families. In those cases, they are allowed only under exceptional circumstances and/or are the privilege of certain people. For example, many legal cases of illegitimate children involve fighting to gain recognition as legitimate members of a particular family, and therefore to gain legitimate access to a father’s property. Legal cases of “gay marriages” (homosexual marriages) also involve sociopolitical recognition and sanction as well as access to resources of institutionalized marriage.

The various features of the family include at least the following four characteristics.

- (1) A family is a social group. The family is identifiable as the smallest social group characterized by residence, economic cooperation and reproduction. In other words, a social group has at least a structure and organization that includes rules, rituals etc., and a psychological being in the consciousness of its members.
- (2) A biological Unit. The family is a biological unit, the group comprising a married couple and their children.
- (3) An institution. As discussed above, the family is the oldest and most fundamental of human institutions, consisting of at least a man and a woman who are generally expected to produce children.
- (4) A domestic group. A domestic group is defined as a group of human beings who habitually share a common dwelling and a common food supply. A family can be a domestic group but there are some differences between a family and a domestic group.

2. Differences between a Domestic Group and a Family

The original meaning of family in Latin equated roughly with “domestic group” but the two can be sharply distinguished, because some domestic groups may be made up of individuals with no kinship ties. At the same time, members of one family may be distributed over two or more domestic groups. The term domestic group may now be used interchangeably with the term “household” rather than family

A nuclear family consists of parents and their natural or adopted children, and this structure describes most families in industrial societies. The actual composition of the nuclear family and the domestic group may be identical. However, one can differentiate the strictly reproductive functions, in our sense of the concept of social reproduction, from the activities concerned with the production of food and shelter and the non-material means for ensuring continuity with society at large. One might put it that the domestic domain is the system of social relations through which the reproductive nucleus is integrated with the environment and with the structure of the total society.

3. The Developmental Cycle of the Domestic Group

There are three main stages or phases in the developmental cycle of the domestic group. The first phase of expansion lasts from the marriage of two people to the completion of

their procreation. The biological limiting factor here is the husband potency and the wife's fertility. In structural terms, it corresponds to the period during which all the offspring of the couple are biologically, economically, and jurally dependent on them. Often overlapping the first phase in time, the second phase of dispersion or fusion begins with the physical departure of the oldest child for school or a job, or with the marriage of the oldest child. This period continues until all the children are dispersed or married. This is the phase of replacement in the social structure of the family, founded by the families of their children.

All forces that are generated cultural and structural variables are manifested during this developmental cycle of the domestic group. Biological laws ensure that children inexorably grow up. Growing up and achieving physical maturity requires about fifteen years while it often takes more than that to attain social maturity. During child rearing, complex and fundamental forces are being imposed on the domestic group that in turn generate critical forces for a new cycle of development.

One important force at work during socialization is the opposition between successive generations, focused in incest taboos. Prohibitions against incestuous sexual relations between close family members have been virtually universal. The opposition between successive generations is not a static condition. The opposition develops in intensity and may change in its customary forms of expression while the filial generation is growing up. It is a factor in the partial or complete secession of offspring at marriage. The essential stake in the social function of marriage is the right to use and dispose of productive and reproductive resources. Every generation must gain possession of the productive and reproductive resources when it reaches maturity. In general, the domestic group passes down resources from one generation to another by gift, presentation, inheritance, and succession of rights over property, individuals, and office. In patrilineal society, rights over the fertility of women are a major, but not the most significant, factor in the development cycle of the domestic group.

4. The Universality Function of the Family

The family functions to satisfy certain universal needs, such as sexual satisfaction, procreation, economic survival and cultural identification, child rearing, and education. If human societies are to survive and continue, provision must be made for biological and social reproduction of their members. In most societies, the family performs six basic social functions.

First, it regulates sexual behavior by specifying who may have sexual contact with whom. Humans have regulated themselves by elaborating social rules governing sexual pairing. Although these rules on sexual pairing have always been diverse, prohibitions against incestuous sexual relations between close family members have been virtually universal. In all societies, incest taboos prohibit sexual contact between people who are culturally defined as close relatives, and they require individuals to find and marry mates from outside their own "family group."

