

THE KINSHIP SYSTEM AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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SOcial work, as an applied profession, draws from a variety of disciplines for its fundamental knowledge of men, groups and societies. Proper understanding of one social institution, the family and kinship system, is central to much of social work practice. Basic knowledge on this social phenomenon is essential. Such information will give support to rational formulation of goals, give direction to agency services and lead to the development of effective techniques.

On the other hand, goals, services and techniques are also based, in part, on values and beliefs. Social work need apologize to no one for asserting its conviction in the worth and dignity of human beings, the enhancement of family life and the building of a more equitable and just society. The problem arises in separating knowledge from value. On occasion the latter becomes so enmeshed in the literature and practice as to be indistinguishable from valid fact. Social workers fail to perceive the difference and hence are unaware of real or potential biases and contradictions. It is necessary, academically and in practice, to tease out what "is" from what "ought to be."

This is precisely the objective of this paper—to review appropriate theories of family and kinship systems and to examine social work policies and prac-

tice in their light. Is our practice in this respect grounded on valid knowledge or not? If not, wherein does the confusion lie?

Family and kinship patterns may be viewed within a broad theoretical framework based on social change. Many sociologists and anthropologists regard industrialization, urbanization and bureaucratization as the major forces at work in society. While the terminology may differ, in essence, the processes refer to the fantastic rate of technological advancement, the rapid growth of cities (and the depopulation of rural areas) and the centralization of services and activities into large forms of impersonally organized enterprises.

Trends Toward Isolation of Conjugal Family

By and large there appear to be two major streams of theoretical development with respect to the family and kinship. Research since World War II asserts that the family in all societies is moving toward a conjugal pattern. This process tends to parallel the phenomena of industrialization and urbanization. At the same time, the traditional extended kinship system is breaking down and disappearing. Smelser's classic study of the industrial revolution and the family in the late eighteenth and

early nineteenth centuries focussed on this point:

In the early nineteenth century the technological changes in the cotton industry created the conditions of urbanization, industrial centralization, and depersonalization of the factory community. More specifically, the enlargement of mules and the introduction of power looms threatened to separate the labour of children from that of adults (often parents). These technological pressures, while long in the making, reached a critical point in the mid-1820's. For the family economy of the factory operatives, the pressures represented a serious dissatisfaction. . . . The worker and his family could no longer work on the old basis which fused the family economy with other, more general family functions. If the worker refused to accept the new conditions of employment, he could no longer support his family satisfactorily; if he accepted labour on the new basis, certain non-economic relations in his family—particularly the rearing of children—might suffer. These pressures, magnified by an appeal to independence and personal responsibility as a family value, pressed for a thoroughgoing reorganization of family relationships.¹

In an industrial society, persons are hired on the basis of competence to perform specific tasks and they compete with others on the basis of ability and record. On the other hand, in Parsonian terms, the extended family system with its standards of ascription, particularism and diffuseness, is ideally not permitted to interfere with the efficient functioning of a modern enterprise.

Because of its emphasis on performance, such a system requires that a person be permitted to rise or fall, and to move about wherever the job market is best. A lesser emphasis on land ownership also increased the ease of mobility. The conjugal family system is neolocal (each couple sets up its own household), and its kinship network is not strong, thus putting fewer barriers than other family systems in the way of class or geographical mobility.

In these ways the conjugal family system "fits" the needs of industrialism. But the relationship may also be put another way. Since increasingly an industrializing society . . . creates formal agencies to handle the major tasks of any kinship groupings larger than the nuclear family, such units as lineages, clans, or even large extended families also lose their functions and thereby the allegiance they once commanded.

More important, elders no longer control the major new economic or political opportunities, so that family authority slips from the hands of such family leaders. . . . The couple need not obey anyone outside their family unit, since only their performance on the job is relevant for their advancement. They need not even rely on family elders for job instruction, since schools, the factory, or the plantation or mine will teach them the new skills. Nor do they even need to continue working on the land, still in the possession of the elders, since the jobs and political opportunities are in the city. Thus industrialization is likely to undermine gradually the traditional systems of family control and exchange. The terms of the role-bargaining between the generations have been altered.

The conjugal emphasis on emotionality within the family also service somewhat the needs of industrialization. At lower job levels, the worker experiences little intrinsic job satisfaction; at higher levels, he obtains more job satisfaction, but is also subject to rather great demands. At any level, the enterprise has no responsibility for the emotional input-output balance of the individual; this is solely the responsibility of the family, in the sense that there is nowhere else to go for it. The small family, then, deals with a problem which the industrial system cannot handle.²

Burgess proposes a concept of the American family as an ideal-type construction, with all of the diversity among American families. He notes such distinctive trends as adaptability to conditions of rapid social change, urbanization, secularization (material comforts in place of religious satisfactions and controls), instability, and specialization

¹ Neil J. Smelser, *Social Change in The Industrial Revolution*, University of Chicago Press, 1959, p. 406.

