

# The FAMILY IN SOCIAL CONTEXT

Sixth Edition

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and Sheila K. Korman

# THE FAMILY IN SOCIAL CONTEXT

S I X T H   E D I T I O N

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## Preface

The sixth edition of this book retains the basic features that caused earlier editions to be so widely praised and so widely used. It is scholarly, comprehensive, and readable.

It is a big book, including most of the material usually covered in courses offered under such titles as the Modern Family, the Sociology of the Family, Marriage and the Family, and the American Family. Not all instructors will be able to cover all of it in one term. They should, however, find ample material to get into their courses the specific emphases they want. Moreover, by assigning the whole book to be read, they can give their students what often requires a textbook and a book of readings combined.

One feature of the book is unusually extensive coverage of cross-cultural and historical material. With the trend toward inclusion of more such material in family courses, many instructors will want to spend considerable time on Parts I and II. Those instructors who do not want to emphasize the family systems of other societies will want to move more quickly to Part III, Contemporary American Families.

Several features are new to this edition. The chapter on Conceptual Approaches in Family Study replaces the earlier chapter on Theories of Family Structure and Family Change. Those instructors who desire more conceptual sophistication will approve of the change. Those who prefer a more descriptive approach will find ample material available.

The restructuring of the chapters on Contemporary American Families provides better integration of those materials. A new chapter on the Influence of Religion has been added. The proliferation of research in all areas of family study is indicated by the fact that 438 new names appear in the Name Index. All of this has been accomplished without lengthening the book.

The last nine chapters of the book continue to be organized in a life-cycle framework, providing a wealth of detail on the functioning of contemporary families from adolescence through old age. Some instructors will interpret these materials in strictly institutional terms; some will use a more functional approach. The needs of both groups should be met fully.

Finally, the book continues to avoid confusing profundity with obscurantism. It assumes that the conceptual apparatus essential to an understanding of the field can be employed in a clear and simple writing style to make learning a pleasure.

*Gainesville, Fla.*  
*September 1984*

G.R.L.  
S.K.K.

# Contents

## I CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

- 1 The Nature of the Family 3
- 2 The Family in World Perspective 25
- 3 Worldwide Trends in Family Patterns 59
- 4 The Family System of China 79
- 5 Utopian Experiments and Alternative Life Styles 109

## II HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

- 6 History of the Western Family 143
- 7 Conceptual Approaches in Family Study 189

## III CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FAMILIES

- 8 The Influence of Social Class 219
- 9 The Influence of Race: Black Families 249
- 10 The Influence of Ethnicity 273
- 11 The Influence of Religion 303

## IV THE FAMILY LIFE CYCLE

- 12 Premarital Interaction 329
- 13 Mate Selection 367
- 14 Marital Adjustment 401
- 15 Sexual Adjustment in Marriage 437
- 16 Family Planning and Childbearing 461
- 17 Marriage in the Middle Years 479

18	Divorce	505	
19	One-Parent Families and Remarriages		535
20	The Postparental Phase	563	

	Name Index	589
	Subject Index	601



# I

## Cross-Cultural Perspectives



Paul S. Conklin, Monkmeyer Press Photo Service

# I

## The Nature of the Family

The family is, as far as we know, the toughest institution we have. It is, in fact, the institution to which we owe our humanity. We know no other way of making human beings except by bringing them up in a family. Of course this does not mean that widows cannot bring up children; but the widowed mother brings up her children to know that their father is dead, that they had a father, and that the children next door have a father. The model is still there. And of course this holds for the widower as well. But we know no other way to bring children up to be human beings, able to act like men and women, and able to marry other men and women and bring up children, except through the family.<sup>1</sup>

The paragraph above was written over a generation ago by one of America's most respected social scientists. Many people today ask whether it is still true, whether the family is the toughest institution we have, and whether the only way to raise children successfully is in families. Although this book will do far more than simply answer these questions, it will attempt to answer them in the context of both several thousand years of human experience and in the context of the rapid changes of recent years.

