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The Kinship System of the Contemporary United States

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## THE KINSHIP SYSTEM OF THE CONTEMPORARY UNITED STATES

By TALCOTT PARSONS

IT IS a remarkable fact that, in spite of the important interrelations between sociology and social anthropology, no attempt to describe and analyze the kinship system of the United States in the structural terms current in the literature of anthropological field studies exists. This is probably mainly accounted for by two facts: on the sociological side, family studies have overwhelmingly been oriented to problems of individual adjustment rather than comparative structural perspective, while from the anthropological side, a barrier has grown out of the fact that a major structural aspect of a large-scale society cannot be observed in a single program of field research. To a considerable extent the material must come from the kind of common sense and general experience which have been widely held to be of dubious scientific standing.

There are two particularly cogent reasons why an attempt to fill this gap is highly desirable. In the first place, an understanding of the kinship system on precisely this structural level is of the greatest importance to the understanding of the American family, its place in the more general social structure, and the strains and psychological patterning to which it is subject.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, our kinship system is of a structural type which is of extraordinary interest in relation to the broader problems of typology and systematic functional dynamics of kinship generally. As a type which, to the writer's knowledge, is not closely approached in any known non-literate society, its incorporation in the range dealt with by students of kinship should significantly enrich their comparative perspective.<sup>2</sup>

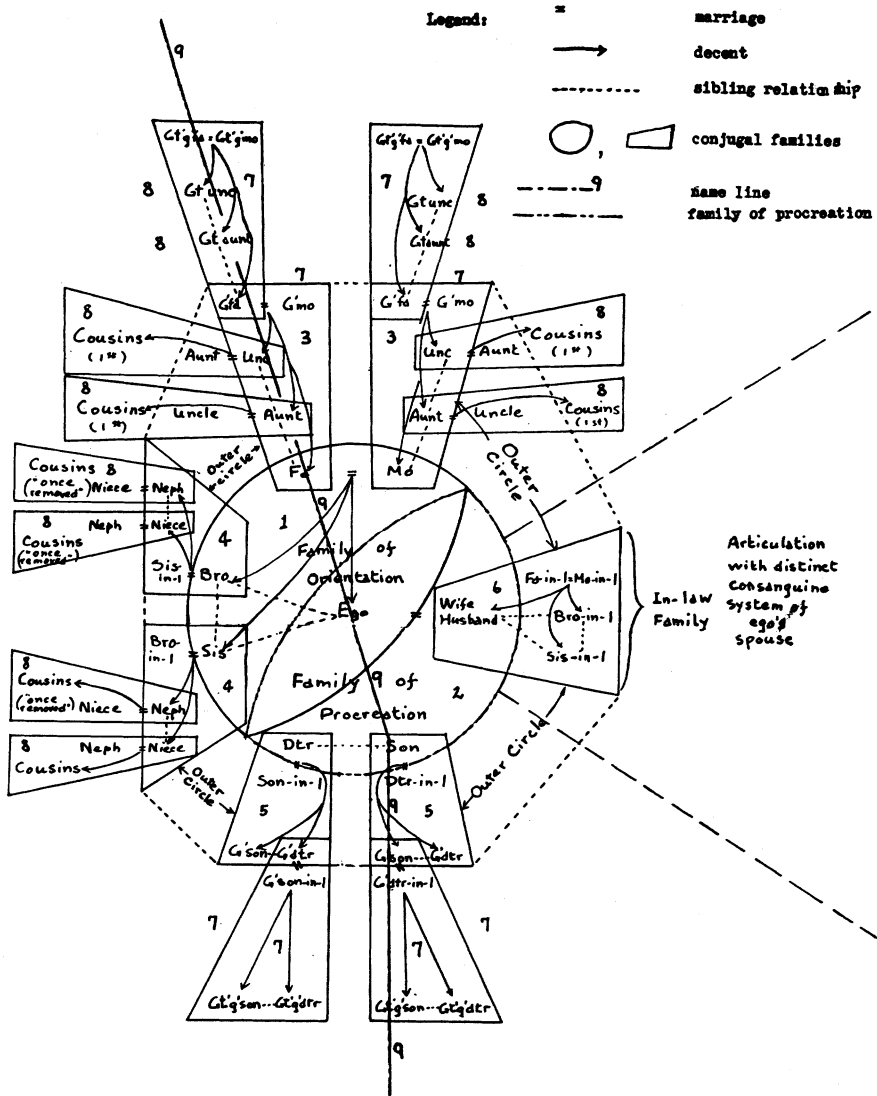
It can perhaps be regarded as established that, with proper precautions, analysis of kinship terminology can serve as a highly useful approach to the

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<sup>1</sup> Probably the most significant contribution to this field thus far has been made by Kingsley Davis in a series of articles starting with his *Structural Analysis of Kinship* (AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST, April, 1937), in collaboration with W. Lloyd Warner, and going on to *Jealousy and Sexual Property* (Social Forces, March, 1936), *The Sociology of Prostitution* (American Sociological Review, October, 1937), *The Child and the Social Structure* (Journal of Educational Sociology, December, 1940), *The Sociology of Parent-Youth Conflict* (American Sociological Review, August, 1940).

