

Feb. 19, 2004

LECTURE 5: DEFINITION OF THE FAMILY I

Read: Coontz: What we really miss about the 1950s 33-50

Giele: Decline of the Family Skolnick 57-75

Begin Wolf 1-22

- I. It's hard to define the family
 - A. "Family" is the intersection of many enterprises; it "does" lots of stuff, accomplishes lots of things
 1. What are some?
 - B. Gough's universal definition of family (a definition that applies to all societies):
 - a. "A married couple or other group of adult kinsfolk who cooperate economically and in the upbringing of children, and all or most of whom share a common dwelling."¹
 - b. Why is this such a convoluted, difficult definition?
 - 1) So much variability cross-culturally has to be taken into account
- II. Taking certain *perspectives* on the family is one way to loosely define it
 - A. First perspective: as a **social unit**
 1. A set of capacities
 - a. Social roles
 - 1) Specific roles: I paint the woodwork; my husband paints the ceilings
 - 2) General role: the combination of specific roles that make up the role "wife"
 - a) Roles may not be perfectly logical, consistent
 - b) Examples?

¹ Kathleen Gough, 1975. The origin of the family. In Rayna R. Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. New York: Monthly Review: 52.
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- 3) A set of roles makes up an *institution*
 - a) The institution of marriage; the institution of the family
 - 4) And sets of institutions makes up a society; a social system
2. As we grow up, we learn how roles are defined, we learn rules of behavior
- a. Culture is, in part, rules that define how you act and how you see yourself—your identity
 - b. Brief definition of culture
 - 1) Learned (taught)
 - 2) Shared
 - 3) Normative
3. Family roles are crucial because a lot of necessary work, learning, interactions, etc., occur in the family
4. What general roles are peculiar to the family?
- a. Husband, wife, etc.
 - 1) Not professor
 - b. Mother, father
 - c. Child, daughter, son, sister, brother
 - d. Secondary roles: grandparent, mother-in-law, etc.
 - 1) We can no longer define the family as residing together
5. What are the sources of role strain?
- a. Change in the larger society
 - b. Or built-in contradictions within the family

- c. Example: ideas of fairness in modern mainstream American families
 - 1) Getting paid for good grades?
 - a) Is this fair? Doesn't it make siblings compete? And feel resentful when it doesn't seem fair?
 - b) A student once said this practice was stopped in her family because of a younger mentally retarded sibling
 - c) The new arrangement was that the whole family went out to dinner at end of school year, "job well done"
 - 2) That fairness ought to be gender-blind is increasingly subscribed to
 - a) Daughters increasingly get as much support to go to college as sons
 - b) Examples of shifts? Of areas where fairness is still not gender-blind?
- 6. Another question related to stresses and strains: is there a lack of fit between the norms in the family and elsewhere?
 - a. Outright contradictions?
 - 1) For example, payment for work done versus allowance, versus birthday gifts
 - 2) What is the distinction? How do family roles and values differ from roles in contexts where work is paid for?
 - b. Housework: how is it like work done on the outside and how not?
 - 1) Lots of stresses there

B. Second perspective: Family as a **kinship unit**

- 1. Where roles are defined by reference to kinship (descent or marriage)

- a. What is kinship? The answer is not immediately obvious
 - 1) Cultures vary in terms of how they define who is kin to whom
 - a) E.g. types of lineality
 - b) Cousin marriage—Catholic Church doesn't allow first cousin marriages; other societies do, even say that marriage between certain types of first cousins is the ideal
- b. What are the basic axes of kinship for us?
 - 1) By blood
 - a) Father, mother, sibling
 - (1) We believe we are related by chromosomes, etc.
 - (2) We're related to our parents, but not to our spouses
 - (3) Other cultures see things very differently
 - b) What's a "blood brother" ceremony?
 - 2) By law
 - a) Marriage, a legal arrangement has to happen
 - b) Even marriages "made in heaven" have to be made on earth, too
 - (1) Why is this important?
 - (a) The theme of the opera "Madama Butterfly"
 - (b) She thought it was a real marriage; he was ethnocentric and racist, knew from the beginning he'd choose a "proper" (white) wife

- (c) She kills herself when he and his new wife come to claim her son

- 3) Legitimacy is not so important now
 - a) We have some famous illegitimate—intentionally so—births in this country
 - b) But it used to be very important
 - c) The Supremes’ “Love child”
 - (1) Listen to the song’s lyrics to understand the connections often made between illegitimacy and other negative factors

c. Features of marriage found widely?

- 1) Joins 2 kinship groups
- 2) Allocates rights and duties
 - a) The roles of husband and wife
- 3) Regulates sexual activity
- 4) Legitimizes offspring
 - a) Who is to be considered the father? In our society traditionally, no marriage, no father, in some respects
 - b) The Skolnick introduction says this might not be true anymore
 - c) What is a “natural” child?
 - d) For us, sexual intercourse is the prime symbol of marriage
 - e) Why we giggle at polygyny, at the idea of woman-woman marriage in parts of E. Africa

- (1) But these are **not** lesbian relationships
 - f) And why marrying a ghost or stick seems so weird
 - g) Because for us, blood is a matter of birth, birth a matter of procreation, procreation a matter of sexual intercourse
 - h) It's helpful to look at exceptions:
 - (1) Jesus Christ
 - (2) Different for Catholics (Mary is seen to have remained a virgin all her life—and *she* came to be seen as immaculately conceived)
 - (3) Pay attention to the lyrics of “The Cherry Tree Carol” next Christmas
 - (a) A bit of a soap opera
 - (b) Joseph tells Mary, “let he who is the father of your child get cherries for you”
 - (c) Jesus spoke from the womb—“bend down, that my mother might have some cherries”
 - (d) A contest of power between father and son, which the son wins, and, more indirectly, between social father and biological father (God)
 - (e) Note that **Mary** doesn't have the power to make the cherry tree bend down—she has to get them from a male—Joseph, and then Jesus
2. **Types** of families, according to kinship relations
- a. Nuclear
 - b. Polygamous

- c. Extended family
- d. Matrifocal family
- e. Stem family

3. So, the right questions to ask are:

- a. What's the kinship system *in that society*?
- b. What's marriage *in that society*?
- c. What things constrain or strain these?

C. Third perspective: family as **process**

- 1. Family as a phase in the process of reproduction
 - a. Relatively long phase
- 2. How enduring is it?
- 3. What causes its consolidation and fragmentation?

III. There are 3 other possible perspectives:

A. Family as an **economic unit**

- 1. Production, exchange, consumption
- 2. How is family a self-contained economic unit? How not?

B. Family as a **ritual unit**

- 1. A site where rituals get enacted: e.g., exchange of gifts at Christmas
 - a. Eating at Thanksgiving
- 2. What are the values and beliefs here?
- 3. Family as a medium for symbolic communication
 - a. As a model for other areas of life

b. A miniature version of how they ought to be elsewhere

(1) Examples of “family” metaphors?

C. Family as a **residential unit**

1. Household

2. Who eats together, sleeps under the same roof?

a. Our assumption is that the co-residers are the nuclear family

3. And, what are the constraints and strains?

Note: These perspectives aren't mutually exclusive

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