It is a large task. Even if we exclude analyses of the family in genetic, embryological, anatomical, and physiological terms, to say nothing of legal, economic, and political ones, and confine our analysis to the family as a social institution, we still must consider humankind's experience over several thousand years and over the entire world. We must analyze the family in its total social context.

1. Margaret Mead, "The Impact of Cultural Changes on the Family," *The Family in the Urban Community*, Detroit: The Merrill-Palmer School, 1953, p. 4.

## SOCIETY AND THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

Conventionally, the term *society* has been used to refer to substantial collections of people living in near isolation from other such collections, having definite geographic boundaries, and enacting distinctive cultures. The term is easy to apply to preliterate peoples, but more difficult to apply to modern industrial nations where there is less isolation and where cultural boundaries and national boundaries do not always coincide.

Anthropologists estimate that there have been 4000 separable societies in the world since the dawn of human experience.<sup>2</sup> These range from preliterate societies of fewer than 400 people to modern societies of over 900 million. Not even a majority of these societies has been systematically studied. The most adequate analysis has been done by Murdock who compiled the *Ethnographic Atlas* of 1170 carefully selected societies.<sup>3</sup> Among those 1170 societies, some are known through history and some exist now, some are preliterate and some are civilized societies.

Few people, except social scientists, know that there have been so many societies. Moreover, when they become aware of this tremendous range of human groups, many people wonder how relevant the experience of small preliterate societies in the mid-Pacific, the Andes, or Africa is to the problem of complex societies such as the United States. They wonder whether the experience of 178 people isolated and virtually without material possessions should be compared with the customs of a society of 230 million people who have created an automated, computerized economy and one in which the arts and humanities flourish.

The problems of comparing societies are complex, but we need not get into them here. Suffice it to say that anthropologists believe that it is legitimate and useful to compare large and small societies when the purpose is to try to understand the full range of solutions to universal human problems. Regardless of the size or technological advancement, each society's customs and institutions constitute an independent solution to the problem of ensuring survival. The family system of a society of 178 people might not be practical in the United States, but it does represent another means of coping with the same general human problems that we face. Moreover, if we see that the majority, or even a significant minority, of societies have family systems that differ significantly from our own, it becomes more difficult for us to believe that our own system is divinely ordained or even inherently superior.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> George P. Murdock, "World Ethnographic Sample," *American Anthropologist* 59 (Aug. 1957), pp. 664-87.

<sup>3</sup> George P. Murdock, *Ethnographic Atlas*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1967.

<sup>4</sup> The tendency of people to regard their own ways of doing things as the best is, of course, the concept of ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism serves the valuable function of

### *Social Institutions*

The concept of social institutions will appear throughout this book, for social scientists are much concerned with the institutional aspects of the family. At this point, our task is to discuss briefly the major social institutions and to place the family institution within the context of the society's larger institutional structure.

Sociologists use the term *institution* in a different and more technical way than does the average person. Sociologists view institutions as systems of social norms. Norms are society's rules of conduct for its members. Norms range from the formal—each person may have only one spouse—to the informal—letting father have the largest piece of pie. The number of such rules, or customary behaviors, is exceedingly large and covers almost every aspect of life. Growing up in a society means learning its norms so that as an adult one will be able to function successfully with other similarly socialized people.

Although most people may not be aware of it, norms are organized into patterns. In the family, for example, there are norms that specify which persons are eligible to marry, how many spouses they may have, who is eligible to marry whom, when they should marry, who should be the boss in the family, where they should live, what the division of labor should be, the proper attitudes toward children and oldsters, and so on. Detailed examination of the normative system controlling family behavior will appear in subsequent chapters.

In all societies, complex normative patterns appear in certain basic areas. There is always a normative system governing the legitimate use of power in the society. We call this system of norms government. Similarly, another normative system defines the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services: the economic institution. A third normative system regulates our relation to the supernatural: the religious institution. The educational institution is concerned with the transmission of values, attitudes, knowledge, and skills from one generation to the next. And there are always rules regulating adult sexual relationships and procreation: the family institution.

