PART I

Introduction to the Study of Families

READING 1

The Family in Question

What Is the Family? Is It Universal?

Diana Gittins

Until recently, most sociological studies of the family have been dominated by functionalist definitions of what the family is and what "needs" it fulfills in society. Functionalists' theories of the family are treated elsewhere at length (Gittins 1982; Morgan 1975), but it is worth examining some of their main assumptions briefly. Generally, functionalists have argued that the family is a universal institution which performs certain specific functions essential to society's survival. Murdock, for instance, defined the family as a "social group characterised by common residence, economic co-operation, and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults."[1] The four basic functions of the family, therefore, are seen as common residence, economic co-operation, reproduction, sexuality. Let us examine each of these in more detail.

Household is the term normally used to refer to co-residence. Murdock's assumption is that it is also a defining characteristic of "the family," and vice versa. It is generally assumed that a married couple, or parent and child(ren), will form a household, and that family implies and presupposes "household." Yet this is by no means always so. Margaret Mead (1971) showed how Samoan children chose the household where they wanted to reside, and often changed their residence again later. Sibling households—or frérèches—were common in parts of Europe, and are a dominant form of household among the Ashanti (Bender 1979:494).

There are numerous examples in contemporary society of families who do not form households, or only form households for periods of time. Families where the husband is in the armed services, is a traveling salesman or travels frequently abroad may only have the husband/father resident for short periods of time.

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Families where partners have jobs some distance away from one another may maintain a second household where one of them lives during the week. Children who are sent to boarding school may spend little more than a third of the year residing with their parent(s).

Gutman (1976) found that it was common among black slave families in the USA for a husband and wife to live on different plantations and see one another for a few hours once or twice a week. Soliende de Gonzalez (1965) found this type of household very common in Black Carib society: "there are groupings which I have called 'dispersed families' in which the father, although absent for long periods of time, retains ultimate authority over a household for which he provides the only support, and where affective bonds continue to be important between him and his wife and children" (p. 1544). Obviously people can consider themselves "family" without actually co-residing, and can also co-reside without considering themselves to be "family."

On the other hand, households might be characterised by a shared set of activities such as sleeping, food preparation, eating, sexual relations, and caring for those who cannot care for themselves. Some have argued that a household can be defined to some extent in terms of a range of domestic activities. "Sharing the same pot" has traditionally been the boundary drawn by census enumerators for demarcating one household from another. Yet these activities need not necessarily, and often do not, occur within one household. Some members of a household may eat there all the time, while others only part of the time. Similarly, as mentioned before, some members may not always sleep in the household for a majority of the time. They may well consider themselves notwithstanding to be a family. Conversely, prisoners eat and sleep under the same roof, but do not consider themselves to be a family.

There is no hard-and-fast rule, much less a definition in universal terms, that can be applied to a household in terms of domestic activities. Whether in modern industrial society or in Africa or Asia "there is no basis for assuming that such activities as sleeping, eating, child-rearing and sexual relations must form a complex and must always occur under one roof" (Smith 1978:33). Household is thus in some ways just as nebulous a term as family, although it lacks the ideological implications that "family" carries.

Murdock further posits "economic co-operation" as a defining characteristic of all families. This is a very broad term and can encompass a wide range of activities from cooking to spinning to resources in terms of people and skills. Economic co-operation is something which can, and does, occur throughout all levels of society and is not specific to the family. Economic co-operation frequently occurs *between* households as well as between individuals within households. Undoubtedly households do entail an economic relationship in various ways; in particular, they entail the distribution, production and allocation of resources. Resources include food, drink, material goods, but also service, care, skills, time and space. The notion of "co-operation," moreover, implies an equal distribution of resources, yet this is seldom so. Allocating food, space, time and tasks necessitates some kind of a division of labour; different tasks need doing every day and may vary by week and by season. The number of people living together will be finite but also changeable—not just in terms of numbers, but also in terms of age, sex, marital status, and physical capacity.

All resources are finite and some may be extremely scarce; some form of allocation therefore has to occur, and this presupposes power relationships. Food, work, and space are rarely distributed equally between co-residing individuals, just as they differ between households and social sectors. Most frequently, the allocation of resources and division of labour is based on differences according to sex and age. Rather than using Murdock's definition of "economic co-operation," it is thus more useful to understand families in terms of the ways in which gender and age define, and are defined by, the division of labour within, and beyond, households. These divisions also presuppose power relationships and inequality—in effect, patriarchy—rather than co-operation and equality.