² William J. Goode, *The Family*, Prentice Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1964, p. 108.

(affective ties in place of economic production, education, and religious training and affection).

With all the variations among American families, it is apparent that they are all in greater or lesser degrees in a process of change toward an emerging type of family that is perhaps most aptly described as the "companionship" form. This term emphasizes the point that the essential bonds in the family are now found more and more in the interpersonal relationship of its members, as compared with those of law, custom, public opinion, and duty in the older institutional forms of the family.

Not that companionship, affection, and happiness are absent from the institutional family. They exist there in greater or lesser degree, but they are not its primary aims. The central objectives of the institutional family are children, status, and the fulfillment of a social and economic function in society.³

Persistence of Extended Family

On the other hand, an increasing number of studies are documenting a second stream of evidence, namely that the extended family has not disappeared even in highly industrialized and urbanized societies. Controversy, particularly in England, as to the status of the extended family in recent years has led to some very interesting studies of family structure and its relation to kin and neighborhood. "All these writers emphasize the persistence of the extended family among the English working class as a unit of social relations and mutual aid."⁴

³ Ernest W. Burgess, "The Family in a Changing Society," in *Social Change—Sources, Patterns And Consequences*, Etzioni and Etzioni, Eds., Basic Books, New York, 1964, p. 195.

⁴ Peter Townsend, "The Family Life of Old People"; Young and Willmot, "Family and Kinship in East London"; John M. Mogeey, "The Family and the Neighborhood"; Elizabeth Bott, "The Family and Social Network." These studies are cited by Ernest W. Burgess (ed.), *Aging in Western Societies*, University of Chicago Press, 1960, p. 273.

Closer to home, Gans' study of Americans of Italian background in the West End of Boston is illuminating. He concludes that West Enders fall squarely between the two ideal types of nuclear and extended families. For example, married daughters often retain close ties with their mothers and try to live near them. They do not live together, in the same house or apartment, in order to avoid conflict between husband and mother-in-law. In addition, some households take in close relatives such as unmarried brothers, sisters or even cousins due to feelings of obligation and love. They strive to reduce the loneliness of the single person.⁵ Pitkin observed a similar pattern in his study of a Southern Italian village and called this an "expanded" family.⁶ Whether single relatives lived independently or within households they spent much of their spare time with their families and often participated in child rearing as quasi-parental aunts and uncles.

But although households are nuclear or expanded, the family itself is still closer to the extended type. It is not an economic unit, however, for there are few opportunities for people to work together in commercial or manufacturing activities. The extended family actually functions best as a social circle, in which relatives who share the same interests, and who are otherwise compatible, enjoy each other's company. Members of the family circle also offer advice and other help on everyday problems.⁷

The evidence and opinion on American Jewish families tends to be inconclusive and sometimes contradictory. Thus Kagan notes such changes as small size and urban and mobile character of these families. Extended family rela-

⁵ Herbert J. Gans, *The Urban Villagers*, The Free Press, Glencoe, Ill., 1962, p. 45.

⁶ Donald Pitkin, "Land Tenure and Farm Organization in an Italian Village," unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 1954, p. 114. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

tionships have been replaced by almost exclusively nuclear ties. "We do not marry into the family, we marry out of the family."⁸

At the same time, Kagan records the emotional attachment of the husband to his parents, especially with his mother. "Momism," or emotional immaturity growing out of this relationship, will effect his choice of a mate. His selection may be required to play at the role of mother rather than wife.⁹ It is interesting to note, in Gans' study, a parallel close tie between mother and married daughter and a less frequent one between mother and unmarried son. These mothers tend to assist rather than guide their married daughters. They help in the household and in the rearing of children "but they have neither the power nor authority of the 'Mum,' the ruling matriarch of the English working-class family."¹⁰

Rabbi Kagan points to the high evaluation of marriage in the culture of the East European Jewish background of the American Jew. Studies comparable to immigrant Polish and Italian families do not exist in the instance of Jewish families. W. I. Thomas did study 3000 letters to the family complaint column of the "Jewish Daily Forward" from 1920 to 1945 (known as the "Bintl Brief") and observed the feeling of kinfolk, "mispocha," which the Jewish family brought with it from the ghetto. This may have crowded immigrant homes with all manner of cousins but it contrasted remarkably with the prototype, allegedly current today, of the

isolated individualistic family. "Some feeling for this extended family still strengthens Jewish home life in the rise of 'family circle associations' . . ."¹¹

Insightfully Kagan analyzes this cultural heritage in the framework of middle-class American Jewish Families.

