

OVERVIEW OF THE FAMILY

Given the complexities of interpreting data on the family, it is little wonder that the family is a "great intellectual Rorschach blot" (Joseph Featherstone, 1979). One's conclusions about the current state of the family often derive from deeper values and assumptions one holds in the first place about the definition and role of the family in society. Yet, many assumptions of family theories continue to influence discussions of the family in both popular and scholarly writings. Here are some of these persistent assumptions.

The Assumption of the Universal Nuclear Family

Families vary in organization, membership, life cycles, emotional environments, ideologies, social and kin networks, and economic and other functions. The idea of the universal nuclear family is based on biology: A woman and a man must unite sexually to produce a child. But no social kinship ties or living arrangements flow inevitably from biological union. Indeed, the definition of marriage is not the same across cultures.

The Assumption of Family Harmony

Every marriage contains two marriages: the husband's and the wife's (Jessie Bernard, 1973). Similarly, every family contains as many families as family members. Family members with differing perspectives may find themselves in conflict, occasionally in bitter conflict.

To question the idea of the happy family is not to say that love and joy are not found in family life or that many people do not find their deepest satisfactions in their families. Rather, the happy family assumption omits important, if unpleasant, aspects of family life. From the Bible to the fairy tale, from Sophocles to Shakespeare to Eugene O'Neill to the soap opera, there is a tragic tradition portraying the family in a high-voltage emotional setting, charged with love and hate, tenderness and spite, even incest and murder. Family violence seems to be a product of psychological tensions and external stresses that can affect all families at all social levels.

The Assumption of Parental Determinism

Although the belief that early family experience is the most powerful influence in a child's life is widely shared by social scientists and the public, it is not well supported by evidence and theory. There are serious flaws in two of its underlying assumptions: the assumption of the passive child and the assumption that parents independently exert influence in a virtual vacuum. Recent empirical work in human development shows that children come into the world with unique temperamental and other characteristics, and children shape parents as much as parents shape children. Further, the child's mind is not an empty vessel or a blank slate to be filled by parental instruction. Children are active agents in the construction of knowledge about the world.

Also, parents are not simply independent agents who train children free of outside influence. Parents indirectly communicate to their children what to worry about -- job loss, prejudice, discrimination. But the stresses or support parents find in the neighborhood, the workplace, the economy, and the political climate also influence childrearing.

Children also learn from the world around them. It is easier to blame the parents than to change the neighborhood, the school, or the economy or to assume that ghetto children's correct perception of their life chances has something to do with school performance.

Finally, early experience is not the all-powerful, irreversible kind of influence it has been thought to be. An unfortunate childhood does not necessarily lead to a despairing life.

The Assumption of a Stable, Harmonious Past

Historians have not located a golden age of the family gleaming at us from the depths of history (Demos, 1975). Recent historical studies of family life also cast doubt on the reality of family tranquility. Historians have found that premarital sexuality, illegitimacy, generational conflict, and even infanticide can best be studied as part of family life itself rather than as separate categories of deviation.

The most shocking finding of the new historical studies is the prevalence of infanticide throughout European history. It now appears that infanticide provided a major means of population control in all societies lacking reliable contraception, Europe included, and that families practiced it on legitimate children.

Contrary to the myth of the three-generation family in past times, grandparents are also a 20th. Century phenomenon (Hareven, 1978). In the past, when people lived shorter lives, they married later. The lives of parents and children thus had fewer years in which to overlap. As a result of these trends, there is for the first time in history a significant number of families with four generations alive at the same time.

THE ORIGIN OF THE FAMILY

It is not known when the family originated or whether it developed once or in separate times and places. Some kind of family exists in all known human societies, although it is not found in every segment or class of all stratified, state societies. Greek and American slaves, for example, were prevented from forming legal families, and their social families were often disrupted by sale, forced labor, or sexual exploitation. This is true in many places such as Sudan even today. Even so, the family was an ideal that all classes and most people attained when they could. The family implies several other universals:

1. Rules forbid sexual relations and marriage between close relatives. All societies forbid mother-son mating, and most, father-daughter and brother-sister. Some societies allow sex relations but forbid marriage between certain degrees of kin.