Power relationships define and inform concepts of sexuality, Murdock's third defining category. His definition of sexuality is *hetero*sexuality, although this is only one of various forms of sexuality. Presumably this is because the final—and perhaps most important—"function" of families as seen by such theorists is reproduction, which necessitates heterosexual relations, at least at times. Sexuality is not something specific to families; rather, the assumption is that heterosexuality *should* be a defining characteristic of families. It also, according to Murdock, presupposes a "socially approved relationship" between two adults.

Social recognition of mating and of parenthood is obviously intimately bound up with social definitions and customs of marriage. It is often assumed that, in spite of a variety of marriage customs and laws, marriage as a binding relationship between a man and a woman is universal. Yet it has been estimated that only 10 per cent of all marriages in the world are actually monogamous; polyandry and polygyny are common in many societies, just as serial monogamy is becoming increasingly common in our own. Marriage is not always a heterosexual relationship; among the Nuer, older women marry younger women. The Nuer also practise a custom known as "ghost marriages," whereby when an unmarried or childless man dies, a relation of his then marries a woman "to his name" and the resulting children of this union are regarded as the dead man's children and bear his name (see Edholm 1982:172).

Marriage customs are not only variable between cultures and over time, but also vary between social classes. Moreover, Jessie Bernard (1973) has shown that the meanings which men and women attribute to the same marriage differ quite markedly. Undoubtedly marriage involves some form of status passage and public avowal of recognizing other(s) as of particular importance in one way or another, yet it does not occur universally between two people, nor between two people of the opposite sex, nor is it always viewed as linked to reproduction. Marriage, in the way in which we think of it, is therefore not universal.

Similarly, definitions of sexuality with regard to incest have not been universal or unchanging. In medieval Europe it was considered incestuous to have sexual relations with anyone less than a seventh cousin, and marriage between cousins was proscribed. Now it is possible to marry first cousins. In Egypt during the Pharaonic and Ptolemaic period, sibling marriages were permitted, and, in some cases, father–daughter marriages. This was seen as a way of preserving the purity of royalty and was not endorsed for the whole of society—although it was permitted for everyone after the Roman conquest of Egypt.

Incestuous marriages were also permitted among royal families in Hawaii and Peru. The Mormons of Utah allowed incest (and polygamy) as a means of ensuring marriage within their church; this was not banned until 1892 (Renvoize 1982:32). Obviously these examples are more related to marriage customs and inheritance or descent problems, but serve to illustrate that even an incest taboo cannot be taken as a universal defining characteristic of families: "who could Adam's sons marry except their sisters?" (ibid., p. 32). Nevertheless, the almost universal existence of some form of incest taboo is a useful illustration of the fact that all societies do, in a myriad of ways, have some form of social organisation of sexuality, mating and reproduction.

Murdock's definition does not take adequate account of the diversity of ways in which co-residence, economic relations, sexuality and reproduction can be organised. Various theorists have made amendments and refinements to Murdock's definition of the family, but all tend to make similar errors. In particular, they translate contemporary western (and usually middleclass) ideas and ideals of what a family should be into what they assume it is everywhere.

Far more precise attempts at definition and analysis have been made by anthropologists who prefer the term kinship to that of family. A feminist anthropologist defined kinship as "the ties which exist between individuals who are seen as related both through birth (descent) and through mating (marriage). It is thus primarily concerned with the ways in which mating is socially organised and regulated,

the ways in which parentage is assigned, attributed and recognised, descent is traced, relatives are classified, rights are transferred across generations and groups are formed" (Edholm 1982:166). This definition of kinship is a vast improvement on functionalist definitions of family because, first, it stresses the fact that kinship is a social construction, and, second, it emphasizes the variability of kinship depending on how it is defined. The social nature of kinship has been stressed by many others elsewhere,[2] and yet there remains a strong common-sense belief that kinship is in fact a quite straightforward biological relationship. It is not.

We assume that because we (think we) know who our parents are and how they made us that kinship is therefore a biological fact. Consider, however, stories we have all heard about children who were brought up by parent(s) for perhaps twenty years, who all along believed their parents were their biological parents, but then discovered that they had in fact been adopted. Such people often suffer severe "identity crises" because they no longer know "who they are" or who their parents are. Their suffering is caused by the way in which we define kinship in our society, namely, in strictly biological terms, differentiating clearly between a "biological" and a "social" parent. The biological parent is always seen by our society as the "real" parent with whom a child should have the strongest ties and bonds. Knowledge of parenthood through families is the central way in which individuals are "located" socially and economically in western society. This, however, is a culturally and historically specific way of defining parenthood and kinship. Other cultures and groups in modern society believe that the person who rears a child is by definition the real parent, regardless of who was involved in the actual reproduction process.

