Secondary Group Relationships and the Pre-eminence of the Family

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The family in Britain has been neglected as an object of sociological study. Research since World War II has concentrated on education, industrial sociology, social class, crime, urban life and race relations.

The most important work on the family has been of five main sorts. The fall in the number of children parents were willing to bear aroused fears of a population decline detrimental to national power and influence. Adjustments which unavoidable changes in the age balance of the population would require needed to be investigated. Fears were expressed also that the larger families being produced by the less well educated and the economically less successful meant recruitment from "the sub-men". Interest in these matters resulted in a Royal Commission to investigate trends in fertility, their causes and consequences. Its findings, together with the policies it thought the State should implement, were reported in 1949.

A second type of study has been undertaken under the stimulus of anthropology. Young and Willmott explored the extent to which extended kinship networks analogous to those found in primitive societies still persist in modern society. Firth, himself a renowned anthropologist, has conducted similar investigations. It is perhaps precisely because there are so few ramifications within a kinship network and into other spheres of society that sociologists have avoided the study of the family. Each nuclear family is a discrete entity maintaining only the most tenuous links with other nuclear families; there is not a kinship structure which resembles the complex and subtle structure of specialized and integrated factories, offices and markets in the economic domain.

A third type of study has been undertaken by social psychologists. Again, the focus of interest has been somewhat different from that of sociology. Spinley, for example, tried to identify the personality types which emerged from different types of English family experience. Goldberg attempted to show the connection

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between the behaviour of the mother and the proneness of her children to certain somatic disorders1. Chesser secured the cooperation of general practitioners to investigate various aspects of the married life of English women2.

Other work has stemmed from research workers with a background in social work. Such is Kerr’s study of some Liverpool families3. Finally, there have been a few workers with an identifiable leaning towards sociological analysis. Examples are Mogey’s studies in Oxford4, Bott’s study of some London families5, and Gorer’s nationwide study6.

Research results nevertheless permit some cautious suggestions to be put forward. One relationship only, that between the husband and wife, will be examined. The relationships between the siblings, the mother and father, the mother and children and the father and children will be left entirely to one side. This is partly an arbitrary sharpening of focus on one phase of a complex phenomenon. Partly, too, the choice is made because spousehood as compared with parenthood takes a larger portion of the life span of the individual than in the past. The average number of children in the completed English family was six in 1871, five in 1881, four in the eighteen nineties, three in 1911, and two in 1931. Current trends show an increase in the size of the family, but the contrast with the earlier figures remains striking. What is more, family planning has made child bearing and child rearing the task of the first few years of marriage, leaving the benefits of modern longevity to the unencumbered spouses7.

One hundred years ago divorce was almost unknown in England. In the latter part of the nineteenth century and in the early years of the twentieth the number of new petitions for divorce rose to a quinquennial rate of 5,000. World War I multiplied these figures by three. They had more than doubled again by the time of World War II. During the war they doubled again. In the succeeding five years they doubled yet again, to the annual rate which still obtains8. The

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7 In 1958 the legitimate maternity rate for women married once only was, for England and Wales, .308 for marriages of under one year duration, .279 in marriages of 1 year and under 2 years, .245 for those of 2 years and under 3, .227 for marriages of 3 years and under 4, and .207 for marriages of 4 years and under 5. Marriages of longer duration yield far fewer maternities. *Registrar General’s Statistical Review of England and Wales for the Year 1958*, London: H.M.S.O., 1960, Part III, Table 23.