2. The men and women of a family cooperate through a division of labor based on gender. In no human society to date is it wholly absent. Childcare, household tasks, and crafts closely connected with the household tend to be done by women; war, hunting, and government by men.

3. Marriage exists as a socially recognized, durable, although not necessarily lifelong relationship between individual men and women. From it springs social fatherhood, some kind of special bond between a man and the child of his wife, whether or not they are his own children physiologically. Even in polyandrous societies, where women have several husbands, or in matrilineal societies, where group membership and property pass through women, each child has one or more designated "fathers" with whom he or she has a special social, and often religious, relationship. Contrary to the beliefs of some feminists, however, in no human society do men, as a whole category, have *only* the role of insemination and *no* other social or economic role in relation to women and children.

4. Men in general have higher status and authority over the women of their families although older women may have influence, even some authority, over junior men. The omnipresence of male authority, too, goes contrary to the belief of some feminists that in "matriarchal" societies, women were either completely equal to or had paramount authority over men, either in the home or in society at large.

In matrilineal societies, where property, rank, office, and group membership are inherited through the female line, it is true that women tend to have greater independence than in patrilineal societies. This is especially true in matrilineal tribal societies where residence is matrilocal--that is, men come to live in the homes or villages of their wives. Even so, in all matrilineal societies for which adequate descriptions are available, the ultimate headship of households, lineages, and local groups is usually with men.

This does not mean that women and men have never had relations that were dignified and creative for both sexes, appropriate to the knowledge, skills, and technology of their times. Nor does it mean that the sexes cannot be equal in the future or that the sexual division of labor cannot be abolished. Being equal doesn't mean that men and women are the same but that they are complimentary--one makes up what is lacking in the other to the benefit of all.

CONCLUSION

The family provided the framework for all pre-state society and the fount of its creativeness. In groping for survival and knowledge, human beings learned to control their sexual desires and to suppress their individual selfishness, aggression, and competition. The other side of this self-control was increased capacity for love--not only love of a mother for her child but also of male for female in enduring relationships and of each sex for ever-widening groups of humans. Civilization would have been impossible without this initial self-control, seen in incest prohibitions and in the generosity and

moral orderliness of primitive family life.

From the start, women have been subordinate to men in certain key areas of status, mobility, and public leadership. But before the agricultural revolution, and even for several thousands of years thereafter, the inequality was based chiefly on the unalterable fact of long childcare combined with the needs of primitive technology. The extent of inequality varied according to the ecology and the resulting sexual division of tasks. In any case, it was largely a matter of survival rather than of man-made cultural impositions.

Hence, the impressions we receive of dignity, freedom, and mutual respect between men and women in primitive hunting and horticultural societies are true whether these societies are patrilocal, bilocal, or matrilineal.

A distinct change occurred with the growth of individual and family property in herds, in durable craft objects and trade objects, and in stable, irrigated farm sites or other forms of heritable wealth. This crystallized in the rise of the state, about 4000 B.C. With the growth of class society and of male dominance in the ruling class of the state, women's subordination increased and eventually reached its depths in the patriarchal families of the great agrarian states.

Knowledge of how the family arose is interesting to women because it tells us what their past has been and what have been the biological and cultural limitations from which they are emerging. It shows how generations of male scholars have distorted or over-interpreted the evidence to bolster beliefs in the inferiority of women's mental processes--for which there is no foundation in fact. Knowing about early families is also important to correct a reverse bias among some feminist writers, who hold that in "matriarchal" societies women were completely equal with or were even dominant over men. For this, too, there seems to be no basis in evidence.

--Family In Transition, Arlene S. Skolnick and Jerome H. Skolnick, Fourth Edition, 1983, edited by Patrick J. Hession