All societies have these major institutions: family, government, economic system, education, and religion. The content of a society's institutions determines in large measure its character. Understanding these basic institutions leads to understanding of the society.<sup>5</sup>

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promoting loyalty to one's own society and its institutions, but it makes it difficult for us to see the relativity of cultural practices. The principle of cultural relativity holds that the functions and meaning of practices can be understood only in the context of the larger culture in which they are found—not in the context of our values and practices.

5. Unfortunately, sociologists occasionally use the term *institution* not only in its tech-

In every known society, at least some persons consider themselves kin of at least some other persons, living and dead. The way in which kinship is expressed and the kinds of behavior which follow from the recognition of this relationship vary from culture to culture.

PHILIP K. BOCK, *Modern Cultural Anthropology: An Introduction*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969, pp. 87-88

The institutions of a society are related to one another. Government, for example, impinges on the family in many ways. The authority wielded within the family may well stand in some inverse relation to the power vested in the government: when the government is weak, the family may exercise considerable control of individual behavior and vice versa. Government may provide a host of services to families and their members or it may require that families be largely self-sufficient.

Moreover, the interrelations among a society's institutions may vary over time. There was a time in our history when there was relatively little differentiation among the major institutions: when the family performed many of what today are the functions of government, religion, and the schools. Later on, Western religious institutions became powerful and restricted and controlled family life. Still other changes saw government come to exercise great regulatory power, and current interrelations between the family and the economy have much to do with the nature of present-day family problems. One social institution can be understood only in the context of its relations with other institutions.

### *Functional Requisites for Societal Survival* slide 6 - 11

The fact that certain institutions are found in all known societies suggests that societies may not be able to exist without them. Or, to put it differently, the major social institutions play a very large role in accomplishing those basic functions that are essential to a society's survival.

Apparently, there are certain minimum tasks that must be performed in all societies. Unless they are performed adequately, the society will cease to exist. An analogy may help to make the point. We might hypothesize that a quality-control department is essential to the survival of a manufacturing company. A company might survive if it occasionally put out defective merchandise, but if much of its product were defective, customers would take their business elsewhere and the company would go bankrupt. Perhaps the only way to prevent this from happen-

nical sense but also in its lay usage. Thus, people refer to prisons and hospitals as institutions. Actually institutionalization is a process that is going on in many areas of life simultaneously.

ing is to have a quality-control department to make sure that the company's product uniformly meets predetermined standards.

Notice that we are not saying that the conscious purpose of a quality-control department is to keep a company in business. Nor are we saying that a company could not be established and operate without a quality-control department. We are saying that, in the long run, a company that does not develop effective means of quality control is likely not to be able to meet the competition and, hence, is likely not to survive.

So it is with societies. To speak of there being functional requisites to a society's survival does not mean that each society is aware that certain tasks must be performed and that it consciously creates arrangements to provide for them. Nor is it to say that there have never been societies in which these tasks were not properly provided for. It is to say that if such societies existed, they have long since ceased to exist.

Social scientists, from their studies of societies, have concluded that there are certain minimum conditions that must be met. These functional requisites that are met principally through a society's major institutions include: (1) provision for the continued adequate biological functioning of the members of the society, (2) provision for the reproduction of new members of the society, (3) provision for the adequate socialization of new members of the society, (4) arrangements for the production and distribution of goods and services, (5) provision for the maintenance of order within the group and with outsiders, and (6) the meaning of life must be defined and the motivation for group and individual survival must be maintained.

*Continued Biological Functioning.* In our analysis of human social life, we should never forget that we are biological organisms who share problems of survival with all other animal species. Our survival depends on provision of the basic necessities of food, clothing, and shelter. Without these, we could not remain healthy—and the maintenance of health is a part of this requisite to societal survival. People must also be relatively healthy to reproduce successfully, and reproduction is a part of the maintenance of biological functioning. The provision of food, clothing, and shelter, of course, implies that there must be an organized pattern of work. Food, clothing, and shelter must be produced and distributed, according to some notion of equity, among the society's members. Except in the simplest societies, the provision for continued biological functioning does not stop at this rudimentary level. In societies above the subsistence level, the basic necessities are elaborated into standards of nutrition, comfort, style, medical care, family planning, and so on. But whatever the level at which the society operates, certain minimum provisions in this area are essential to survival.

