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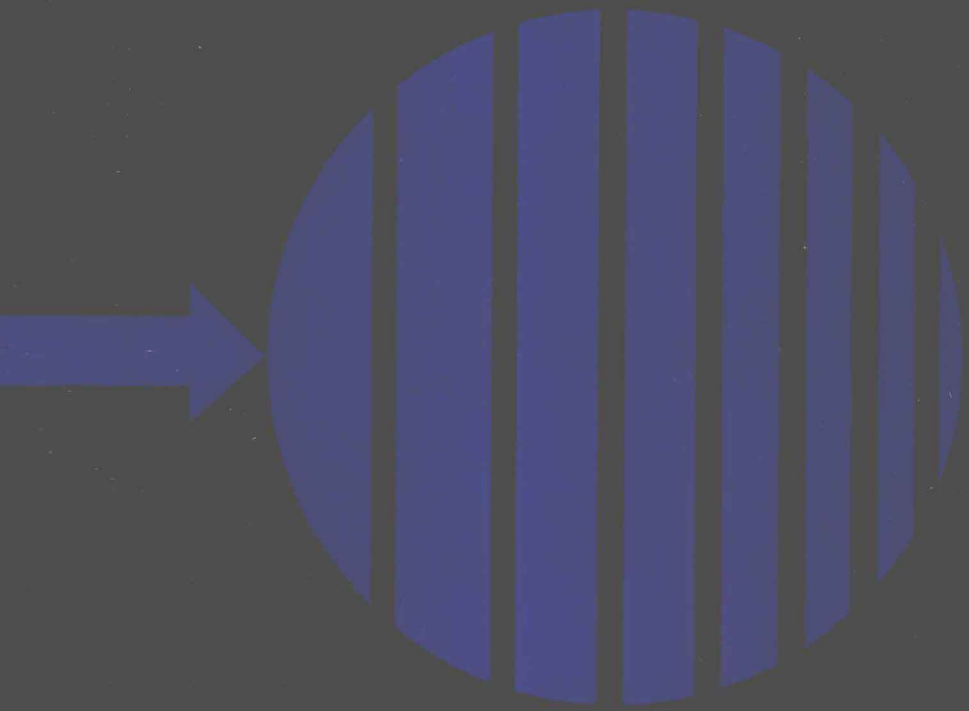
the family

WILLIAM J. GOODE



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preface

In these pages, I have tried to exemplify, rather than argue, the fruitfulness of sociological theory when applied to family relations. Hopefully, the serious reader will see not only the framework of ideas that here encompasses a wide range of facts, but also will realize how using such a framework will elucidate still other observations not here reported. This text also utilizes data from other societies, both present and past, to extend our range of experience, to qualify our generalizations, to test our hypotheses, and to show in general that twentieth-century sociology can no longer be bound by a parochialism that confines its vision to the urban centers of the contemporary United States. In so doing, the book suggests that a well-trained young sociologist with a historical bent will find much work to do, since we have few reliable studies on family systems of the past.

In pointing to the complex relations between family systems and the larger social structure, I am arguing implicitly that the family can no longer be treated as a simple set of dependent variables explained by cryptic remarks about "economic forces." The aim of a social theorist is to state and demonstrate determinate relationships between sets of central variables, no matter which may turn out to be "dependent." In any event, a systematic attempt to explain *any* important institution is likely to force the researcher to explore the larger social structure. Thus, I am urging the wise student of society to give serious thought to the importance of the family system.

Finally, a word with respect to the general problem of values. It is sometimes useful to remember that science focuses on what is, how people actually behave and feel, and that science cannot tell us how we ought to behave. It is therefore almost unnecessary to state that my analyses of particular family patterns do not imply approval of them. But I mean more. I think that sociology as a science can justifiably explore from time to time some alternative modes of living; can suggest possible utopias. This is not, however, a task of salon sociology. We should be well equipped with sound theory and facts before posing such solutions. Whether or not we work out better family systems, at least some of our future social planning will be wiser if we base it on the best of sound sociological research; and sociological wisdom will increasingly have to take systematic account of family patterns.

William J. Goode

contents

the family as an element in the social structure

one

In all known societies, almost everyone lives his life enmeshed in a network of family rights and obligations called role relations. A person is made aware of his role relations through a long period of socialization during his childhood, a process in which he learns how others in his family expect him to behave, and in which he himself comes to feel this is both the right and the desirable way to act. Some, however, find their obligations a burden, or do not care to take advantage of their rights. This wide range of behavior leads to one of the commonest themes of conversation found in all societies—just what the duties of a given child or parent, husband or wife, cousin or uncle ought to be, and then, whether he *has done* his duty. This type of discussion is especially common in societies undergoing industrialization, where arguments are frequent concerning the duties of women.