. . . Marriage was such an archetype of all joy that the Sabbath was called a bride and the infant boy was dedicated to *chuppah* (marriage) at the rite of his circumcision. The husband and wife were a *zivug*, a pair matched by tempering romance with consideration of *yichus* (family background) and guided by that symbolic preserver of family status, the *shadchan* (the matchmaker). The dual authority of the parents was indicated by reference to them as *der tateh-mameh*. The *mameh* was too busy being the *balabosteh* (house manager), keeping a kosher home, to have much time left for neuroses. . . . Despite her manipulations of children through oversolicitous feeding, belief in her love was strong in a hazardous world, for the parents' greatest happiness was to *kleib naches fun kinder* (find happiness in children). *Machen menschen fun kinder* (make people out of children) was a sacred obligation even though the maturation of the *stetl* child to adulthood was much too rapid. Yet, punishment through constant verbal reference to appropriate conduct contained in the popular phrases *derech erets, es past nit* and for *azzus ponim* or impertinence, a *potch* from *mameh* or worse, a stern look from *tateh*—was not regarded as rejection, since the withdrawal of love from a Jewish child was unthinkable. Nor did obedience preclude a child's questioning which was encouraged. With three generations in a small home, let no one think that *sholom bayis* was a place of unruffled serenity.¹²

In the absence of definitive evidence it does not suffice to rely on images, memories or idealized pictures in one's mind. Kagan may be forgiven for sentimentality but not for unsound scholarship. On the contrary, he and other writers such as Mark Zborowski,¹³ Eliza-

⁸ Henry E. Kagan, "The Jewish Family," in Abraham B. Shoulson (ed.), *Marriage and Family Life*, Twayne Publishers, New York, 1959, p. 78.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁰ Gans, *op. cit.*, p. 46. See: Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1957.

¹¹ Kagan, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

¹³ Mark Zborowski, "The Place of Book-Learning in Traditional Jewish Culture," in Margaret Mead and Martha Wolfenstein (eds.),

beth Herzog,¹⁴ and Martha Wolfenstein¹⁵ have much to contribute to a proper understanding of traditional and changing American Jewish family life, be it through an analysis of book-learning, responses to pain, *stetl* life or psychiatric studies of Jewish mothers.

As a matter of fact Kagan may be fully accurate in his sociological presentation of the modern American Jewish family as a blend, more or less, with certain remaining Eastern European strains. For as Leichter reports on her study of Jewish families in New York City, "Contrary to many opinions that conjugal families living in urban industrial settings have very tenuous contacts with their kin, the families studied show an extensive range of socially and emotionally significant interaction with their kinspeople. . . . These influences are found to be quite important in the population studied and frequently emerge as significant factors to be dealt with in the course of casework with the family."¹⁶

What are the fundamental values, attitudes and practice patterns of social workers on this matter of "the family in the modern world"? On what bodies of knowledge is this practice based? There are some very interesting findings on this precise topic from a study in a social casework agency.¹⁷

Childhood in Contemporary Cultures, The University of Chicago Press, 1955.

Mark Zborowski, "Cultural Components in Responses to Pain," *J. Social Issues*, 1952, 8, 16-20.

¹⁴Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life Is with People*, International University Press, New York, 1952.

¹⁵Martha Wolfenstein, "Two Types of Jewish Mothers," in Mead and Wolfenstein, *op. cit.*

¹⁶Russell Sage Foundation, *Annual Report*, 1960-61, p. 44.

¹⁷Hope J. Leichter, "Kinship Values and Casework Intervention," *Casework Papers*, Family Service Association of America, New York, 1961.

The focus of the research in the Jewish Family Service was delimited to the relationships that families have with kin outside the immediate or nuclear family. The clients of the agency were mainly Jewish families of Eastern European origin or descent. Their occupations were generally of lower or lower-middle class. The husbands and wives were primarily American born but the vast majority of their parents were born in Europe.

Are caseworkers aware of client relationships with kin beyond the nuclear family? In the study caseworkers reported that some sort of intervention had taken place, or was contemplated, in these relationships in 46 percent of the cases. In the aged caseload, the workers reported that some such intervention had taken place or was being contemplated in 62 percent of the cases. The intervention process in terms of goals and changes was made more specific by establishing three categories of interactions with kin: "restriction," "expansion" or "redefinition." "Redefinition" was cited in 47 percent of the cases in terms of altering *psychological relations* with kin. Reports which implied "restriction" of kin *interaction* were not counted. Nevertheless, explicit statements that a goal or a result of treatment had been the "restriction" of kin interaction were noted in 40 percent of the clients. In contrast, "expansion" in kin interaction was the goal or result of treatment in only 9 percent of the cases. The same pattern of results was found in the smaller sample of aged clients.

