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ABSTRACT

Although various social groupings--aggregates, dyads, groups, and organizations--have been the subject of much past study, researchers have encountered an absence of a systematic theory to explain behavior within marriage and family units. This paper examines the diversity present in research concerning marriage and family units and suggests that these differences stem from the false assumption that "the family," as commonly perceived, represents a heuristic unit of analysis. Criteria based on observations of behavior in other social groupings can be used to predict the differences in interactions which occur between families. The implications of this paradigm for conflict resolution within kinship groups are also examined. (KS)

A QUESTION OF FORM

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> The mere formulation of a problem is far more often essential than its solution, which may be merely a matter of mathematical or experimental skill. To raise new questions, new possibilities, to regard old problems from a new angle requires creative imagination and marks real advances in science.
>
> - Albert Einstein

Introduction

Over the past seventy-five years social scientists have been examining the phenomenon of marriage and the family. Tharp (1963) begins his literature review of marriage research as far back as 1890, with Pearson's comparison of the anthropometric characteristics of spouses. In spite of the large accumulation of research findings in the area, little systematic theory exists concerning the joint behaviors of the target population of "marriage and family" research.

Findings in the area of family communication seem disjointed and often contradictory. Alexander (1973) found a reciprocal response by sons to parent supportive communication but not to parents' defensive communication. Ort (1950) concluded that marital happiness lies in spouses playing the roles they conceive of as ideal, and their partners supporting such roles. However, Hobart and Klausner (1959) found no relation between marital satisfaction and role disagreement.[1] Such contradictory findings have often been explained by stating one set of family behaviors represents abnormal or unhealthy families, while the opposite behavior represents normal or healthy families (Alexander, 1973). But, the solution of calling one set of findings representative of healthy groups and the other representative of unhealthy groups contributes little knowledge concerning behavioral patterns of the system "family." This paper posits that one reason for the lack of progress and hodge-podge of findings in the area commonly referred to as family research stems from the false assumption that "the family" as commonly perceived represents a heuristic unit

of analysis. Instead, the author proposes that criteria based on regularities already found in dyads, groups, aggregates and organizations be used to predict differences in interactions among "families" or vice versa. Whether different behaviors cause kinship bodies to develop as dyads, groups, organizations, or remain aggregates, or whether these structures produce diverse behavioral patterns seems like a premature "which came first, the chicken or egg" question which remains open for empirical verification at a later date.

Right now family researchers need to develop new perspectives to guide their empirical endeavors. These four units of analysis, aggregates, dyads, groups, and organizations have been examined to some degree by past research. The inability of social scientists, over the years, to identify characteristics that behaviorally distinguish families from already studied forms of social structures indicates that a return to a more basic perspective when examining kinship bodies will produce more heuristic and parsimonious findings concerning human behavior in general. Most typically, researchers have brought together kinship clusters of various levels of complexity -- couples, couples with single and multiple offspring, large subunits of extended kinship groups, etc., -- put them in a laboratory setting, had these individuals discuss some topic or solve some problem, and analyze the communication patterns of this body based on an audio or video tape of the interactions (Riskin and Faunce, 1970; Ferreira, Winter and Poindexter, 1968; Scott, 1962). The assumption implicit in such a procedure is that these combinations of "kin" function as a group which falls into a subcategory called family. Whether these individuals researchers call a "family" function as a group and whether their behavior in a laboratory concerning an experimenter defined problem represents generalizable group behavior remain empirical questions. Secondly, so far only the non-behavioral characteristic of kinship has been used to distinguish the subcategory of family;

whether kinship justified the establishment of such a subcategory is also questionable. The author will illustrate the utility of examining the assumptions presented above, through discussion of literature concerning dyads, groups, organizations and the family, and the implications that a new framework could have for conflict resolution among kinship bodies.

I. Two's Company, Three's A Crowd

Past literature indicates that childless couples, whether married or not, which have been categorized as families along with kinship bodies of a larger size, demonstrate characteristics which differentiate them from these larger structures and associate them with dyads in general. McCall and Simmons (1966) indicate three different modes by which participants enter into a relationship: 1) an individual can be born into, inherit, or be otherwise plugged into a relationship; 2) an individual may choose to enter a relationship based on prior knowledge of the prospective other; or 3) an individual may be thrown into a relationship due to indirect choice variables such as propinquity, common work situation, etc. McCall and Simmons present these modes of entrance as important variables effecting patterns of interaction and role expectations throughout the career of the relationship.[2] Couples would differ from larger kinship bodies in terms of this variable, mode of entrance. In larger kinship systems some subset of individuals would have been born into the body. Little discussion or decision between born-in members concerning why individuals were together, or how to mesh previously acquired habits and behavioral histories would have teken place prior to relationship entrance. On the other hand, a direct or indirect choice concerning entrance into the relationship took place on the part of both members of the couple. This choice entailed some type of, at minimum, implicit and probably explicit, communication concerning role

expectations and past histories. Such communication increases the realization of commitment and indirectly trust, two important relational variables (McCall and Simmons, 1966; Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson, 1967) on the part of the participants. In addition, the possibility of differing past histories between both members of a couple brings into play the effects of what Burr (1973) refers to as "premarital factors" on the marriage. The lack of choice in one's relatives may create varying levels of trust and commitment within the kinship body once it expands beyond the free-choice couple. Simmel (1950) discusses a number of additional ways in which the dyad, and therefore couple, differs in the relation of each of the members to one another, in comparison to a large group to its members.