Various Views of the Family

The intense emotional meaning of family relations for almost all members of a society has been observable throughout man's history. Philosophers and social analysts have noted that society is a structure made up of *families*, and that the peculiarities of a given society can be described by outlining its family relations. The earliest moral and ethical writings suggest

that a society loses its strength if people fail in their family obligations. Confucius thought, for example, that happiness and prosperity would prevail in the society if only everyone would behave "correctly" as a family member—which primarily meant that no one should fail in his filial obligations. The relationship between a ruler and his subjects, then, was parallel to that of a father and his children. Similarly, much of the early Hebrew writing, in Exodus, Deuteronomy, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, and Proverbs, is devoted to the importance of obeying family rules. In India, too, the earliest codified literature (the *Rig-Veda*, about the last half of the 2nd millenium B.C., and the Law of Manu, about the beginning of the Christian Era) devote great attention to the family.

From time to time, imaginative social analysts or philosophers have sketched out plans for societies that *might* be created—utopias—in which new definitions of family roles are presented as solutions to traditional social problems. Plato's *Republic* is illustrative of this approach. He was probably the first to urge the creation of a society in which all people, men and women alike, would have an equal opportunity to develop their talents to the utmost, and to achieve a position in society solely through merit. Since family relations in all known societies prevent a selection based solely on individual worth, in Plato's utopia the tie between parents and children would play no part, because no one would know who was his own child or parent. Conception would take place at the same times each year at certain hymeneal festivities. Children born out of season would be eliminated (along with those born defective); all children would be taken from their parents at birth, and reared under challenging conditions by specially designated people. Similarly, experimental or utopian communities, like Oneida, the Shakers, and the Mormons in this country, insisted that changes in family relations were necessary to achieve their goals.

Included among the aims of many revolutions since the French Revolution of 1789 has been a profound alteration in family relations. Since World War II, the leaders of all countries undergoing industrialization have introduced new laws, well ahead of public opinion, intended to create family patterns that would be more in conformity with the demands of urban and industrial life.

All these facts, by demonstrating that philosophers, reformers, and religions, as well as secular leaders, have throughout history been at least implicitly aware of the importance of family patterns as a central element in the social structure, also suggest that the social analyst must understand family behavior in order to understand social processes generally.

The strategic significance of the family is to be found in its *mediating* function in the larger society. It links the *individual* to the larger social structure. A society will not survive unless its many needs are met, such as the production and distribution of food, protection of the young and old, the sick and the pregnant, conformity to the law, the socialization of the young, and so on. Only if *individuals* are motivated to serve the needs of the society will it be able to survive. The formal agencies of social control (such as the police) are not enough to do more than force the extreme deviant to conform. Socialization makes most of us wish to conform, but throughout each day we are often tempted to deviate. Thus both the internal controls and the formal authorities are insufficient. What is needed is a set of social forces that responds to the individual whenever he does well or poorly, supporting his internal controls as well as the controls of the formal agencies. The family, by surrounding the individual through much of his social life, can furnish that set of forces.

The family then, is made up of individuals, but it is also part of the larger social network. Thus we are all under the constant supervision of our kin, who feel free to criticize, suggest, order, cajole, praise, or threaten, so that we will

carry out our role obligations. Even in the most industrialized and urban of societies, where it is sometimes supposed that people lead rootless and anonymous lives, most people are in frequent interaction with other family members. Men who have achieved high position usually find that even as adults they still respond to their parents' criticisms, are still angered or hurt by a brother's scorn.

Thus it is *through the family* that the society is able to elicit from the *individual* his necessary contribution. The family, in turn, can continue to exist only if it is supported by the larger society. If the society as a larger social system furnishes the family, as a smaller social system, the conditions necessary for its survival, these two types of systems must be interrelated in many important ways. The two main foci in this volume will be the relations among family members and the relations between the family and the society.

Preconceived Notions about the Family

Such a task presents many difficulties. One of the greatest lies in ourselves. We know too much about the family to be able to study it both objectively and easily. Our emotions are aroused quickly by the behavior of families, and we are likely to feel that family patterns other than our own are queer or improper. We are too prone to argue about what is *right*, rather than coolly to demonstrate what *is*. In addition, we have had an opportunity to observe many people engaged in family behavior, so that when we consider almost any generalization (such as "the lower social strata have a higher divorce rate than the upper") we can often find a specific experience that seems to refute the generalization. Thus our personal experience is really a narrow sample of the wide range of family behavior, but it is so vivid to us, that we are likely to see no reason to look for broader data with which to test it.