Second, the family is responsible for reproduction, and the norms, values, and beliefs that regulate family life often affect the number of children born. Mating is never simply random.

Third, families nurture and protect children and provide emotional support for adults.

Fourth the family is the main socializing institution for new members of society. Compared to animals, human children require a long period of care by a limited number of individuals with whom they develop intimate relations if they are to grow up as normal human beings capable of playing adult roles. This conclusion is based partly upon experimental evidence (Bowlby, 1951) and partly upon inference from the fact that in many societies children are raised in small kinship-based groups, and that there are customary modes of regulation between children and their socially recognized parents, and between parents themselves. There are some exceptions: the Israeli kibbutz where all women take collective responsibility for child care, India's Nayar where fathers have no role relationship with their children, and Indonesia's Dani who have no word for family at all.

Fifth, the family plays a part in the production and consumption of goods and services.

Finally, families are also a source of social statutes, many of which are ascribed. In all societies, the family is organized to perform certain functions for society. A function is defined as an activity that is imperative if the society is to continue to exist. Each role of the family is conceptualized around specific functions. Moreover, each role implies a reciprocal role. As, for example, the sexual functions of marriage reside both in the husband's role and in the wife's reciprocating role. To identify each function with a role it is necessary to regard not simply the functions but the roles themselves as universal. The specific context of the role may vary, but the formal aspects must be universal.

Closely related to this discussion, G.P. Murdock points out four universal functions of the family: sexual, reproductive, economic, and educative. Murdock argues that without the sexual and reproductive functions, society would become extinct; without economic cooperation among family members, life would cease. Without the education of children, culture would end.

Now the question may be raised, what are the universal functions of the family? The anthropologist M. Zelditch, studying the roles of husband and wife in various societies, found that the husband's primary role was to represent the family in the larger society. At the level of universal functions, this suggests that the father's major non-sexual role is economic, because his tie with the family is essentially that of an outsider who represents society to his family. The wife is related to the husband not only by an economic bond but also by sexual functions. Her primary role in the family is reproductive and educational. The wife's roles involves much sentiment and emotional attachment. Zelditch suggests that by this role allocation, the husband becomes the instrumental leader while the wife becomes the socio-emotional leader. A second question refers to the effect of changes in society through the smallest identifiable social unit that is the family. In Parsons' view, values are the major controlling element of groups in society, for they are pertinent to the maintenance of existing social patterns. Pattern maintenance is analogous to the concept of inertia in mechanics and is followed next in the control hierarchy by the integration of the norms of society. Integration deals with the mutual adjustments of sub-units of society from the viewpoint of their contribution to society as a whole. This means that the homes regulating family life

must be integrated with norms of other major institutions of society, including economic and political systems.

A third question regarding the universal functions of the family in the hierarchy of control is goal attainment. Unlike pattern maintenance, goal attainment is tied to specific situations and thus is variable. Although one of the general functions of the family is to produce children, goal attainment refers to their actual rate of production, which must be consistent with the norms (referring to integration) and with more general values (referring to pattern maintenance).

Parsons has suggested that in modern society, family roles are becoming increasingly constricted. This constriction represents an increasing specialization in family functions. To be sure, the family retains its functions of procreation, child-care, some economic functions, and sexual functions, but it shares some of these with other institutions. Presumably, as the nuclear family gives up or shares functions with other institutions, it loses some of the qualities of the family and changes the part it plays in the larger society

5. Family Organization

The family is the basic social institution of society. Several major institutions are found in all human societies; their relative importance, however, varies from one society to another. The family is easy to locate and the members of any society are constantly aware of and deeply involved in the performance of its requisite functions. Therefore, family is always a conspicuous feature of social organization. At the heart of all family institutions is the concept of kinship, which refers to social relationships based on common ancestry, adoption, or marriage. In all societies, children and their mothers are culturally defined as relatives (or kin) but beyond this core there are great differences in cultures. For example, Italian culture includes special terms for hundreds of different relatives and fictive kin such as godparents and honorary aunts and uncles. The number of possible kin relationships is enormous, and for this reason virtually all societies simplify kinship by considering only some to be true relatives. Trobriand Islanders studied by Malinowski, on the other hand, were unaware of the biological connection between fathers and their children, and although fathers had affectionate relationships with their children, they were regarded as outsiders. Kinship, therefore, depends more on cultural definitions than on biology, because kinship provides social continuity from one generation to the next by establishing ties between the generations who carry a society's culture and those who must learn to live by it.

