Essentials of Sociology

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The Family

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Introduction

There have been serious philosophical objections to the idea of tradition and its sacredness. Utilitarian thinkers, for instance, tell us that traditions are not self-justifying, or that moral traditions can frustrate the moral progress of societies and individuals. In the wake of our struggle for independence, traditional authorities were denounced by nationalists and progressives. And while the requirements of democracy have generally been pitted against tradition, a number of philosophers from Alasdair McIntyre to Alain Locke and David Gauthier have raised questions about the narrow-mindedness and absence of self-examination that informs ordinary thinking about democracy as well as the lack of self-examination that limits the diffusion of democratic ideals.

Tradition is a customary way of doing things that is unique to a group. It is what is handed down from generation to generation. To borrow a religious language, it is the acceptance of the faith of our fathers. As renowned sociologist Shils puts it, the "decisive criterion (of its traditionalism) is that having been created through human actions, through thought and imagination, it is handed down from one generation to the next." Of course, being handed down does not entail being accepted. A tradition is a tradition only because it is accepted by the next generation that also passes it on. The continued acceptance of a tradition is the basis of its endurance.

It is important to note that the acceptance of a traditional idea, belief, or practice is subject to what the people it serves make of it in terms of their well-being. The notion that a tradition has a suffocating grip on a people is, therefore, misleading. It depends on the moral weight that the people accord it. This is what Kwame Gyekye has in mind when he notes that "the continuity or survival of a tradition depends on the normative weight it can carry with (a) generation" that accepts it and "much of the authority of an inherited tradition is said to have derived from the evaluative activities of a recipient generation."

What goes into the evaluative activities of a recipient generation? How do individuals and communities come to the conclusion that a way of life that they inherited from their forebears has meaning for them and is good for their well-being? These questions assume that we really have a choice in the matter. And to some extent, we do. After all, we can choose to ignore or even eradicate those traditions that we find unacceptable for various reasons. The limitation has to do with the fact that a recipient generation is not completely isolated from the giving gene-ration. Unless a whole generation of potential receivers collectively commits patricide, they will have their parents for the better part of their lives. So did those parents have their own parents. There is therefore an interlocking and intersecting relationship of givers and receivers with givers interested in and monitoring the receivers' attitude to the tradition of their parents and grandparents. In general, we are obedient and loyal offspring of the community that seers us, of course through the family institution.

The family has been around since the beginning of human kind and clearly will exist in some form forever. Many definitions of the family describe diverse domestic arrangements among human societies. It is assumed that the family performs biological as well as social reproduction for the survival and the continuation of the society. Generally speaking, the family is regarded as a major social institution and a locus of much of a person's social activity. It is a social unit created by blood, marriage, or adoption, and can be described as nuclear (parents and children) or extended (encompassing other relatives). The family plays a crucial role for personality formation and socialization of every individual. However, what the family looks like, what it does, and how it operates depends on some variables that seem complex.

The structural arrangement of the society affects the family and influences the entity the family becomes. Since the family does not operate in a vacuum, whatever changes affect it, will be as a result of the changes that characterize the society. Thus, in order to work with and understand what the family stands for, one needs to see the family in the context of the structural arrangement and social order. The family exists within an environment; it is not merely the product of change. In a dynamic process, the family acts and reacts to the social, political, environmental and economic forces around it.

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. It is generally assumed today

that the modern family has undergone significant transformations in its structure. We are told that societal changes have contributed to a sharp reduction in the percentage of orthodox "usual" families, principally "nuclear" families. Replacing these, we are made to understand, are same-sex family, childless families, one-parent families, other family configurations, and quasi-family units based on non-marital cohabitation. This argument of the decline has been advanced for a number of decades.

The family is generally recognized as an element of a broader kinship network that links ancestors and descendants of a person. Most published statistics on the family are based on census or household survey questions and responses. In Africa and in most parts of the world, the "family" is defined in censuses and surveys as two or more persons related by blood, marriage, or adoption and living in the same residence. The first part of the definition excludes non-marital cohabitation but can include extended as well as nuclear family members. However, the second part of the definition severely restricts family composition by limiting the family members to those who share living facilities under the same roof (Glick 1957). This standard definition is basically an accommodation to requirements of data collection in censuses and surveys in which identifying population in geographic contexts down to the separate dwelling unit is necessary.

What is the Family?

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 political parties 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. "File 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.

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. 'File 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.

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's 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 tile fertility of women are a major, but not the most significant factor in the development cycle of the domestic group.

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 Darn 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 asked, 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

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 above mentioned four structures describe families in most societies, other variations exist. For example, the family as an isolated social group barely exists among Indonesia's Dam, 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

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