In many poor families in Western Europe and America well into this century it was not uncommon for children to be raised by a grandparent, other kin, or friend, and such children often thought of those who raised them as their parents, even though acknowledging that they also had biological parents who were different. R. T. Smith (1978) found such practises common in Guyana and Jamaica, and reports how "close and imperishable bonds are formed through the act of 'raising' children, irrespective of genetic ties. . . . What is erroneously termed 'fictive kinship' is a widespread phenomenon. . . . While a father may be defined minimally as the person whose genetic material mingled with that of the mother in the formation of the child during one act of sexual intercourse, the father 'role' varies a good deal in any but the most homogeneous societies" (p. 353).

Others have shown the ways in which kinship is a social construction, and how those who are not biologically related to one another come to define themselves as kin: "Liebow, Stack, Ladner and others describe fictive kinship, by which friends are turned into family. Since family is supposed to be more reliable than friendship, 'going for brothers,' 'for sisters,' 'for cousins,' increases the commitment of a relationship, and makes people ideally more responsible for one another. Fictive kinship is a serious relationship" (Rapp 1980:292). It is possible to argue that this is how all kinship began and becomes constructed. Kinship, whether we choose to label it as "biological," "social" or "fictive," is a way of identifying others as in some way special from the rest, people to whom the individual or collectivity feel responsible in certain ways. It is a method of demarcating obligations and responsibility between individuals and groups.

It is thus essential to get away from the idea that kinship is a synonym for "blood" relations—*even though it may often be expressed in those terms*—and to think of it as a social construction which is highly variable and flexible. Some anthropologists recently have argued that kinship is no more and no less than a system of meanings and symbols and that it is "absolutely distinct from a biological system or a system of biological reproduction. Animals reproduce, mate, and undoubtedly form attachments to each other, but they do not have kinship systems" (Smith 1978:351). Indeed, just as Marx argued that it is labour that distinguishes people from animals, it could equally be argued that it is kinship systems that do just that.

This is not to say that many kinship relations do not have some sort of biological base—many do—but the fact that not all of them do, and that the type of base is highly variable, means that it cannot be assumed that there is some universal biological base to kinship. There is not. As Edholm (1982) argues: "notions of blood ties, of biological connection, which to us seem relatively unequivocal, are highly variable. Some societies of which we have anthropological record recognize only the role of the father or of the mother in conception and procreation. . . . Only one parent is a 'relation,' the other is not. In the Trobriand Islands . . . it is believed that intercourse is not the cause of conception, semen is not seen as essential for conception . . . (but) from the entry of a spirit child into the womb . . . it is the repeated intercourse of the same partner which 'moulds' the child" (p. 168).

Because fatherhood is always potentially unknown, and always potentially contestable, it is therefore also always a social category. Motherhood, on the other hand, is always known. Yet apart from carrying and giving birth to a child, the biological base of motherhood stops there. The rest is socially constructed, although it may be—and often is—attributed to biology or "maternal instinct." Whether or not women breastfeed their children has been historically and culturally variable. Baby bottles are no modern invention, but were used in ancient Egypt and in other cultures since. Historians have noted the number of babies given to "wet nurses" in earlier times in Europe as a sign of lack of love and care for infants on the part of mothers. But we can never really know the emotions felt by people hundreds of years ago or their motivations for their practices. The most we can do is to note that their customs were different. To use our own ideology of motherhood and love and apply it universally to all cultures is a highly ethnocentric and narrow way of trying to understand other societies.

Notions of motherhood and "good mothering" are highly variable:

> In Tahiti young women often have one or two children before they are considered, or consider themselves to be, ready for an approved and stable relationship. It is considered perfectly acceptable for the children of this young woman to be given to her parents or other close kin for adoption. . . . The girl can decide what her relationship to the children will be, but there is no sense in which she is forced into "motherhood" because of having had a baby. (Edholm 1982:170)

Who cares for children and rears them is also variable, although in most cases it is women who do so rather than men. Often those women who rear children may well claim some kinship tie to the biological mother—for example, grandmother or aunt—but this tie may simply be created as a result of rearing another woman's child. Motherhood, therefore, if taken to mean both bearing and rearing children, is not universal and is not a biological "fact."

Nor can it be argued that there is such a thing as maternal "instinct," although it is commonly believed to exist. Women are capable of conceiving children today from the age of 13 or 14, and can continue to bear children approximately every two years until they are 45 or 50. This could mean producing around eighteen or nineteen children (although fecundity declines as women age), and this, of course, seldom occurs. Few women in western society marry before they are 18 or 19, and few women in contemporary society have more than two or three children. Contraceptives control conception, not instincts, and unless it were argued that women are forced to use contraceptives,[3] there is little scope to argue for such a thing as maternal instinct.

