The Concepts of Nuclear and Extended Family: An Exploration of Empirical Referents

GELIA T. CASTILLO, ABRAHAM M. WEISBLAT AND FELICIDAD R. VILLAREAL

Gelia T. Castillo, University of the Philippines College, Philippines
Abraham M. Weisblat, Agricultural Development Council, New York, U.S.A.
Felicidad R. Villareal, University of Wisconsin, Madison, U.S.A.

Introduction

The sociologist's efforts to arrive at empirical generalizations with respect to a particular sociological phenomenon is quite often handicapped by the fact that he does not know enough to generalize well or that the phenomenon under study is labelled differently by different investigators or that the same concept refers to different phenomena in the empirical world. Homans in his Rules of Theory Building sets the following rule: "Talk about one thing at a time. That is, in choosing your words (or, more pedantically, concepts) see that they refer not to several classes of fact at the same time but to one and one only. Corollary: Once you have chosen your words, always use the same words when referring to the same things." 2

Actually the nature and direction of an investigator's statement of research findings is frequently determined by operational decisions made regarding the particular phenomenon which should be subsumed under the concept employed. Murdock's view that the term "family" is ambiguous when used alone is a virtual understatement. Bowerman and Elder lament the confusion created by descriptive accounts of family structure wherein terms are used rather loosely. Hence if one were to study the characteristic family structure in a particular society, conceptual clarification and operational specification of the varieties of existing family structure are indispensable.

2 Ibid., p. 16.
This paper tries to explore the empirical referents and definitions of the concepts of nuclear and extended family. It is an attempt to see what these concepts are anchored to in the empirical world. In addition to examining the operational definitions used in various studies, some effort will be directed toward the discovery and analysis of modal family household patterns, attitudes toward extended household arrangements, and other functions of the extended family in the Philippines and elsewhere.

A) AN EXAMINATION OF OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

In presenting the basic concepts in interpreting American Society, Robin Williams emphasizes that “Every scientific fact is a statement about phenomena in terms of a particular set of concepts. Our facts must be objective i.e., the operations by which they are derived can be described and publicly communicated so that ultimately they can be replicated and checked by any competent observer. At the same time the multitudes of heterogeneous facts must be ordered and analyzed in concepts that are as clear and invariant as possible.” In keeping with these pronouncements he has attempted clarification of several “family” concepts in the chapter on Kinship and Family in the United States. He defines Kinship system as a “pattern of social norms defining interpersonal relationships relating to the facts of birth and of the birth cycle” and regards prolonged human infancy which requires extended adult care as the central fact of all kinship systems. The selection of marriage partners, the marriage bond, the immediate conjugal unit are the four main categories of social relations based on actual or potential births.

For further clarification, Williams makes a distinction between kinship as “a set of relations” and a family as “a definite group of persons united by kinship and by common residence (the household group), economic production and consumption, religious organization, or common recreational activities.” In the United States, “the isolated conjugal unit is regarded as desirable, right, and proper by social consensus. It is felt that each family (typically this is simply assumed to mean immediate family) should be an autonomous group. It is considered unfortunate if for any reason other relatives have to reside in the household.” Raymond Firth uses the term “extra-familial kin” to refer to relatives outside the family. From his subsequent discussion of British society it is gathered that the term has reference to “kin outside the household” or to social relations “with parents (when alive), siblings, and siblings’ children, parents’ siblings and their children. But the range of the effective kin universe extends collateral as far as second cousins and (in very rare cases) third cousins.” From these two authors, it is evident that in the United States and

2 Ibid., p. 48.
3 Raymond Firth, “Family and Kinship in Industrial Society,” The Sociological Monograph No. 8: The Development of Industrial Societies, University of Keele, October 1964, p. 81.