I am greatly indebted to Dr. Davis's work, starting with the significance of his first article, for the systematic relating of the biological and the social levels of kinship structure. Much of the present analysis is implicit in his later articles, which have proved to be very suggestive in working out the somewhat more explicit formulations of the present study.

<sup>2</sup> It is proposed in a later article to enter into certain of these comparative problems of kinship structure in an attempt to arrive at a higher level of dynamic generalization about kinship than has yet come to be current in the sociological or even the anthropological literature.



*Types of Families:*

1. Ego's family of orientation (1 only)
2. Ego's family of procreation (1 only)
3. First degree ascendant families (2)
4. First degree collateral families (number indefinite, 2 types)
5. First descendant families (number indefinite, 2 types)
6. In-law family (1 only)
7. Second degree ascendant and descendant families (4 ascendant, descendant indefinite, 4 types)
8. Second degree collateral families (all children ego's cousins)

*Structural Groupings of Families:*

- I. 1+2—Inner circle
- II. 3,4,5+6—Outer circle
- III. 1,2,3,5,7—Families in line of descent
- IV. 4,8—Collateral families
- V. 2,6—Articulation of consanguine systems

No difference according to sex of ego, except in the term for spouse and the fact that, if ego is female, name line does not extend below ego in line of descent.

study of the functioning social structure. In the case of the English language two precautions in particular, over and above those commonly observed, need to be explicitly mentioned. Such analysis alone cannot serve to bring out what is distinctively American because the terminology has been essentially stable since before the settlement of America, and today there is no significant terminological difference between England and the United States. Moreover, the differences in this respect between English and the other modern European languages are minor. Hence all analysis of terminology can do is indicate a very broad type within which the more distinctively American system falls.

As shown in the accompanying diagram<sup>3</sup> the American family is perhaps best characterized as an "open, multilineal, conjugal system."

The conjugal family unit of parents and children is one of basic significance in any kinship system. What is distinctive about our system is the absence of any important terminologically recognized units which cut across conjugal families, including some members and excluding others. The only instances of such units are *pairs* of conjugal families each with *one* common member. Terminologically, in common speech, it is significant that we have only the words "family", which generally<sup>4</sup> refers to the conjugal unit, and "relatives", which does not refer to *any* solidary unit at all, but only to anyone who is a kinsman.

Ours then is a "conjugal"<sup>5</sup> system in that it is "made up" *exclusively* of interlocking conjugal families. The principle of structural relation of these families is founded on the fact that, as a consequence of the incest tabu, *ego*

<sup>3</sup> The diagramming conventions adopted in this paper are somewhat different from those commonly used by anthropologists. They are imposed by the peculiar structural features of our system, especially

a) Its "openness," i.e., absence of preferential mating. Hence the two spouses of any given conjugal family are not structurally related by family of orientation and it is not possible to portray "the" system in terms of a limited number of lines of descent. Each marriage links *ego's* kinship system to a complete system.

b) The consequent indefinite "dispersion" of the lines of descent.

The best that can be done in two dimensions is to take *ego* as a point of reference and show *his* significant kin. It is strictly impossible to diagram the system as a whole—that would require a space of *n*-dimensions. Similarly, "vertical" and "horizontal" or "lateral" "axes" have only a very limited meaning. "Lines of descent" and "generations" are significant. But there is a geometrically progressive increase in the number of lines of descent with each generation away from *ego* and the distinctions cannot be made in terms of a linear continuum. I am indebted to Miss Ai-li Sung of Radcliffe College for assistance in drafting the diagram.

<sup>4</sup> The most important exception is its usage in upper class circles to denote what Warner calls a "lineage," i.e., a group possessing continuity over several generations, usually following the "name line," e.g., the "Adams family." See W. L. Warner and Lunt, *Social Life of a Modern Community*. The significance of this exception<sup>1</sup> will be commented upon below.

<sup>5</sup> See Ralph Linton, *The Study of Man*, Ch. VIII, for the very useful distinction between "conjugal" and "consanguine" kinship types.

is always in the structurally normal<sup>6</sup> case a member not of one but of two conjugal families, those which Warner usefully distinguishes as the "family of orientation," into which he is born as a child, and the "family of procreation," which is founded by his marriage. Moreover, he is the *only*<sup>7</sup> common member of the two families.

From *ego's* point of view, then, the core of the kinship system is constituted by families 1 and 2 in the diagram, in the one case his father, mother, brothers and sisters, in the other his spouse (wife or husband according to *ego's* sex), sons and daughters. Monogamy is reflected in the fact that parent and other parent's spouse are terminologically identical, modified only by the prefix "step" to take account of second or later marriages, and in the fact that the terms father and mother, husband and wife can each apply to only *one* person at a time. It is also notable that no distinction on the basis of birth order is made—all brothers are terminologically alike. But most notable of all is the fact that *none* of these seven kinship personalities is terminologically identified with *any* relative outside the particular conjugal family in which he is placed. A brother is specifically distinguished from any male cousin, the father from any uncle, the mother from any aunt, etc. These two conjugal families may conveniently be treated as constituting the "inner circle" of the kinship structure. Relative priorities within them will be discussed below.