Consider further that women who conceive babies now when they are *not* married are not hailed as true followers of their natural instinct, but are considered as "immoral," "loose," "whores," and so on. As Antonis (1981) notes: "maternal instinct is ascribed to *married women* only" (p. 59). That women can conceive and

bear children is a universal phenomenon; that they do so by instinct is a fallacy. So is the notion that they always raise them. From the moment of birth, motherhood is a social construction.

Sociological and historical studies of the family have tended to pay most attention to the vertical relationships between parents and children. Less attention is paid to the lateral relationships between siblings. Yet in other cultures, and in Western Europe in earlier times, the sibling tie has often formed the basis of households and may be seen as more important than that between parent and child. Among the poorer sectors of western society until quite recently it was common for the eldest daughter to take responsibility for supervising and caring for younger siblings from quite an early age, thereby freeing her mother to engage in waged or domestic work. This remains common in many contemporary societies. In Morocco, for instance, girls "from the age of about four onwards look after younger siblings, fetch and carry, clean and run errands. The tasks themselves are arranged in a hierarchy of importance and attributed to women and girls according to their authority within the household. . . . Boys tend to be freed from domestic tasks and spend their time in groups of peers who play marbles or trap birds" (Maher 1981:73–74).

The content and importance of sibling ties vary, and this is partly a result of different interpretations of reproduction. In societies where the role of the male is seen as peripheral or unimportant—or even non-existent—in reproduction, then his children by another woman are not seen as having any relation to those of the first mother, or vice versa if the mother's role is seen as unimportant. The salience of sibling ties also depends on the organisation of kinship generally. The relative neglect of studying sibling ties as an important aspect of—or even basis of—kinship betrays our own assumptions about the primacy of parenthood in families and, particularly, the assumption that reproduction is the "essence" of kinship, with the mother and child forming the universal core of kinship. As Yanagisako (1977) points out in writing about Goodenough: "while he is undoubtedly right that in every human society mothers and children can be found, to view their *relationship* as the universal nucleus of the family is to attribute to it a social and cultural significance that is lacking in some cases" (pp. 197–98).

Implicit in definitions of kinship is a way of perceiving the social organisation of reproduction and mating, at the centre of which therefore is an organisation of relations between the sexes. The organisation of, and differentiation between, male and female takes many different forms, but all societies do have a social construction of the sexes into gender. Gender is an inherent part of the manner in which all societies are organised and is also a crucial part of the different ways in which kinship has been constructed and defined. The social, economic and political organisation of societies has been initially at least based on kinship—and thus also on gender. Understanding society means understanding the ways in which a society organised kinship and gender, and how these influence one another. Gender and kinship are universally present—as are mothers and children—but the content of them, and the meanings ascribed to them, is highly variable.

The most basic divisions of labour within any society, as pointed out by Durkheim (1933) and others, are based on age and sex. While age as a category can eventually be achieved, sex is ascribed, permanent, and immutable. The biological differences between men and women are such that only women can conceive and lactate; only men can impregnate. In spite of these obvious differences, none of them is great enough to be adequate grounds for allocating one kind of work to women and another to men. Indeed, crossculturally and historically there are very few jobs that can be claimed to be specifically and universally performed by either men or women. Women have ploughed and mined and still do; men have laundered, gathered fruit and minded children. Hunting and warfare have almost always been male activities, while care of the young and sick has usually been a female activity. But allocation of tasks is also strongly based on age, so it is important to remember that it may be *young* men who hunt and *old* men or women who care for children;

old women may be responsible for cooking, while both young men and women may work in the fields or mines.

Age is an important factor to consider in trying to understand the organisation of kinship and households. Nobody remains the same age—contrary to contemporary images in the media of the "happy family" where the couple is permanently 30 and the children forever 8 and 6. As individuals age, so the composition and structure of the unit in which they live change. Consider the ways in which the household composition and resources of a couple change as, first, aged 20, they marry and both work; second, aged 25, they have had two children and the wife has left the labour market for a few years to rear the children until they attend school; third, at 30, one partner leaves or dies and one parent is left with total care of the children; fourth, at 35, one or both may remarry someone who perhaps has three children from an earlier marriage, or may take in an elderly parent to care for, and so on. The number of wage earners and dependants changes over a household's cycle, just as it changes for the individuals within the household.