Our emotional involvement and reliance on individual experience often convince people that the findings of family sociology must be "obvious," since they deal with what we already know. Many "well known" beliefs about the family, however, are not well-grounded in fact. Others are only partly true, and require precise study in order to be understood better. One such belief is that "children hold the family together." In fact, most divorcing couples do not have children. But the most valid data now suggest, rather, that the causal nexus is this: People who have not become well adjusted, who for many reasons may be prone to divorce, are also less likely to have children.

Perhaps the need for testing apparently self-evident ideas about the family may be seen in another way. Suppose that a researcher in the field of the family had demonstrated the following set of facts. Would it have been worth doing? Or were the facts already known?

1. The present divorce rate in the U.S. is much higher than the rates in primitive societies, and higher than any other nation has ever experienced.

2. Because of the importance of the extended family in China and India, the average size of the household has always been very high, with many generations living under one roof.

3. In Western nations, the age at marriage among peasants was always low, since early marriage meant that children would soon be produced, and these were useful in farming. By contrast, the average age at marriage among the nobility was generally higher.

Although these statements sound plausible to many people, and impressive arguments could be adduced to support them, in fact they are all false. A majority of primitive societies have higher rates of marital dissolution than our own, and several nations in the past have at various times equaled or exceeded our present rate—notably Japan in the 1880's, when even her official rate

(certainly an underestimate) was over 300 divorces per 1,000 marriages. Every survey of Chinese and Indian households has shown that they are relatively small (about 3.3 to 5.5, from one region to another). Peasant marriages were later, on the average, than the nobility, requiring as they did that the couple have land of their own.

Thus we see that in the instances just cited, common beliefs *did* require testing. Of course, many popular beliefs about how families work *are* correct, but we cannot simply assume their correctness. We must examine many of our individual observations to see how well they fit other societies or perhaps the different family types in our own society.

To understand family behavior we must be self-conscious in our method. We must adopt an approach that will yield reliable results. Vast tables of figures, such as the ages of all the married couples in the world, taken from national censuses, would contain many facts, but might add very little to our grasp of family behavior. What we seek is *organized* facts, or a structure of propositions, that will illuminate one another. That is, we seek theory as well as facts. Theory without facts is blind speculation; facts without theory are random and often insignificant observations.

The Family as a Unique Institution

A brief consideration of certain peculiarities of the family as an element of the social structure will suggest how better theory and a fruitful general approach are needed in this area.

The family is the only social institution other than religion which is *formally* developed in all societies. Indeed, the term, "social structure" in anthropology is often used to mean the family and kinship structure. By contrast, some have argued that in certain societies legal systems do not exist because there is no formally organized legislative body or judiciary. Of course, it is possible to abstract from concrete behavior the legal *aspects* of action, or the economic aspects, or the political dynamics, even when there are no explicitly labeled agencies formally in control of these areas in the society. However, the kinship statuses and their responsibilities are the object of both formal and informal attention in societies at a high or a low technological level.

Family duties are the *direct* role responsibility of everyone in the society, with rare exceptions. Almost everyone is both born into a family and founds one of his own. Each person is kinsman to many. Many people, on the other hand, may escape the religious duties which others take for granted, or the political burdens of the society. Almost no family role responsibilities can be delegated to others, as more specialized obligations can be in a work situation.

Participation in family activities has a further interesting quality, that though it is not backed by the formal punishments supporting many other kinds of obligations, almost everyone takes part nonetheless. We must, for example, engage in economic or productive acts, or face the alternative of starving. We must enter the army, pay taxes, and appear before courts, or face physical penalties and force. However, no such penalties face the individual who does not wish to marry, or refuses to talk with his father or brother. Nevertheless, so pervasive and recurrent are the social pressures, and so intertwined with indirect or direct rewards and punishments, that almost everyone either conforms, or claims to conform, to family demands.

Next, as suggested earlier, the family is the fundamental *instrumental* foundation of the larger social structure, in that all other institutions depend on its contributions. The role behavior that is learned within the family becomes the model or prototype for role behavior required in other segments of

the society. The content of the socialization process is the cultural traditions of the society; by passing them on to the next generation the family acts as a conduit or transmission belt by which the culture is kept alive.

