

The Family from the perspective of cultural anthropology and ethnology

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1. Definition: Cultural anthropology concerns itself with the communal life of people in different cultures. It inquires into all kinds of human ideas, behaviors, material and spiritual goods and values, mores and customs that are brought forth by human communities (cf. Marschall, 7).

Biological Foundations: Man is characterized above all by his comparatively high level of independence from instincts (freedom to choose), he possesses a high degree of intelligence (abstract thinking, self-awareness, conscious behavior, use of tools, etc.) as well as powerful social abilities (such as language and communication, empathy, cooperation (Montague), trust and social bonding (Montague), social interest (Adler), reason, morality, justice, etc.).

All these naturally given abilities make the cultural life of human beings possible as well as necessary. We may say: Man is by nature a cultural being.

2. Concept of Man: Man is a personal unity of body and soul; he is both a highly individual and social being (Portmann), that is by nature inclined to live together with other human beings and that can develop and unfold as an individual only within the context of living together with other human beings in a culture. In this context it is first of all the family that plays the most important role, because it transmits as well as develops further cultural values and norms from one generation to the next.

Cultures differ as to how human social life is organized. Thus, one could be led to believe that, according to empirical research, every culture is a self-containing whole and different from every other culture (the notion that all cultural values and norms are culture specific and relative- [cultural relativism]). Yet despite all empirically ascertainable differences it is an undisputed fact that there are constants transcending particular cultures which can be found in almost every culture. This is so, because every culture has to conform to the basic conditions of human nature and in fact does so;

otherwise we could not live as human beings. "The existence of these cultural constants is unquestionable for the ethnologist." (Rippe, 109)

This is so, because "every society and culture [has] necessarily to fulfill certain aspects and desires of human existence" (Rippe, 109), i.e., the cultural institutions of a people fulfill existential purposes of human life. From this follows clearly that "no human action is only natural or only cultural" (ibd.) [i.e., social-historical-dialectical, as Marxism and feminism¹ claim, A. H.]. This means that cultural anthropology proceeds from the fact that man has a fixed nature and therefore has to fulfill certain existential purposes that are given by human nature, even though man lives in a diversity of historically developed cultures (this is also a fact of nature).

3. In all cultures there are firmly regulated "systems of inship", the core of which is constituted by the family (the so-called "nuclear family" with husband, wife and children, be it small or extended families or clans, matrilinear or patrilinear forms; furthermore there is always a more comprehensive "political order" etc." (Rippe, 109), i.e., institutions which are established by rules or laws and their adherence which is ensured by moral values and norms (or: taboos, e.g., the incest taboo). Exceptions do not refute the general rule (Schockenhoff, 90).²
4. The biology of man "suggests" as it were certain culturally transcendent constants: the sexual duality of man, especially love between man and woman based on the difference between the sexes and on the personal nature of man (I-Thou-Relation) demands a permanent bonding; furthermore pregnancy, feeding and caring for children (cf. human biology, theory of attachment...), the long phase of childhood and youth, necessity of education, a permanent division of labor between man and woman which increases emotional attachment.

Marriage which is mostly established by means of celebrations and rites in a kind of "contractual" way (cf. contract of marriage) establishes certain rights and duties between man and woman. The union between man and woman and following that the family is protected in all cultures by a rejection of adultery (see below the list of universals).

¹ Margaret Mead writes (in "Brombeerblüten im Winter", 183f.): When I wrote *Male and Female* (1949), after *Sex and Temperament in three Primitive Societies* (1935), a book in which I cautiously treated the differences due to culture and temperament, as reflected in the life of men and women, and when I then discussed the properties that seemed to be connected to the primary sex differences between men and women, I was accused of antifeminism by women..."

² Cf. Turnbull's report on his empirical research on the culture of the Ik (Turnbull, *Das Volk ohne Liebe*, 1972) "Turnbull denies not only ... that morality is a cultural constant but also that man is a *zoon politikon*". (Rippe, 115) See also Note 5, quote from Turnbull. (Ibd.): "...isolated special cases of particular peoples do not refute the universal recognition of a core of common moral notions." (Schockenhoff, 90)

5. On the basis of meta-analytical secondary research (i.e., not primary empirical research) it is possible to sum up the following universals relating to the family. (According to Richard Beis (1964: state of research in the fifties), Rippe (1993, state of research in the first half of the nineties), quoted from Rippe, 111-112):

I. Universals relating to duties within the family and kinship, respectively:

Rejection of adultery

Avoidance of incestuous sexual relations within the nuclear family
the precept of exogamy

Reciprocal duties of children and parents (or children and their educators)

duty to care for the wellbeing and education of the children;

duty to be a “good” mother

duty to obey one’s parents and to care for them in old age

the precept to render help (solidarity) and to be loyal within the family

duty to regulate inheritances and estates

II. Universals relating to kinship or to the whole of society (in-group):

willingness to cooperate within the in-group

care for the poor and disadvantaged

prevention of violence within the in-group

obedience to “leaders” (authorities, A.H.)

duty not to disparage the religious ideas and practices of one’s group

III. Duties relating to kinship, to one’s own society or to all men

prohibition of murder

prohibition of lying

condemnation of rape

respect for the dead

the precept to keep promises

duty of reciprocity (the fair exchange of goods; golden rule of morality: do

not to others what you do not want to be done to you, A.H.) (cf. Rippe,

111f.)