Thinking in terms of "the" family leads to a static vision of how people actually live and age together and what effects this process has on others within the household in which they live. Moreover, the environment and conditions in which any household is situated are always changing, and these changes can and often do have important repercussions on individuals and households. As Tamara Hareven (1982) points out, it is important when analysing families to differentiate between individual time, family time, and historical time. Thus, in considering the structure and meaning of "family" in any society, it is important to understand how definitions of dependency and individual time vary and change, how patterns of interaction between individuals and households change, and how historical developments affect all of these.

The notion of there being such a thing as "the family" is thus highly controversial and full of ambiguities and contradictions. Childbearing, childrearing, the construction of gender, allocation of resources, mating and marriage, sexuality and ageing all loosely fit into our idea of family, and yet we have seen how all of them are variable over time, between cultures and between social sectors. The claim that "the family" is universal has been especially problematic because of the failure by most to differentiate between how small groups of people live and work together, and what the ideology of appropriate behaviour for men, women and children within families has been.

Imbued in western patriarchal ideology, as discussed previously, are a number of important and culturally specific beliefs about sexuality, reproduction, parenting and the power relationships between age groups and between the sexes. The sum total of these beliefs makes up a strong *symbol-system which is labelled as the family.* Now while it can be argued that all societies have beliefs and rules on mating, sexuality, gender and age relations, the content of rules is culturally and historically specific and variable, and in no way universal. Thus to claim that patriarchy is universal is as meaningless as claiming that the family is universal.

If defining families is so difficult, how do we try to understand how and why people live, work and form relationships together in our own society? First, we need to acknowledge that while what we may think of as families are not universal, there are still trends and patterns specific to our culture which, by careful analysis, we can understand more fully. Second, we can accept that while there can be no perfect definition, it is still possible to discover certain defining characteristics which can help us to understand changing patterns of behaviour and beliefs. Finally, and most important, we can "deconstruct" assumptions usually made about families by questioning what exactly they mean. Before doing this, however, it is useful to attempt some definition of what is meant by "family" in western society.

Problematic though it may be, it is necessary to retain the notion of co-residence, because most people have lived, and do live, with others for much of their lives. Thus "household" is useful as a defining characteristic, while bearing in mind that it does not necessarily imply sexual or intimate relationships, and

that, moreover, relationships *between* households are a crucial aspect of social interaction. "Household" should not be interpreted as a homogeneous and undivided unit. Virtually all households will have their own division of labour, generally based on ideals and beliefs, as well as the structure, of age and sex. There will always tend to be power relationships within households, because they will almost invariably be composed of different age and sex groups and thus different individuals will have differential access to various resources.

Because the essence of any society is interaction, a society will always be composed of a myriad of relationships between people, from the most casual to the most intimate. Relationships are formed between people of the same sex, the opposite sex, the same age group, different age groups, the same and different classes, and so on. Some of these relationships will be sexual—and sexual relations can occur in any type of relationship. Some relationships will be affectionate and loving, others will be violent or hostile. They may be made up of very brief encounters or may extend over the best part of a person's life cycle. Thus while relationships are extremely varied in the ways in which they are formed, their nature and duration, *ideologically* western society has given highest status to long-term relationships between men and women, and between parents and children. Ideologically, such relationships are supposed to be loving and caring, though in reality many are not. They are presented as "natural," but as we have seen, they are not. These ideals have become reified and sanctified in the notion of "family," virtually to the exclusion of all other long-term or intimate relationships.

Ideals of family relationships have become enshrined in our legal, social, religious and economic systems which, in turn, reinforce the ideology and penalise or ostracise those who transgress it. Thus there are very real pressures on people to behave in certain ways, to lead their lives according to acceptable norms and patterns. Patriarchal ideology is embedded in our socioeconomic and political institutions, indeed, in the very language we use, and as such encourages, cajoles and pressures people to follow certain paths. Most of these are presented and defined in terms of "the family," and the family is in turn seen as the bulwark of our culture. The pressures of patriarchal ideology are acted out—and reacted against—in our interpersonal relationships, in marriage and non-marriage, in love and hate, having children and not having children. In short, much of our social behaviour occurs in, and is judged on the basis of, the ideology of "the family."

Relationships are universal, so is some form of co-residence, of intimacy, sexuality and emotional bonds. But the *forms* these can take are infinitely variable and can be changed and challenged as well as embraced. By analysing the ways in which culture has prescribed certain, and proscribed other, forms of behaviour, it should be possible to begin to see the historical and cultural specificity of what is really meant when reference is made to "the family."

Endnotes

1. Murdock quoted in Morgan (1975), p. 20.
2. Notably B. J. Harris, J. Goody, W. Goode.
3. For a full discussion of power relationships between men and women with regard to contraceptive practice see Gittins (1982).

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