Kinship and Geographical Mobility in a Sample from a London Middle-Class Area

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This paper deals with a small sector of the results of research in progress among a set of middle-class families in London. The object of the study is to analyse the structure and estimate the magnitude and social significance of the kinship systems of British middle-class families; it was conceived as an extension of earlier work in London, and is being carried out in conjunction with a parallel study in Chicago.1

The British study, with which I am concerned here, started with a pilot investigation of 30 families living on a private housing estate in North London. This estate, "Greenbanks", is generally considered to be a "good middle-class area", having a high proportion of professional people living on it. Following the pilot survey, a random sample of 60 households was taken of the total population of electors' households on the estate (about 250 in all). This sample was heterogeneous in terms of marital status, family stage, age, religion and occupation, though the majority of individuals are married with children, Protestant, and the occupations of the heads of households fall within the broad band of "middle-class" occupations.

A second random sample was drawn from a population of married couples with dependent children from a delimited area of Highgate village in North London. The sample therefore differs radically from the Greenbanks sample in

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that it is homogeneous in terms of family stage, and thus more so in terms of age too. The sample from Highgate was also, for various reasons, more uniform in terms of religion, having far fewer Jewish families than the estate.

All the 167 adult individuals in the two random samples could be said to be middle class by at least some of the criteria generally used to place people. Apart from occupation, their style of life, socio-economic level and general behaviour were distinctly middle class, even if only insofar as they were neither working class nor aristocracy or “plutocracy”, although within this general homogeneity there were wide variations of such items as income, class origins and speech patterns.

Since only a small part of the field material collected is relevant to the subject of this article, little need be said about the nature of the methodology or results of the whole study. Briefly, the object was to estimate the importance of extra-familial kinship, i.e. the importance of kin outside the immediate family, in everyday life and in times of crisis, in terms of contact, exchange of services, influence in decision-making and on general behaviour patterns. The study was basically anthropological in method, using genealogies as the basic framework, and collecting material over a number of interviews. Although the actual interviews were of an unstructured nature, the material was collected systematically for each household. A comprehensive aide-memoire of over 20 pages covered education, occupational and residential history of the informants and all their kin, the nature of contact and services between kin, specific kin relationships, kinship and family ideology, the role of friends and any factors which were thought to bear possible relation to kinship attitudes and behaviour. The bulk of the material was of a qualitative kind, but was collected in such a way that certain quantitative aspects could be abstracted from it for purpose of analysis.

The families of the individuals in the samples varied considerably in terms of size, varying between extremes of one or two known relatives to over 300. Apart from size, they varied too in terms of the degree of corporateness, in “family ideology” and attitudes towards kin and kin obligations, and in general kinship behaviour.

Within the wide scope of the material collected certain areas are relevant to the discussion of kinship and geographical mobility. They are, for example, the origin of the individuals in the samples, the reasons for coming to London (for those informants born elsewhere) and the use made of kin in these circumstances, the location, degree of scatter or corporateness of their kin, the relation between geographical distance and contact patterns between kin, and the importance of actual geographical location.

Since the analysis of our data is still in progress, the discussion of quantitative aspects of the material has been limited for the purpose of this article to the 30 married couples from the second sample area, Highgate Village, though qualitative examples have been drawn from both samples.