Now *each* member of *ego's* inner kinship circle is the connecting link with one other terminologically recognized conjugal family. Moreover he links the family of orientation or procreation, as the case may be, with *only* one farther conjugal family, and each individual with a separate one. The kinship personalities of this "outer circle" are not, however, always terminologically separate, a fact which will be shown to be of paramount importance.

The first pair of outer circle families, which may be called the "first ascendant," are the families of orientation of *ego's* parents and consist, besides the articulating personality, each of the four kinship personalities of grandfather, grandmother, uncle, and aunt. The most significant fact is the lack of terminological distinction between the paternal and the maternal families of orientation—grandparents, uncles and aunts are alike regardless of which "side" they are on. The only important exception to this lies, not in kinship terminology as such but in the patrilineal inheritance of the family name, giving rise to a unilateral "name line" (9). Since the same principle of lack of distinction by sex of intervening relative applies to still higher ascendant generations—the four great- and eight great-great-grandfathers—it is perhaps more

<sup>6</sup> Excluding, of course, those who do not marry. But failure to marry has no positive structural consequences in relation to kinship—only negative.

<sup>7</sup> It is of course possible for two pairs—or even more—of siblings to inter-marry. This case is, however, without structural significance.

accurate to speak of a "multilineal" than a "bilateral" system. Anyone of an indefinite number of lines of descent *may* be treated as significant. Above all, the extension from the principle of *bilaterality*, as applied to the first ascendant (and descendant) families, to that of *multilineality* in succeeding generations is completely incompatible with any tendency to *bifurcate* the kin group on the basis of lines of descent.

The same fundamental principles govern the terminology of the first collateral families (4), the families of procreation of *ego's* siblings; and the first descendant families (5), the families of procreation of his children. It is noteworthy that siblings' spouses are terminologically assimilated to sibling status with the suffix "in-law"—generally not used in address or the more intimate occasions of reference—and that nephews and nieces are the same whether they are brothers' or sisters' children and regardless of the sex of *ego*. Similarly spouses of children are assimilated to the status of children by the same terminological device and sons' and daughters' children are all indiscriminately grandchildren. Finally, both siblings-in-law and children-in-law are terminologically segregated from *any* kinship status relative to *ego* except that in the particular conjugal family which is under consideration.

The last "outer circle" family, the "in-law" family (6), has a very particular significance. It is the only one of those to which *ego's* inner circle is linked to which he is not bound by descent and consanguinity but only by affinity, and this fact is of paramount importance, signaling as it does the openness of our system. Preferential mating on a kinship basis, that is, is completely without structural significance, and every marriage in founding a new conjugal family brings together (in the type case) two completely unrelated kinship groups which are articulated on a kinship basis *only* in this one particular marriage. Seen from a somewhat more generalized point of view, if we take the total inner and outer circle group of *ego's* kin as a "system," it is articulated to another entirely distinct system of the same structure by *every* peripheral relative (i.e., who is not a connecting link between the inner and outer circles), except in the direct lines of descent. The consequence is a maximum of dispersion of the lines of descent and the prevention of the structuring of kinship groups on any other principle than the "onion" principle, which implies proportionately increasing "distantness" with each "circle" of linked conjugal families.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In any finite population, lines of descent are bound to cross somewhere, and in our society the marriage of fairly close relatives is not infrequent. But there is no consistent pattern in this intermarriage, and it is hence without structural consequences.

Most of the essentials of an open conjugal system can be maintained, while a high level of generation continuity in at least one line is also maintained, by a systematic discrimination between lines of descent—especially through primogeniture. The extent to which this has and has not occurred is the most important range of variation within the basic pattern and will have to be discussed in some detail below.

Another way of throwing the significance of this basic open-multilineal structure into relief is to recall the fact that *ego's* family of orientation and his in-law family are, from the point of view of his children, both first ascendant families whose members are equally grandparents, aunts and uncles.

In principle it is possible to distinguish, beyond the outer circle, further layers of the "onion" indefinitely. It is, however, significant that our kinship terminology ceases at this point to apply at all specific terms, fundamentally recognizing only two elements. First is the line of descent (8) designated by the ascendant and descendant family terms with the addition of the reduplicating prefix "great"—e.g., greatgrandfather and greatgrandson. Second is the indiscriminate category "cousins" into which all "collaterals" are thrown, with only the descriptive<sup>9</sup> devices of "first," "third," "once removed," etc., to distinguish them by.