> Each of the two feels himself confronted only by the other, not by a collectivity above him. The social structure here rests immediately on the one and on the other of the two, and the secession of either would destroy the whole. The dyad, therefore, does not attain the super-personal life which the individual feels to be independent of himself. As soon, however, as there is a sociation of three, a group continues to exist even in case one of the members drops out.[3]

This equal control over life and death has broader implications for the relationship. First, members have more control over the power distribution within the relationship. Disagreement, conflict, and threat seem more threatening and may, therefore, be suppressed.

The realization of the fragile nature of the dyad, its irreplaceability and death probability, adds to feelings of sentimentality and intimacy on the part of participants (Simmel, 1950). Often these feelings of sentimentality and intimacy cause additional distortion in communication patterns.

> It leads them to consider what they share with others and what part is the most important part of their personalities -- objective, intellectual, generally interesting, generous features -- a lying outside the marital relation, and thus they gradually eliminate it from their marriage.[4]

These characteristics which distinguish dyads from larger bodies have implications in a number of behavioral processes.

Coser (1956) raises a number of points concerning the function of conflict, which imply that differences found between dyads and larger bodies will produce substantial differences in the conflict process. He discusses the effect of the existence or lack of a super-personal entity beyond the relationship participants.

> Conflicts in which the participants feel that they are merely the representative of collectivities and groups, fighting not for self but only for the ideals of the group they represent are likely to be more radical and merciless than those that are fought for personal reasons.[5]

Coser also raises a second issue concerning conflict which may have implications for differences between couples and larger kinship bodies.

> Conflict may serve to remove dissociating elements in a relationship and to re-establish unity. Insofar as conflict is the resolution of tension between antagonists it has stabilizing functions and becomes an integrating component of the relationship. However, not all conflicts are positively functional for the relationship, but only those which concern goals, values or interests that do not contradict the basic assumptions upon which the relation is founded.[6]

In relationships where participants have engaged in some type of communication prior to entrance, where they have chosen to enter rather than been born into the relationship, one would hypothesize a lower probability of disagreement over issues that contradict the basic assumptions upon which the relation is founded. The probability is higher that a mother-in-law or teenage son will disagree with the male couple member on the basic assumptions underlying his relationship with his spouse, than his spouse disagreeing with him over the same things. Overall, the regularities which would be found in any free choice dyad seem closer to the type that would be expected in a couple. For this reason, it seems fruitful to view husbands and wives (or lovers) as dyads rather than attempting to plug them into a subcategory family.

II. When You and Me and Baby Makes Three

How to identify kinship bodies that should be viewed as dyads presents few problems -- two person free-choice relationships present little identification difficulties. However, the question of what kinship bodies function as groups becomes more complex. Kinship bodies may develop behavioral characteristics of aggregates, groups, or organizations. The problem becomes identifying which of these three levels of complexity matches the form of the object of examination: the three person or more "family." The problem and utility of distinguishing kinship groups from kinship organizations will be discussed later.

Attention now turns to the problem and implication of differentiating kinship bodies which remain aggregates from those functioning as groups.

When Scott (1962) examined three, four, and five person three-generation kinship bodies and attempted to compare his results to those of Mills (1952) and Strodtbeck (1953), he found few regularities across results. Mills and Scott's findings for triads supported the hypothesis that the highest rates of support among participants will be between rank 1 and rank 2 initiators. Strodtbeck's and Scott's four and five person data did not support the hypothesis. Scott discussed a number of possible confounding variables (i.e., children and grandparents in some "groups," the nature of the task, etc.) as post-hoc explanations for the lack of regularities. Trying to measure or control for all such intervening variables, however, presents a complex, near impossible goal. A simpler, more useful approach would be to find (a) major general variables(s) which had strong explanatory power; interrelatedness or groupness of the target of observation could serve as such a variable. "Groups can be defined as sets of interdependent individuals. They should be distinguished from aggregates which are sets of non-interdependent individuals."[7]

When interactions reach the group level coalitions may form (Simmel), renegades, heretics, and deviants become viable roles for participants (McCall and Simmons, 1966; Schachter, 1953) and a wide variety of communication networks can develop (Cartwright and Zander, 1953). The degree of interrelatedness of participants in an interaction, not the number of participants, accounts for the possibility of alternative patterns among the variables examined by group researchers.

