LECTURE 5: DEFINITION OF THE FAMILY I

I. It’s hard to define the family

A. “Family” is the intersection of many enterprises; it “does” lots of stuff, accomplishes lots of things

1. What are some?

B. Gough’s universal definition of family (a definition that applies to all societies):

a. “A married couple or other group of adult kinsfolk who cooperate economically and in the upbringing of children, and all or most of whom share a common dwelling.”

b. Why is this such a convoluted, difficult definition?

1) So much variability cross-culturally has to be taken into account

II. Taking certain perspectives on the family is one way to loosely define it

A. First perspective: as a social unit

1. A set of capacities

a. Social roles

1) Specific roles: I paint the woodwork; my husband paints the ceilings

2) General role: the combination of specific roles that make up the role “wife”

a) Roles may not be perfectly logical, consistent

b) Examples?

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3) A set of roles makes up an *institution*
   a) The institution of marriage; the institution of the family

4) And sets of institutions makes up a society; a social system

2. As we grow up, we learn how roles are defined, we learn rules of behavior
   a. Culture is, in part, rules that define how you act and how you see yourself—your identity
   b. Brief definition of culture
      1) Learned (taught)
      2) Shared
      3) Normative

3. Family roles are crucial because a lot of necessary work, learning, interactions, etc., occur in the family

4. What general roles are peculiar to the family?
   a. Husband, wife, etc.
      1) Not professor
   b. Mother, father
   c. Child, daughter, son, sister, brother
   d. Secondary roles: grandparent, mother-in-law, etc.
      1) We can no longer define the family as residing together

5. What are the sources of role strain?
   a. Change in the larger society
   b. Or built-in contradictions within the family
c. Example: ideas of fairness in modern mainstream American families

1) Getting paid for good grades?
   a) Is this fair? Doesn’t it make siblings compete? And feel resentful when it doesn’t seem fair?
   b) A student once said this practice was stopped in her family because of a younger mentally retarded sibling
   c) The new arrangement was that the whole family went out to dinner at end of school year, “job well done”

2) That fairness ought to be gender-blind is increasingly subscribed to
   a) Daughters increasingly get as much support to go to college as sons
   b) Examples of shifts? Of areas where fairness is still not gender-blind?

6. Another question related to stresses and strains: is there a lack of fit between the norms in the family and elsewhere?
   a. Outright contradictions?
      1) For example, payment for work done versus allowance, versus birthday gifts
      2) What is the distinction? How do family roles and values differ from roles in contexts where work is paid for?
   b. Housework: how is it like work done on the outside and how not?
      1) Lots of stresses there

B. Second perspective: Family as a kinship unit

1. Where roles are defined by reference to kinship (descent or marriage)
a. What is kinship? The answer is not immediately obvious

1) Cultures vary in terms of how they define who is kin to whom
   a) E.g. types of lineality
   b) Cousin marriage—Catholic Church doesn’t allow first cousin marriages; other societies do, even say that marriage between certain types of first cousins is the ideal

b. What are the basic axes of kinship for us?

1) By blood
   a) Father, mother, sibling
      (1) We believe we are related by chromosomes, etc.
      (2) We’re related to our parents, but not to our spouses
      (3) Other cultures see things very differently
   b) What’s a “blood brother” ceremony?

2) By law
   a) Marriage, a legal arrangement has to happen
   b) Even marriages “made in heaven” have to be made on earth, too
      (1) Why is this important?
         (a) The theme of the opera “Madama Butterfly”
         (b) She thought it was a real marriage; he was ethnocentric and racist, knew from the beginning he’d choose a “proper” (white) wife
(c) She kills herself when he and his new wife come to claim her son

3) Legitimacy is not so important now
   a) We have some famous illegitimate—intentionally so—births in this country
   b) But it used to be very important
   c) The Supremes’ “Love child”

   (1) Listen to the song’s lyrics to understand the connections often made between illegitimacy and other negative factors

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

f) And why marrying a ghost or stick seems so weird

g) Because for us, blood is a matter of birth, birth a matter of procreation, procreation a matter of sexual intercourse

h) It’s helpful to look at exceptions:

(1) Jesus Christ

(2) Different for Catholics (Mary is seen to have remained a virgin all her life—and she came to be seen as immaculately conceived)

(3) Pay attention to the lyrics of “The Cherry Tree Carol” next Christmas

(a) A bit of a soap opera

(b) Joseph tells Mary, “let he who is the father of your child get cherries for you”

(c) Jesus spoke from the womb—“bend down, that my mother might have some cherries”

(d) A contest of power between father and son, which the son wins, and, more indirectly, between social father and biological father (God)

(e) Note that Mary doesn’t have the power to make the cherry tree bend down—she has to get them from a male—Joseph, and then Jesus

2. Types of families, according to kinship relations

a. Nuclear

b. Polygamous
c. Extended family
d. Matrifocal family
e. Stem family

3. So, the right questions to ask are:
   a. What’s the kinship system in that society?
   b. What’s marriage in that society?
   c. What things constrain or strain these?

C. Third perspective: family as **process**
   1. Family as a phase in the process of reproduction
      a. Relatively long phase
   2. How enduring is it?
   3. What causes its consolidation and fragmentation?

III. There are 3 other possible perspectives:

A. Family as an **economic unit**
   1. Production, exchange, consumption
   2. How is family a self-contained economic unit? How not?

B. Family as a **ritual unit**
   1. A site where rituals get enacted: e.g., exchange of gifts at Christmas
      a. Eating at Thanksgiving
   2. What are the values and beliefs here?
   3. Family as a medium for symbolic communication
      a. As a model for other areas of life
b. A miniature version of how they ought to be elsewhere

(1) Examples of “family” metaphors?

C. Family as a **residential unit**

1. Household

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

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

3. And, what are the constraints and strains?

Note: These perspectives aren’t mutually exclusive