Two institutions are deeply involved in meeting this functional requisite for societal survival. The production and distribution of goods and services occur through the economic system. The usual consumption unit for goods and services is the family. Moreover, the family is the unit of reproduction and the primary source of care for ailing persons. It is no accident that the meeting of functional requisites is accomplished significantly through social institutions. Institutions develop originally in response to societies' needs to survive.

*Adequate Reproduction.* That the various functional requisites are interrelated has been shown by our reference to reproduction when talking primarily about continued biological functioning. The problem of replacement of members of the society is so fundamental, however, that it deserves separate discussion.

Unless a society provides for an adequate number of children to be born and cared for, the population will dwindle and eventually disappear. All societies have normative systems that regulate childbearing and childrearing. These societal rules define who is qualified to bear children, when reproduction may begin, how many children should be born, how the children should be cared for, and so on. These norms make up part of the institution of the family.

Even in this area, which seems to fall squarely within the institutional sphere of the family, other institutions are involved. The educational system shares with the family the care and training of the young. The replacement of societal members may occur also through recruitment from other societies. This process sometimes assumes large proportions through immigration. Immigrants require resocialization into the normative system of the new society, again involving the educational institution. No society for long, however, depends on immigration to provide new members. New adults are not so dependable a source of replacement as are infants born into the society, and infants are not faced with conflicts between two normative systems. In all societies, the replacement of members occurs primarily through reproduction.

*Socialization of New Members.* The term *socialization* encompasses learning the values, attitudes, knowledge, skills, and techniques that a society possesses—in short, it involves learning the culture. A very important part of the culture is the normative system, including the major institutions. Socialization molds the child's biological potential into the pattern of functioning that we call human personality.

Socialization covers all learning, including the indirect and unanticipated learning that occurs whenever the child observes parents or others in interaction. Thus, the child learns socially disapproved as well as ap-



proved behaviors and masters the nuances that are not taught in school, in college, or in apprenticeship.

No society allows socialization to proceed according to chance. The family institution includes norms defining proper parental behavior. It defines what parents properly may teach children and what they may not. Beyond the familial contribution, and intertwined with it, there always lies a body of knowledge and practice that is shared by the society at large and that the society transmits to all new members. For unless the members of a society share a common core of values, beliefs, and practices, the organization of the society cannot be maintained.

The organization of the socialization process outside the family is, of course, what we call the educational institution. It may be rudimentary and nonspecialized, involving only a few wise elders passing on the ancient lore to youngsters working in informal apprenticeship with adults, or it may be highly organized and complex, including nursery schools, schools, colleges, and graduate schools.

Socialization does not cease when adulthood is reached. The socialization of the young is so dramatic that most of our attention has focused on it. We are realizing more and more, however, that learning occurs throughout life. College seniors have only begun to prepare for their occupational roles, and it takes considerable learning to transform them into the mature, poised, knowledgeable, self-confident leaders they may be as middle-aged adults. Similarly, becoming a husband or wife and a parent involves learning attitudes, sentiments, and skills that are not learned in school. Even becoming old involves complicated learning that the young and middle-aged cannot appreciate. The need for society to socialize its members may be most dramatic in the early years of life, but the continued functioning of a society is equally dependent on the continued socialization of its adult members.

*Production and Distribution of Goods and Services.* All known societies have norms defining what goods will be produced, how, and by whom. At bottom is the problem of ensuring the survival of individuals. But the regulation of economic activity does not stop here. All societies elaborate their regulations to provide for a division of labor among the members of the society. The economic and family institutions become intertwined, for there is always a division of labor among family members, influenced by sex and age. Work roles considered appropriate to sex and age groups derive from the family and are also influenced by it. Further, the production of goods results in the accumulation of property and necessitates rules for transmitting property from one generation to the next. Such rules again are involved in both the family and the economic system.

The adequate functioning of these various sets of norms ensures that