How far can this distinctive terminology be said to "reflect" the actual institutional structure of kinship? In a broad way it certainly does. We clearly have none of the "extended" kin groupings so prevalent among non-literate peoples, such as patrilineal or matrilineal clans. We have no exogamy except that based on "degree" of relationship. We have no preferential mating—all these are a matter of the simplest common knowledge. But to get a clearer conception of the more specific structure it is essential to turn to a different order of evidence.

In the first place, the importance of the isolated conjugal family is brought out by the fact that it is the normal "household" unit. This means it is the unit of residence and the unit whose members as a matter of course pool a common basis of economic support, with us, especially money income. Moreover, in the typical case neither the household arrangements nor the source of income bear any specific relation to the family of orientation of either spouse, or, if there is any, it is about as likely to be to the one as to the other. But the typical conjugal family lives in a home segregated from those of both pairs of parents (if living) and is economically independent of both. In a very large proportion of cases the geographical separation is considerable. Furthermore, the primary basis of economic support and of many other elements of social status lies typically in the husband's occupational status, his "job," which he typically holds independently of any particularistic relation to kinsmen.

The isolation of the conjugal unit in this country is in strong contrast to much of the historic structure of European society where a much larger and more important element have inherited home, source of economic support, and

<sup>9</sup>It should perhaps be explicitly stated that though sometimes called a "descriptive" system by some of the older anthropologists, our terminology is by no means literally descriptive of exact biological relationships. Above all it fails to distinguish relatives whose relation to *ego* is traced through different lines of descent. But it also fails to distinguish by birth order, or to distinguish siblings' spouses from spouses' siblings—both are brothers- or sisters-in-law. Finally, as just noted, it stops making distinctions very soon, treating all collaterals as "cousins."

specific occupational status (especially a farm or family enterprise) from their fathers. This of course has had to involve discrimination between siblings since the whole complex of property and status had to be inherited intact.<sup>10</sup>

Hence considerable significance attaches to our patterns of inheritance of property. Here the important thing is the absence of any specific favoring of any particular line of descent. Formally, subject to protection of the interests of widows, complete testamentary freedom exists. The American law of intestacy, however, in specific contrast to the older English Common Law tradition, gives all children, regardless of birth order or sex, equal shares. But even more important, the actual practice of wills overwhelmingly conforms to this pattern. Where deviations exist they are not bound up with the kinship structure as such but are determined by particular relationships or situations of need. There is also noticeable in our society a relative weakness of pressure to leave all or even most property to kin.<sup>11</sup>

It is probably safe to assume that an essentially open system, with a primary stress on the conjugal family and corresponding absence of groupings of collaterals cutting across conjugal families, has existed in Western society since the period when the kinship terminology of the European languages took shape. The above evidence, however, is sufficient to show that within this broad type the American system has, by contrast with its European forbears, developed far in the direction of a *symmetrically multilineal* type. This relative absence of any structural bias in favor of solidarity with the ascendant and descendant families in any one line of descent has enormously increased the structural isolation of the individual conjugal family. This isolation, the almost symmetrical "onion" structure, is the most distinctive feature of the American kinship system and underlies most of its peculiar functional and dynamic problems.

Before entering into a few of these, it should be made clear that the incidence of the fully developed type in the American social structure is uneven and important tendencies to deviation from it are found in certain structural areas. In the first place, in spite of the extent to which American agriculture has become "commercialized," the economic and social conditions of rural life place more of a premium on continuity of occupation and status from generation to generation than do urban conditions, and hence, especially perhaps among the more solidly established rural population, something approaching Le Play's *famille souche* is not unusual.

Secondly, there are important upper class elements in this country for

<sup>10</sup> Though perhaps the commonest pattern, primogeniture has by no means been universal. Cf. Arensberg and Kimball, *Family and Society in Ireland*, and G. C. Homans, *English Villagers of the 13th Century*.

<sup>11</sup> Indeed a wealthy man who completely neglected philanthropies in his will would be criticized.



which elite status is closely bound up with the status of ancestry, hence the continuity of kinship solidarity in a—mainly patrilineal—line of descent, in “lineages.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore in these “family elite” elements the symmetry of the multilineal kinship structure is sharply skewed in the direction of a patrilineal system with a tendency to primogeniture—one in many respects resembling that historically prevalent among European aristocracies, though considerably looser. There is a tendency for this in turn to be bound up with family property, especially an ancestral home, and continuity of status in a particular local community.

Finally, third, there is evidence that in lower class situations, in different ways both rural and urban, there is another type of deviance from this main kinship pattern. This type is connected with a strong tendency to the instability of marriage and a “mother-centered” type of family structure—found both in Negro and white population elements.<sup>13</sup> It would not disturb the multilineal symmetry of the system but would favor a very different type of conjugal family, even if it tended to be as nearly isolated as the main type from other kinship groups. This situation has not, however, been at all adequately studied from a functional point of view.

Thus what is here treated as the focal American type of kinship structure is most conspicuously developed in the urban middle class areas of the society. This fact is strong evidence of the interdependence of kinship structure with other structural aspects of the same society, some of which will be briefly discussed below.