6. (a) There can be no doubt that in all cultural anthropological research known to us marriage is a union between man and woman. Marriage, and this can also be taken to be a universal constant, is a lasting relationship between man and woman. See above the rejection of adultery (cf. Rippe, 110)

(b) The family in its core is always in the form of a permanent relationship between man, woman, and child(ren), regardless of the larger context of relations of kinship.

It is also not relevant whether we deal with patrilinear (Patriarchal) or matrilinear (matriarchal) forms. Ruth Benedict (p. 61f.) describes a North American Indian tribe, the Zuni, where home, possessions and sacred objects remain in the hands of the mother or grandmother, whereas the young men marry into the clan of the women. Conditions are thus the reverse of the way our society is organised.

It is the function of the family (according to Malinowski, functionalist school) "to provide the community with members", to educate them, to provide them with material goods (ibid., 37), security, protection, trust (cf. Bischof, chapter on "Assistance and Tradition", 60), and at the same time to hand down property and cultural traditions, i.e., maintaining the family as well as the cultural tradition. (ibid., 61)

According to Messner, 551: "The purpose of the family is a threefold one: to provide its members with the material and spiritual goods necessary for an ordered daily life, the education of children, to be the nucleus of society." (ibid. 551)

1. Family (kinship) in its function as an economic community
2. Raising of children
3. Nucleus of the whole culture

7. Concerning marriage there are certain rules characterized by the incest taboo and the precept of exogamy. Bischof (53): "All cultures, different as their marriage rules may be in the details, are obviously intolerant of too great a "closeness" or too great a "distance" of partners in a sexual relationship. There could be a biological sense in this: both inbreeding and crossing of species reduce the breeding success." (ibid., 53) -> genetic degeneration

Qualification: "But it is not as easy as that. It is not possible to derive social structures directly from advantages of biological selection." (ibid., 53)

As a result of family exogamy and cultural endogamy family relations and attachments are extended beyond the immediate family or clan. This ensures the survival of the whole culture in so far as family relations are established and thereby the relations between the members of a culture grow closer, as is also true of mutual aid and solidarity (survival advantages of the individual and the species); cf. "... importance of this taboo" for establishing society and community (Rippe, 181); cf. theory of attachment (Bowlby).

→ incest prohibition and exogamy make cultural diversity possible; marriage within a family would lead to unilinear handing down of one and the same tradition.

8. According to Bischof (38ff): Family “distance” (exogamy), but cultural closeness (world view, common values, etc.) → cultural endogamy, help to create marriages (cf. Murdock’s theory); i.e., marriage presupposes a certain fund of common cultural values and aims. Only thus can children be raised who will develop an individual identity by means of a more or less common cultural tradition.

Task of the family: security, protection, trust; and at the same time handing down of possessions and cultural traditions, i.e., conservation of family and cultural tradition. “Familial bonding can already be found among animals ... Already here it has the function of providing security, something which does not change with human beings. Even with us family groups still primarily fulfill the task of assigning the individual a circle of people that helps him when he is in need, that defends him when threatened, that revenges him when harm is done to him. The main and original function of the family group is to be a community of support.” (Bischof, 60)

Concerning the 2nd function: handing down of material and immaterial values, cf. Bischof, 61.

9. (a) Precept of solidarity and loyalty within family and kinship, i.e., it is regarded as natural to practice mutual aid if a member of the family is in need of support. Sociobiology (on-ingroup/out-group-altruism; Rippe, 117) explains altruism within the family as an evolutionary strategy to secure the procreation success of one’s own genes. It is the common view today that within the family attachments are stronger and consequently also empathy, solidarity, mutual aid and altruism (see attachment theory). Cf. Rippe, 183ff.
(b) the reciprocal duties of parents to care for their children, to nurture them, and to educate them is likewise regarded as universal. Even less altruistic cultures such as the Ik (cf. note 2) recognize the duty of the mother to feed their children, to care for them and to educate them at least to the age of three. No Ik mother abandons her child! (cf. attachment theory)
(c) Likewise it is regarded as dishonorable not to support one’s not to support one’s parents in old age. Parenticide is universally prohibited (cf. Schockenhoff, 86ff).
10. The universal rule to regulate inheritances (cf. last point on the list of universals) can be interpreted as the natural wish of the parents to care for their children and to provide a basis for their existence even after their death. (Bischof, 61)

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