Next, each individual's total range of behavior, how he budgets his time and energies, is more easily visible to the family than to outsiders. Family members can evaluate how the individual is allocating his time and money in various of his role activities. Consequently, the family acts as a source of pressure on him to adjust—to work harder and play less, or go to church less and study his school lessons more. In all these ways, the family is an instrument or agent of the larger society; its failure to perform adequately means that the goals of the larger society may not be attained effectively.

A further striking characteristic of the family is that its major functions are separable from one another, but in fact are not separated in any known family system. These functions will be discussed in various contexts in this book, and need no great elaboration at this point. The family contributes these services to the society: reproduction of the young, physical maintenance of family members, social placement of the child, socialization, and social control. Clearly, all these activities could be separated. The mother could send her child to be fed in a neighborhood mess hall, and of course some harassed mothers do send their children to buy lunch in a local snack bar. Those who give birth to a child need not socialize the child. They might send the child to specialists, and indeed specialists do take more responsibility for this task as the child grows older. Parents might, as some eugenicists have suggested, be selected for their breeding qualities, but these might not include any great talent for training the young. Status-placement might be accomplished by random drawing of lots, by IQ tests or periodic examinations in physical and intellectual skills, or by polls of popularity, without regard to an individual's parents, those who socialized or fed him, or others who controlled his daily behavior.

Separations of this kind have been suggested from time to time, and a few hesitant attempts have been made here and there in the world to put them into operation. However, three conclusions relevant to this kind of division can be made. (1) In all known societies, the *ideal* (with certain qualifications to be noted) is that the family be entrusted with all these functions. (2) When one or more family tasks are entrusted to another agency by a revolutionary or utopian society, the change can be made only with the support of much ideological fervor, and sometimes political pressure as well. (3) These instances are also characterized by a gradual return to the more traditional type of family. In both the Israeli *kibbutzim* and the Russian experiments in relieving parents of child care, the ideal of completely communal living was urged, in which husband and wife were to have only a personal and emotional tie and not be bound to each other by constraint. The children were to see their parents at regular intervals but look to their nursery attendants and mother-surrogates for affection and direction during work hours. Each individual was to contribute his best skills to the cooperative unit without regard to family ties or sex status (i.e., there would be few or no "female" or "male" tasks). That ideal was maintained for a while, but behavior has gradually dropped away from the ideal. The only other country in which the pattern has been attempted on a large scale is China. Whether the Chinese commune will retreat from its high ambitions remains to be seen, but chances are good that it will follow the path of the *kibbutz* and the Russian *kolkhoz*.

Various factors contribute to such a deviation from the ideal, but the two most important sets of pressures cannot easily be separated from each other. First is the problem, also noted by Plato, that individuals who develop their

own attitudes and behaviors in the usual Western (i.e., European and European-based) family system do not adjust to the problems of the communal "family." The second is the likelihood that when the family is radically changed, the various relations between it and the larger society are changed, so that new strains are created, demanding new kinds of adjustments on the part of the individuals in the society. Perhaps the planners must develop somewhat different agencies, or a different blueprint, to transform the family.

Concretely, some of the factors reported as "causing" a deviation from the ideal of family living are the following. Some successful or ambitious men and women wish to break away from group control, and leave to establish their lives elsewhere. There, of course, they do not attempt to develop a communal pattern of family living. Parents do try to help their own children secure advantages over other children, where this is possible. Parents not only feel unhappy at not being with their children often enough (notice that youngsters need not "be home for meals"!), but perhaps some feel the husband-wife relationship itself is somewhat empty because children do not occupy in it their usually central place. Husband and wife usually desire more intimacy than is granted under communal arrangements. Finally, the financial costs of taking care of children outside the family are rather high.

These comments have nothing to do with "capitalism" in its current political and economic argument with "communism." It merely describes the historical fact that though various experiments in separating the major functions of the family from one another have been conducted, none simply evolved slowly from a previously existing family system; and the two modern important instances represent a retreat from the ideals of a previous generation. It is possible that some functions can be more easily separated than others; or that some family systems (for example matrilineal systems, to be discussed later) might lend themselves to a separation of functions more easily than others. Nevertheless, we have to begin with the data available now. Even cautiously interpreted, they suggest that the family is a rather stable institution.

A Sociological Approach to Family Research

The unusual features the family exhibits as a type of social sub-system require that some attention be paid to the approach to be used in studying it. First, neither ideal nor reality can be excluded from focus. It would, for example, be naive to suppose that because one-fourth to one-third of all couples marrying will eventually divorce, they do not cherish the ideal of monogamy. Kinsey estimated that about half of all married men engage in extra-marital intercourse, but perhaps nearly all these men believed in the ideal of faithfulness. On a more personal level, every reader of these lines has lied, but nevertheless most believe in the ideal of telling the truth.