In approaching the functional analysis of the central American kinship type, the focal point of departure must lie in the crucial fact that *ego* is a member not of one but of two conjugal families. This fact is of course of central significance in all kinship systems, but in our own it acquires a special importance because of the structural prominence of the conjugal family and its peculiar isolation. In most kinship systems many persons retain throughout the life cycle a fundamentally stable—though changing—status in one or more extended kinship units.<sup>14</sup> In our system this is not the case for anyone.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Warner and Lunt, *op. cit.*, and A. Davis and Gardner, *Deep South*.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Davis and Gardner, *op. cit.*, Ch. VI, E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*, and Lynd, *Middletown in Transition*. Mrs. Florence Kluckhohn of Wellesley College has called my attention to a fourth deviant type which she calls the “suburban matriarchy.” In certain suburban areas, especially with upper-middle class population, the husband and father is out of the home a very large proportion of the time. He tends to leave by far the greater part of responsibility for children to his wife and also either not to participate in the affairs of the local community at all or only at the instance of his wife. This would apply to informal social relationships where both entertaining and acceptance of invitations are primarily arranged by the wife or on her initiative.

<sup>14</sup> This is conspicuously true, for example, in a unilateral clan system, of the members of the sex group on which the continuity of the clan rests. The situation of the other, the “out-marrying,” sex, is, on the other hand, quite different.

The most immediate consequence lies in the structural significance of the marriage relationship, especially in relation to the lines of descent and to the sibling tie. *Ego*, by his marriage, that is, is by comparison with other kinship systems drastically segregated from his family of orientation, both from his parents—and their forbears—and from his siblings. His first kinship loyalty is unequivocally to his spouse and then to their children if and when any are born. Moreover, his family of procreation, by virtue of a common household, income, and community status, becomes a solidary unit in the sense in which the segregation of the interests of individuals is relatively meaningless, whereas the segregation of these interests of *ego* from those of the family of orientation tends relatively to minimize solidarity with the latter.

The strong emphasis for *ego* as an adult on the marriage relationship at the expense of those to parents and siblings is directly correlative with the symmetrical multilineality of the system. From the point of view of the marriage pair, that is, neither family of orientation, particularly neither parental couple, has structurally sanctioned priority of status. It is thus in a sense a balance of power situation in which independence of the family of procreation is favored by the necessity of maintaining impartiality as between the two families of orientation.<sup>15</sup>

From this it seems legitimate to conclude that in a peculiar sense which is not equally applicable to other systems the marriage bond is, in our society, the main structural keystone of the kinship system. This results from the structural isolation of the conjugal family and the fact that the married couple are not supported by comparably strong kinship ties to other adults. Closely related to this situation is that of choice of marriage partner. It is not only an open system in that there is no preferential mating on a kinship basis, but since the new marriage is not typically "incorporated" into an already existing kinship unit, the primary structural reasons for an important influence on marriage choice being exerted by the kin of the prospective partners are missing or at least minimized.

It is true that something approaching a system of "arranged" marriages does persist in some situations, especially where couples brought up in the same local community marry and expect to settle down there—or where there are other particularistic elements present as in cases of "marrying the boss's daughter." Our open system, however, tends very strongly to a pattern of

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<sup>15</sup> See Simmel's well-known essay on the significance of number in social relationships. (*Sociologie*, Ch. II). This is an illuminating case of the "triadic" group. It is not, however, institutionally that of *tertius gaudens* since that implies one "playing off the other two against each other," though informally it may sometimes approach that. Institutionally, however, what is most important is the requirement of impartiality between the two families of orientation. Essentially the same considerations apply as between an older couple and two or more of their married children's families of procreation—impartiality irrespective of sex or birth order is expected.

purely personal choice of marriage partner without important parental influence. With increasing social mobility, residential, occupational and other, it has clearly become the dominant pattern. Though not positively required by the kinship structure, freedom of choice is not impeded by it, and the structure is probably, in various ways, connected with the motivation of this freedom, an important aspect of the "romantic love" complex.

A closely related functional problem touches the character of the marriage relationship itself. Social systems in which a considerable number of individuals are in a complex and delicate state of mutual interdependence tend greatly to limit the scope for "personal" emotional feeling or, at least, its direct expression in action. Any considerable range of affective spontaneity would tend to impinge on the statuses and interests of too many others, with disequilibrating consequences for the system as a whole. This need to limit affective spontaneity is fundamentally why arranged marriages tend to be found in kinship systems where the newly married couple is incorporated into a larger kin group, but it also strongly colors the character of the marriage relationship itself, tending to place the primary institutional sanctions upon matters of objective status and obligations to other kin, not on subjective sentiment.<sup>16</sup> Thus the structural isolation of the conjugal family tends to free the affective inclinations of the couple from a whole series of hampering restrictions.