On testing such professional social work concepts as "maturity" and "healthy" with respect to family relationships one finds that workers in the study believe that marital relationships should be the primary tie of an individual after he leaves his parental home. A person should be strong enough to

break away from such old ties for the sake of the new marital bond. Caseworkers and supervisors revealed implicit professional assumptions about desirable forms of household composition, such as the notion that the "most normal or desirable household unit is one consisting of parents and children, rather than one in which grandparents are also present."

The researchers examined value items held by clients and caseworkers and found some to be so different as to be statistically significant.

Thus, when these values were stated in extreme terms, caseworkers and clients agreed that the ideal bond of solidarity should be a marital rather than a parent-child one. Nevertheless, when this bond is considered in terms of leeway for other bonds between parents and children, and obligations for interaction with kin, the differences were considerable throughout, and in a consistent direction. There were many more items on which caseworkers and clients had different opinions than there were items on which they had similar opinions.

Implications for Social Work Practice

The author concludes that "There are clear value differences between caseworkers and many of their clients, or between caseworkers and their clients considered as groups. *These differences undoubtedly are significant in the process of casework intervention in kinship structure.*"¹⁸ This startling conclusion strikes at the heart of a fundamental social work practice principle—understanding, respect and acceptance of the client's values. On the other hand, there is an equally vital practice principle which relates to the role of the worker as a change agent, either in terms of client acculturation broadly speaking, or in terms of modifying the specific values of clients.

Thus, the study raises questions of the

knowledge base of many professional assumptions which guide practice. How do social workers know which kinship structure is generally preferred by people or better adapted to the tensions and risks of modern urban living? Are there categories of people that vary in their kinship values based on social class, ethnic, religious and/or racial background? What are the hard facts on this subject as opposed to a belief yet to be fully identified and examined rigorously in a normative framework?

Practice in traditional social group work agencies—Y's, settlement houses and Jewish community centers commands attention. For the most part the overwhelming majority of recreational and group work activities is organized by sex and age level. After World War II, when aging in our society became gradually defined as a "social problem," the Jewish community center field did notable pioneering work in developing programs for "senior citizens." Regardless of the euphemisms employed to designate these groups (e.g. "Golden Age" and "Sunshine Clubs") agencies separate these older adults for program purposes. With sound professional and organizational support many such persons are benefited psychologically and socially from these group work oriented clubs. At the same time, if group workers are objective and perceptive about their own values and practice, can they not recall instances of a worker's failure to understand the reluctance, more or less, of an older person to affiliate with such a club by doing everything possible to entice the person to join? Do they not recognize that they were "bothered" by the attitude of such a client, who, in their judgment, failed to perceive the values they were convinced were present in the interaction potential of the senior citizens group? How much did they know about the alternatives available to him—a hope or reality of

¹⁸ Writer's emphasis.

continued or expanded kinship relationships or neighboring patterns of social activity in his immediate vicinity? The truth is they believed the client was wrong and they did everything ethical and appropriate to convince him of the error of his ways.

Group workers will recall their periodic inner disappointment when advised by a status board member that he intends to take his entire family on a vacation rather than send his children to the agency's camp. Some staff persons may be convinced that such parents are erring by depriving the children of an invaluable "peer group" social experience. Perhaps this feeling is more honestly based on a perception of agency loss rather than on some objective measure of differential value between family and peer interaction to children. How much time, effort and budget have we actually invested in experimentation and programs oriented to total families? To be sure there are such examples—perhaps around holidays, camping or special events, mass activities, gym or swimming pools—but they tend to be rare instances.

Group work agency executives will admit that even family membership plans were conceived in terms of improving the organization's financial base and not fundamentally as the central focus of a program policy. It is unsound and morally unjustifiable to rationalize an administrative device into a value principle underlying practice.

What about community organization and social planning, more specifically, in terms of family and kinship interaction? Beyond family and group work agencies, what trends does one see in servicing people with the family in mind? This is a vast subject so that one can only attempt some suggestive comments in this area, again with respect to older persons.

Have social workers clearly identified the values implicit in the social policy

underlining the development of homes for the aged through philanthropic sources? It is no accident that the expanding private commercial so-called convalescent homes are financially successful in recent years when one considers the pressures on middle-class urban families faced with an infirm or chronically ill aged parent.