6. Types of Families

The term nuclear, elementary, or simple family refers to a group comprised of a man and a woman, living in a socially approved sexual relationship with their own or adopted children. It is the familiar unit of mother, father, and children. "Not only is the family a universal institution, but a specific form of the family—the nuclear family—is found in all known societies." (Murdock, 1949). It has been suggested that the nuclear family is the universal form of family relations, always fulfilling "distinctive and vital functions—sexual, economic, reproductive, and educational." (Murdock, 1949). The nuclear family is usually the smallest kinship unit. The nuclear family is a universal

human social group. Either as the sole prevailing form of the family, or as the basic unit from which more complex familial forms are compounded, it exists as a distinct and strongly functional group in every known society (Murdock, 1949).

Parsons has argued that the nuclear family exhibits characteristics that seem to be necessary for the socialization of children and the stabilization of adult personalities (Parsons and Bales, 1995). He has also argued that the incest taboo is universal in human societies for similar reasons and that the taboo results in the perpetual creation of new nuclear family groups through marriage (Parsons, 1954).

The basic structure of the nuclear family depends upon incest taboos; from these it follows that the nuclear family is discontinuous over time and continues to two generations. A third generation can only result from the function of new families by an exchange of males and females between existing nuclear families. The incest taboos, and their extensions outside the nuclear family, together with rules of descent, are the source of all the complexities of kinship usages and terminology. The extended incest taboos establish interdependence between families, siblings, and classes and thus play an important part in the integration of primitive societies.

According to Lowie, universality of family is a fact that stands out beyond all others, and everywhere the husband, wife, and immature children constitute a unit apart from the rest of the community. The universality of the nuclear family can be accounted for by the indispensable functions it performs and the difficulty of ensuring the nuclear family or its constituent relationships—we thus see assembled four functions fundamental to human social life—the sexual, the economic, the reproductive, and the educational. A major factor in maintaining the nuclear family is economic cooperation based upon division of labor between the sexes. Economic cooperation also strengthens the ties between parents and children and between siblings.

There are three other types of family composition, besides the nuclear family. Extended families include additional relatives such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, or cousins. The remaining two family structures are variations on the nuclear family: Single-parent families are nuclear families in which one parent is absent. In compound families, children are directly related to only one of the two parents. When a divorced parent with custody of children remarries, for example, the resulting family—parent, children, and stepparent—constitutes a compound family. Even when they are relatively small, compound families can have complicated structures, as both wife and husband may bring to their new family children from prior marriages and may then have children together. Compound families have the potential to include a variety of complex relationships in which children have closer family ties to one parent than the other and, in the most complicated cases, other children have equally strong family ties to both parents.

Although the abovementioned four structures describe families in most societies, other variations exist. For example, the family as an isolated social group barely exists among Indonesia's Dani, because the community as a whole is the major focus of social life, and children move away from biological parents to live with other relatives by the time they are ten years old.

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Dr. (Mrs.) Sumita Chudhuri is a social anthropologist, whose area of interest is mainly the urban problem in Indian cities. Her fields of interest and publication are the anthropological study of urban poor, urbanization, migration, ethnicity, and urban ecology. She has completed a study on four large metropolitan cities in India—Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi, and Madras—which is in press. She has also completed a number of projects on different categories of urban poor. Her book *A Study of Beggars of Kalighat, Calcutta* was published by Anthropological Survey of India, with whom she was previously affiliated. She has started her next project on urban ecology. She is currently affiliated with the Department of Anthropology, Calcutta University, as UGC Research Scientist.