These restrictive forces, which in other kinship systems inhibit affective expression, have, however, positive functional significance in maintaining the solidarity of the effective kinship unit. Very definite expectations in the definition of role, combined with a complex system of interrelated sanctions, both positive and negative, go far to guarantee stability and the maintenance of standards of performance. In the American kinship system this kind of institutionalized support of the role of marriage partner through its interlocking with other kinship roles is, if not entirely lacking, at least very much weaker. A functionally equivalent substitute in motivation to conformity with the expectations of the role is clearly needed. It may hence be suggested that the *institutional* sanction placed on the proper subjective sentiments of spouses, in short the expectation that they have an obligation to be "in love," has this significance. This in turn is related to personal choice of mar-

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<sup>16</sup> This tendency for multiple-membered social systems to repress spontaneous manifestations of sentiment should not be taken too absolutely. In such phenomena as cliques, there is room for the following of personal inclinations within the framework of institutionalized statuses. It is, however, probable that it is more restrictive in groups where, as in kinship, the institutionalized relationships are particularistic and functionally diffuse than in universalistic and functionally specific systems such as modern occupational organizations. In the latter case personal affective relationships can, within considerable limits, be institutionally ignored as belonging to the sphere of "private affairs."

riage partner, since affective devotion is, particularly in our culture, linked to a presumption of the absence of any element of coercion. This would seem to be a second important basis of the prominence of the "romantic complex."

Much evidence has accumulated to show that conformity with the expectations of socially structured roles is not to be taken as a matter of course, but that often there are typically structured sources of psychological strain which underlie socially structured manifestations of the kind which Kardiner has called "secondary institutions."<sup>17</sup>

Much psychological research has suggested the very great importance to the individual of his affective ties, established in early childhood, to other members of his family of orientation. When strong affective ties have been formed, it seems reasonable to believe that situational pressures which force their drastic modification will impose important strains upon the individual.

Since all known kinship systems impose an incest tabu, the transition from asexual intrafamilial relationships to the sexual relation of marriage—generally to a previously relatively unknown person—is general. But with us this transition is accompanied by a process of "emancipation" from the ties both to parents and to siblings, which is considerably more drastic than in most kinship systems, especially in that it applies to both sexes about equally, and includes emancipation from solidarity with *all* members of the family of orientation about equally, so that there is relatively little continuity with *any* kinship ties established by birth for anyone.

The effect of these factors is reinforced by two others. Since the effective kinship unit is normally the small conjugal family, the child's emotional attachments to kin are confined to relatively few persons instead of being distributed more widely. Especially important, perhaps, is the fact that no other adult woman has a role remotely similar to that of the mother. Hence the average intensity of affective involvement in family relations is likely to be high. Secondly, the child's relations outside the family are only to a small extent ascribed. Both in the play group and in the school he must to a large extent "find his own level" in competition with others. Hence the psychological significance of his security within the family is heightened.

We have then a situation where at the same time the inevitable importance of family ties is intensified and a necessity to become emancipated from them is imposed. This situation would seem to have a good deal to do with the fact that with us adolescence—and beyond—is, as has been frequently noted, a "difficult" period in the life cycle.<sup>18</sup> In particular, associated with this situation is the prominence in our society of what has been called a "youth culture," a distinctive pattern of values and attitudes of the age groups between child-

<sup>17</sup> See Abraham Kardiner, *The Individual and His Society*.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. the various writings of Margaret Mead, especially her *Coming of Age in Samoa* and *Sex and Temperament*.

hood and the assumption of full adult responsibilities. This youth culture, with its irresponsibility, its pleasure-seeking, its "rating and dating," and its intensification of the romantic love pattern, is not a simple matter of "apprenticeship" in adult values and responsibilities. It bears many of the marks of reaction to emotional tension and insecurity, and in all probability has among its functions that of easing the difficult process of adjustment from childhood emotional dependency to full "maturity."<sup>19</sup> In it we find still a third element underlying the prominence of the romantic love complex in American society.

The emphasis which has here been placed on the multilinear symmetry of our kinship structure might be taken to imply that our society was characterized by a correspondingly striking assimilation of the roles of the sexes to each other. It is true that American society manifests a high level of the "emancipation" of women, which in important respects involves relative assimilation to masculine roles, in accessibility to occupational opportunity, in legal rights relative to property holding, and in various other respects. Undoubtedly the kinship system constitutes one of the important sets of factors underlying this emancipation since it does not, as do so many kinship systems, place a structural premium on the role of either sex in the maintenance of the continuity of kinship relations.

But the elements of sex-role assimilation in our society are conspicuously combined with elements of segregation which in many respects are even more striking than in other societies, as for instance in the matter of the much greater attention given by women to style and refinement of taste in dress and personal appearance. This and other aspects of segregation is connected with the structure of kinship, but not so much by itself as in its interrelations with the occupational system.

The members of the conjugal family in our urban society normally share a common basis of economic support in the form of money income, but this income is not derived from the co-operative efforts of the family as a unit—its principal source lies in the remuneration of occupational roles performed by individual members of the family. Status in an occupational role is generally, however, specifically segregated from kinship status—a person holds a "job" as an individual, not by virtue of his status in a family.