On the other hand, outside of such helpless ailing older persons, what patterns can we note in planning for the housing needs of the aged population? It is important, in this context, to note certain fundamental principles and assumptions from countries other than the United States.

1. It is in the best interests of the economy and social health of the country to provide old people with living arrangements especially suited to their needs.
2. Industrialized society, because of its influence on the breakup of the generations, must assume some of the responsibility for the shelter and care of the aged previously supplied by the family.
3. The old age group has the right to its proportionate share of the goods and services available to other age groups in the population.
4. Mental and physical health of older people are promoted when the aged are privileged to retain active membership in the life of the community.¹⁹

Thus in Sweden a housing policy committee appointed by the Swedish minister of social welfare took the following position: "In the first place and to the largest extent possible, measures for the care of the aged should aim at assisting the aged by all available means to live independent lives in their homes as long as possible without excessive personal strain," and, in Stockholm, officials asserted that "We must try to abolish or prevent the isolation which so easily be-

¹⁹ Ernest W. Burgess (ed.), *Aging in Western Societies*, op. cit., p. 125.

comes an accompaniment to old age in a modern society. 'Old' and 'Lonely' are, alas, two words which are only too often linked together, and rightly."²⁰

The English likewise have taken a broad overview of the housing for the elderly. In *Housing for Special Purposes* (Great Britain, Ministry of Local Government and Planning, 1951) the following statement is made:

The ultimate object of all housing activity is to give the opportunity of living a full and happy life in healthy and congenial surroundings. . . . For older people it means that accommodations should be provided which enable them to take their part in life of the community. . . . Elderly people with their greater freedom from family cares can render valuable service to the community in which they live.²¹

In spite of the fact that large old people's villages have become more and more unpopular in Europe and England, builders and social planners in the United States tend to favor them. The village tries to encompass all services for elderly persons, particularly in their declining years.

Studies of these developments highlight certain criteria for good housing for the elderly. These include the need for privacy, a homelike atmosphere reflecting the personality of each person, and, above all, the importance of keeping these projects relatively small and in the heart of communal life. Currently and in the past homes for old people are located in outlying areas, apparently to provide a quiet and peaceful atmosphere. This is true of both the United States and Europe. On the other hand, the clients clearly prefer to live close to friends and relatives, shops and other services rather than in isolated areas. When they are isolated, they lose much

of the help and companionship their children and families provide.²²

Here, again, one needs to inquire how policy decisions in this field are made. Are they, in fact, based on erroneous assumptions of fact with respect to family and kinship structure and relationships, personal and hidden biases, pragmatic considerations of land and building costs or political considerations? How much effort, in fact, has gone into determining the preferences of the elderly themselves and their families?

To sum up, knowledge and values have been explored in social work practice with respect to family and kinship patterns in society. Two major directions in theoretical research have been identified: one asserting the growing preeminence of the nuclear or conjugal family and the disappearance of the extended or intergenerational kinship system as a response to the change forces of industrialization, urbanization and specialization; the other contending that, with certain modifications kinship networks remain significant and meaningful.

Where is the truth? It is quite likely that both sets of findings are valid. Within their respective research frameworks the findings are understandable and, in some instances, inevitable. They represent the hypotheses of the social scientists and hence the old maxim may be informative, "seek and ye shall find." One needs to distinguish here between a *value-oriented* bias of a researcher and the limiting conclusions of a study due to the *selectivity* of the researcher's theoretical framework. It should also be noted that care needs to be taken in assessing findings with respect to the sample population in terms of social class, ethnic, religious or cultural backgrounds.

The implications for social workers are clear. It is vital that policy and prac-

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 130.

tice need to be formulated from firm knowledge, not from bias or conjecture. To some extent social workers may have unwittingly and overly extended their psychological training from graduate schools (largely Freudian) to encompass larger sociological entities with misleading interpretations. An essential aspect of professionalism is for one consciously to separate personal preference from client needs. The profession, as a whole, needs to be alert to and involved in the broader issues and problems of society.

While it would be foolish to ignore the evidence that the forces of industrialization, urbanization and bureaucratization that affect all modern life also put their clear mark on us, social workers are among those who believe that there is point to an effort to

understand these forces and to help shape them.²³

The clinician, administrator and planner build their wisdom and contribution to society through the sometime smooth meshing and sometime abrasive grinding of theory and practice. When the fit is poor social workers need to dig deeper and objectively. Periodic re-examination of established procedures and return to basic values need to be evaluated alongside of new theoretical insights. This is the central qualification of a true profession.

²³ Harold L. Wilensky and Charles N. Lebeaux, *Industrial Society and Social Welfare*, Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 1958.