Research findings would vary greatly if family members under the observation of social scientists did not constitute a group of interdependent individuals. For some adolescent offspring the nuclear family may serve as a place to check in for food and sleep, while for others it may serve as a cohesive reference group with a history of networks and well developed relationships. These two kin-bodies would have totally different responses to the laboratory problem-solving task. In the first case, where participants had functioned with relative independence, as an aggregate, in the past, the body might begin to go through phases of group formation. Conflict would be handled in terms of group formation (Ellis and Fisher, 1975).and the possibility of conflicts concerning the basis upon which this unfamiliar interdependence was being established would be great. Conflict over the basic premises underlying group formation would be dysfunctional in contrast to the integrative function of conflict in those bodies of individuals already committed to membership in one group (Coser, 1956). As a result of previous failure at development as a cohesive unit, an aggregate of kin might not even attempt functioning as an interdependent body, and instead respond negatively to one another at any opportunity in order to reaffirm independence. An already cohesive unit, on the other hand, would revert to previously developed group norms. Long established coalitions, leadership patterns, and roles could be depended upon throughout the interaction. Knowledge of previously

supported behavior would produce the reciprocity to supportive communication that Alexander originally found, while communication among an aggregate of kin who no longer even attempted to function as a group would produce reciprocity to defensive communication.

The problem arises, however, as to how to identify when a household functions as a group versus highly independent people who happen to live together. NEGOPY (Richards, 1975; Farace, Russell and Monge, 1974), a network analysis program mainly used to identify organizational communication patterns and the Significant Other Battery (Woelfel and Haller, 1971) offer possible solutions to this problem. The Significant Other Battery (SOB) identifies all the individuals that the respondent communicates with or considers in relationship to (a) specified role(s) or topic area(s). The SOB could be administered to all members of the kinship body to be examined concerning the types of areas the researcher has found that families discuss. Comparison could then be made between various members' SOB results to see to what extent members' communication networks overlap, and how often other members of the kinship body turn up within the SOB's as a whole. A network analysis questionnaire could then be administered, considering all individuals which appear on the SOB as possible nodes (Richards, 1975). Negopy would then produce a description of groups within the overall kinship bodies' communication contacts, dyads and isolates within the structure, and the integrativeness and reciprocal nature of the linkages (for further explanation of criteria for these structures see Farace, Russell and Monge, 1974; and Richards, 1975). On the basis of these data researchers could determine to what degree the nuclear family functions as a group for which participants and if the group structure indicates a more extended family. The possibility also arises for using coorientation measures as possible criteria for interrelatedness (Newcomb, 1968).

III. Checking for the Bigger Picture

The final distinction which researchers may find useful to make concerning the kinship bodies they examine concerns whether the bodies have reached organizational complexity or function in terms of their roles in a larger organizational structure. J.G. Miller offers the following criteria for distinguishing the group from the organization:

> The initial difference between organizations and groups is in the structure of the decider. Organizations always have at least two echelons in their deciders even when they are so small that each person can interact in a face-to-face relationship with all the others. Group deciders have no formally designated echelons.[8]

This distinction is extremely important if the kinship body is part of a larger "extended family" and participants are members of various different echelons within this large organization. The members of the kinship may notfunction within the larger organization as a unit, but rather be connected individually to various other echelons which have specific roles in a larger more formalized structure. Coser discusses the implications for conflict resolution and functions when smaller, cohesive units exist within larger bodies. The people sitting in the laboratory may be interacting in terms of norms established by a larger structure and would show different behaviors than similar sized nuclear families that do not have these "organizational constraints" governing their behavior. The network analysis proposed earlier would offer data concerning the kinship body's function in a larger, more complex system.

Conclusion

The perspecitve laid out here does not attempt to hypothesize relationships which researchers can test based on any existing or proposed theory. Rather it offers a paradigm through which researchers can examine kinship bodies and develop plausible theories based on past dyadic, group, and organizational findings. It

offers a new starting point from which family researchers can compare their work. More importantly it questions a number of assumptions concerning family communication, which up to this point have been ignored.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Roland G. Tharp, "Psychological Patterning in Marriage," Psychological Bulletin, March 1963, 60:2, 113.

[2]George J. McCall and J.L. Simmons, Identities and Interactions. New York: The Free Press, 1966, 180-187.

[3]Georg Simmel, The Sociology of Georg Simmel, Edited and translated by Kurt H. Wolff. New York: The Free Press, 1950, 123.

[4]Ibid., 127

[5]Lewis Coser, The Functions of Social Conflict. New York: The Free Press, 1956, 118.

[6]Ibid., 80.

[7]M. Mark Miller, "Communicating In Groups: Tasks, Values, and Interaction," Human Communication: Concepts, Skills and Principles, Edited by Jan Shubert. East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University, 1974, G-1.

[8]J.G. Miller, "Living Systems: The Organization," Behavioral Science. 1972, 17, 5.

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