Among the occupational statuses of members of a family, if there is more than one, much the most important is that of the husband and father, not only because it is usually the primary source of family income, but also because it is the most important single basis of the status of the family in the community at large. To be the main "breadwinner" of his family is a primary role of the

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. N. S. Demareth, *Schizophrenia and the Sociology of Adolescence*, Dissertation, Harvard University, 1942, (unpub.).

normal adult man in our society. The corollary of this role is his far smaller participation than that of his wife in the internal affairs of the household. Consequently, "housekeeping" and the care of children is still the primary functional content of the adult feminine role in the "utilitarian" division of labor. Even if the married woman has a job, it is, at least in the middle classes, in the great majority of cases not one which in status or remuneration competes closely with those held by men of her own class. Hence there is a typically asymmetrical relation of the marriage pair to the occupational structure.

This asymmetrical relation apparently both has exceedingly important positive functional significance and is at the same time an important source of strain in relation to the patterning of sex roles.<sup>20</sup>

On the positive functional side, a high incidence of certain types of pattern is essential to our occupational system and to the institutional complex in such fields as property and exchange which more immediately surround this system. In relatively common-sense terms it requires scope for the valuation of personal achievement, for equality of opportunity, for mobility in response to technical requirements, for devotion to occupational goals and interests relatively unhampered by "personal" considerations. In more technical terms it requires a high incidence of technical competence, of rationality, of universalistic norms, and of functional specificity.<sup>21</sup> All these are drastically different from the patterns which are dominant in the area of kinship relations where ascription of status by birth plays a prominent part, and where roles are defined primarily in particularistic and functionally diffuse terms.

It is quite clear that the type of occupational structure which is so essential to our society requires a far-reaching structural segregation of occupational roles from the kinship roles of the *same* individuals. They must, in the occupational system, be treated primarily as individuals. This is a situation drastically different from that found in practically all non-literate societies and in many that are literate.

At the same time, it cannot be doubted that a solidary kinship unit has functional significance of the highest order, especially in relation to the socialization of individuals and to the deeper aspects of their psychological security. What would appear to have happened is a process of mutual accommodation between these two fundamental aspects of our social structure. On the one hand our kinship system is of a structural type which, broadly speaking, interferes least with the functional needs of the occupational system, above all in that it exerts *relatively* little pressure for the ascription of an individual's

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Talcott Parsons, *An Analytical Approach to the Theory of Social Stratification* (American Journal of Sociology, May, 1940); and *Age and Sex in the Social Structure of the United States* (American Sociological Review, October, 1942).

<sup>21</sup> For the meaning of these technical terms, see Talcott Parsons, *The Professions and Social Structure* (Social Forces, May, 1939). There is no space available to explain them here.

social status—through class affiliation, property, and of course particular “jobs”—by virtue of his kinship status. The conjugal unit can be mobile in status independently of the other kinship ties of its members, that is, those of the spouses to the members of their families of orientation.

But at the same time *this* small conjugal unit can be a strongly solidary unit. This is facilitated by the prevalence of the pattern that normally only *one* of its members has an occupational role which is of determinate significance for the status of the family as a whole. Minor children, that is, as a rule do not “work,” and when they do, it is already a major step in the process of emancipation from the family of orientation. The wife and mother is either exclusively a “housewife” or at most has a “job” rather than a “career.”

There are perhaps two primary functional aspects of this situation. In the first place, by confining the number of status-giving occupational roles of the members of the effective conjugal unit to one, it eliminates any competition for status, especially as between husband and wife, which might be disruptive of the solidarity of marriage. So long as lines of achievement are segregated and not directly comparable, there is less opportunity for jealousy, a sense of inferiority, etc., to develop. Secondly, it aids in clarity of definition of the situation by making the status of the family in the community relatively definite and unequivocal. There is much evidence that this relative definiteness of status is an important factor in psychological security.<sup>22</sup>

The same structural arrangements which have this positive functional significance also give rise to important strains. What has been said above about the pressure for thoroughgoing emancipation from the family of orientation is a case in point. But in connection with the sex role problem there is another important source of strain.

Historically, in Western culture, it may perhaps be fairly said that there has been a strong tendency to define the feminine role psychologically as one strongly marked by elements of dependency. One of the best symbols perhaps was the fact that until rather recently the married woman was not *sui juris*, could not hold property, make contracts, or sue in her own right. But in the modern American kinship system, to say nothing of other aspects of the culture and social structure, there are at least two pressures which tend to counteract this dependency and have undoubtedly played a part in the movement for feminine emancipation.