A sociologist ascertains the ideals of family systems partly because they are a guide to behavior. Knowing that people believe in telling the truth, we can expect them to do so unless there are advantages in telling a lie, and we can even (as a manipulative measure) create the conditions under which people are more likely to tell the truth. We know also that when an individual violates the ideal, he is likely to conceal the violation, to find some internal excuse for the violation, and to be embarrassed if others find him out.

A sociologist may also be interested in ideals as values, as sets of norms which are passed on from one generation to another as a major constituent of culture. The organization of values, how norms in different areas change or are translated into a different form, how they are qualified by still other norms—all these are legitimate questions for a sociologist.

Next, as an element in this approach, the sociology of the family cannot confine its conclusions only to contemporary, urban (or suburban) U.S. life. In order to reach conclusions of any merit, a sociologist must confront his speculations and hypotheses with data from other societies, whether these are past or present, industrial or nonindustrial, Asiatic or European. Data from the historical past, such as Periclean Athens or Imperial Rome, are not often used, because as yet no sociologically adequate account of their family systems has been written. However, some reference to customs and beliefs of the past yield a better understanding of the range of social behavior, and often serves to refute or qualify an observation that seems to be accurate. Similarly, the use of data from other contemporary societies helps in establishing conclusions about family systems that are not found at all in U.S. society, such as matrilineal systems or polygyny. Or, an apparently simple relationship may take a different form in other societies. For example, in the U.S., almost all first marriages are based on a love relationship, and few will admit that they married someone with whom they were not in love. However, when other societies are brought in for comparison, love may play a small or a considerable part in the marriage.

In some societies love is viewed as irrelevant to mate choice. In many societies love is seen as a threat to the control by family elders over who marries whom, and thus over family alliances, and the inheritance of property. Consequently, various social arrangements are to be found which prevent love from being a primary basis of mate choice.

Although it is possible to investigate other perspectives in this discussion, family patterns will here be analyzed *sociologically*. A full analysis of any concrete object is impossible. Everything can be analyzed from a great many vantage points, each of them yielding a somewhat different picture. Everything is infinitely complex. For this reason, any science limits its perspective, the character of its particular thin slice of infinity. A sociology of the family does not pretend to describe adequately the biological or even the psychological relations among members of a family. Each of these approaches has its own justification. The sociological approach focuses on the family as a social institution, the peculiar and unique quality of family interaction as *social*. Family systems exhibit the characteristics of legitimacy and authority, which are not biological categories at all. The values relating to the family, or the rights and duties of family statuses, such as father or daughter, are not psychological categories, but *are* peculiar to the theoretical level of sociology. Analysis of the personality cannot tell us much about the differences in family behavior between, say, China and Japan. Utilizing a consistently sociological approach misses some important information about concrete family interaction, but also yields some systematization, some rigor, by staying on one theoretical level.

In any event, if a sociologist moves from the sociological to the psychological level of theory, he should at least be conscious of it. And if the investigation turns to the impact of biological or psychological factors on the family, they should be examined with reference to their *social* meaning. For example, interracial marriage is of little biological significance, but of great social importance. A sociologist studying the family does not analyze the *psychodynamics* of mental disease, but is interested in the impact of mental disease on the social relations in a particular family or type of family, how different family types adjust to it, which kinds of family patterns or constellations are more likely to produce certain types of mental disease. The biological or psychological aspects of the family are not the province of the sociologist, except when he is investigating their social meaning.

biological bases of the family

two

Man's family patterns are determined in part by the peculiar task imposed on them: The family is the only social institution charged with transforming a biological organism into a human being. By the time other institutions begin to shape the individual in important ways, his family has already accomplished much of this transformation, having taught him to speak and to play out many social roles.

This close relation between family and biological factors suggests other reasons for considering the biological foundations of the family. The family is also charged with the social arrangements having to do with the biological factors of sex and reproduction. Next, if the family did not make adequate provision for the biological needs of man, obviously society would die out. In addition, kinship structure is a network of social roles linked by real or supposed biological relations. To understand the family better, then, it is worthwhile examining the biological material that is to be transformed.

Assessment of Data

In such an inquiry, various types of data are not available, and others are irrelevant, even though reputable scholars have sometimes used them in the past. It is not possible to outline the gradual evolution of man