The first, already much discussed, is the multilineal symmetry of the kinship system which gives no basis of sex discrimination, and which in kinship

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<sup>22</sup> An example of disturbing indeterminacy of family status without occupational competition between husband and wife is the case where inherited wealth and family connections of a wife involve the couple in a standard of living and social relations to which the husband's occupational status and income would not give access. Such a situation is usually uncomfortable, especially for the husband, but also very likely for the wife.

terms favors equal rights and responsibilities for both parties to a marriage. The second is the character of the marriage relationship. Resting as it does primarily on affective attachment for the other person as a concrete human individual, a "personality," rather than on more objective considerations of status, it puts a premium on a certain kind of mutuality and equality. There is no clearly structured superordination-subordination pattern. Each is a fully responsible "partner" with a claim to a voice in decisions, to a certain human dignity, to be "taken seriously." Surely the pattern of romantic love which makes his relation to the "woman he loves" the most important single thing in a man's life, is incompatible with the view that she is an inferior creature, fit only for dependency on him.

In our society, however, occupational status has tremendous weight in the scale of prestige values. The fact that the normal married woman is debarred from testing or demonstrating her fundamental equality with her husband in competitive occupational achievement, creates a demand for a functional equivalent. At least in the middle classes, however, this cannot be found in the utilitarian functions of the role of housewife since these are treated as relatively menial functions. To be, for instance, an excellent cook, does not give a hired maid a moral claim to a higher status than that of domestic servant.

This situation helps perhaps to account for a conspicuous tendency for the feminine role to emphasize broadly humanistic rather than technically specialized achievement values. One of the key patterns is that of "good taste," in personal appearance, house furnishings, cultural things like literature and music. To a large and perhaps increasing extent the more humanistic cultural traditions and amenities of life are carried on by women. Since these things are of high intrinsic importance in the scale of values of our culture, and since by virtue of the system of occupational specialization even many highly superior men are greatly handicapped in respect to them, there is some genuine redressing of the balance between the sexes.

There is also, however, a good deal of direct evidence of tension in the feminine role. In the "glamor girl" pattern, use of specifically feminine devices as an instrument of compulsive search for power and exclusive attention are conspicuous. Many women succumb to their dependency cravings through such channels as neurotic illness or compulsive domesticity and thereby abdicate both their responsibilities and their opportunities for genuine independence. Many of the attempts to excel in approved channels of achievement are marred by garishness of taste, by instability in response to fad and fashion, by a seriousness in community or club activities which is out of proportion to the intrinsic importance of the task. In all these and other fields there are conspicuous signs of insecurity and ambivalence. Hence it may be concluded that the feminine role is a conspicuous focus of the strains inherent in our social



structure, and not the least of the sources of these strains is to be found in the functional difficulties in the integration of our kinship system with the rest of the social structure.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, a word may be said about one further problem of American society in which kinship plays a prominent part; the situation of the aged. In various ways our society is oriented to values particularly appropriate to the younger age groups so that there is a tendency for older people to be "left out of it." The abruptness of "retirement" from occupational roles also contributes. But a primary present concern is one implication of the structural isolation of the conjugal family. The obverse of the emancipation, upon marriage and occupational independence, of children from their families of orientation is the depletion of that family until the older couple is finally left alone. This situation is in strong contrast to kinship systems in which membership in a kinship unit is continuous throughout the life cycle. There, very frequently, it is the oldest members who are treated with the most respect and have the greatest responsibility and authority. But with us there is no one left to respect them, for them to take responsibility for or have authority over.

For young people not to break away from their parental families at the proper time is a failure to live up to expectations, an unwarranted expression of dependency. But just as they have a duty to break away, they also have a right to independence. Hence for an older couple—or a widow or widower—to join the household of a married child is not, in terms of the kinship structure, a "natural" arrangement. This is proved by the fact that it is seldom done at all except under pressure, either for economic support or to mitigate extreme loneliness and social isolation.<sup>24</sup> Even though in such situations it may be the best solution of a difficult problem it very frequently involves considerable strain, which is by no means confined to one side. The whole situation would be radically different in a different kind of kinship structure. It may be surmised that this situation, as well as "purely economic" questions, underlies much of the current agitation for old age pensions and the appeal of such apparently fantastic schemes as the Townsend Plan.

In this brief paper there can be no pretense of anything approaching an exhaustive functional analysis of the American kinship system or of its structural interdependence with other aspects of our social structure. A few problems

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<sup>23</sup> There is no intention to imply that the adult masculine role in American society is devoid of comparably severe strains. They are not, however, *prima facie* so intimately connected with the structure of kinship as are those of the feminine role.

<sup>24</sup> These pressures are, of course, likely to be by far most acute in the case of widows and widowers, especially the former. They are also considerably the more numerous, and often there is no other at all tolerable solution than to live in the family of a married child. Being joined and cared for by an unmarried child, especially a daughter, is another way out for the aged which often involves acute tragedies for the younger person.

of this order have been presented, beyond a direct descriptive analysis of the kinship structure as such, to illustrate the importance of a clear and thorough grasp of this structure in the understanding of many problems of the functioning of American society, including its specific pathology. This, by and large, sociological students of the American family have failed to provide or use systematically. It is as a contribution toward filling this gap in our working analytical equipment that the present paper has been conceived.

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