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Aspects of the Analysis of Family Structure



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Structure

SILVAN S. TOMKINS

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To the memory of

F. F. GREENMAN

*to Whom Many
an Education is Owed*

“ . . . when Bill Guthrie, umpiring in the American League, called a third strike on Wes Ferrell, a good pitcher and dangerous hitter with the Cleveland Indians, Ferrell heaved his stick into the air.

“ ‘If dat bat comes down,’ said Mr. Guthrie, not wishing to be hasty about it, ‘you’re outta d’ ball game.’ ”

Quoted from “Views of Sports,”
Red Smith, *New York Herald Tribune*,
Friday, April 25, 1952.

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PREFACE

THIS IS an essay in hypotheses with some critical comments. I have presented it in this form without any attempt at large scale empirical verification of its hypotheses because I believe that the primary goal of the scientific game is highly generalized systems of theory. I believe it is more important that hypotheses (or theories) be fruitful for the development of yet further ones than that they be right. I believe that one of the most fundamental rules of the scientific game is the principle of parsimony and that strategies of analysis should be devised with this in mind. This essay is an attempt to come to far-reaching conclusions in the field of family analysis in terms of a small number of variables. I hope and believe that these hypotheses are important for the following reason: they are so posed that from either their verification or disproof we shall know a great deal more than we know now.

More specifically I have tried to show the following: 1) It is possible to come to conclusions that are not banally true by definition and that apply to any society anywhere at any time; 2) that systematic use of the distinction between ideal and actual structures (or patterns) is one of the most powerful theoretical tools of the social scientist; 3) that neglect of biological factors—doubtless related to a fine reaction against naïve forms of biological determinism—has been a serious mistake in the strategy of social science; 4) that the uses of the implications of demographic findings are much too important and fruitful for all of us to be left solely to demographers; 5) that

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most extant descriptions of ideal kinship and family structures are inconsistent with possible actual structures if accurate, or they are untenable as descriptions of the ideal structures; and 6) that use of this sort of analysis can lead to new hypotheses, e.g., that suggested about the change with modernization to a preference for nuclear families as an ideal structure. (See pp. 56-60.)

In this effort Professor Ansley J. Coale of the Office of Population Research, Princeton University, supplied the basic demographic models used in the attempt to show that however great the variation in ideal structures might be, the variations in actual structures of kinship, insofar as kinship phenomena are in any way dependent upon such factors as the numbers of individuals present, age distribution, sex distribution, marital-spouse pair distributions, generational distributions, sibling distributions, etc., are not so great as most social scientists have tended to assume or imply. Professor David M. Schneider of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago has attacked what he considers to be an overly biologicistic orientation of the entire discussion. His attack is focused on the basic conceptual scheme used here. I do not believe that the element of biological orientation that he sees is in fact so extreme nor do I think it untenable to allege that all peoples do orient to biological factors to some extent. I certainly do not hold that kinship must be defined in this way—only that it is fruitful to define it in this way. I do not define it solely in biological terms but only as oriented in part to biological considerations. His commentary, however, represents an important point of view. I would not want these hypotheses published without someone raising the kind of questions he has raised.

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Professor Lloyd A. Fallers, also of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago, has raised a different kind of question. My hypotheses make assertions about any society, any time, anywhere—regardless of any known variations in social (or cultural?) structures (or patterns). Professor Fallers has shown that if *fictive* kinship is not limited in specific ways, my hypotheses do not necessarily hold. I do not happen to believe that the examples he cites are in fact genuine “exceptions to the rule” as I have posed it, nor do I believe my position has some of the implications he sees, but I deeply regret that I have no theoretical answer to the possibility he raises. I suspect that there are limits on the possible range of fictive kinship, but I have no good theoretical argument to this effect. Therefore, although I know of no empirical exception to the hypotheses as I have asserted them, Professor Fallers’ point is a deadly and fruitful theoretical criticism. I wish that without the argument being tautological I could think of neither theoretical nor empirical exceptions to the propositions as posed.

Professor Silvan S. Tomkins’ essay speaks eloquently for itself. In addition to its relevance here it makes available in abbreviated compass much of the core of concern of the two volumes so far published of his *Affect, Imagery, and Consciousness* (Springer Publishing Co., New York, 1962-63). I am in his debt in general for bringing that to bear on the subject of this volume. I am in his debt much more specifically for the far-reaching implications of his concept of and theories about affects. Whether tenable or not, his approach brings a new and fruitful point of view to the whole question of the role of “biological” factors and their interdependency with “social” ones. I accept wholeheartedly his criticism that even in my

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care that biological factors not be overlooked, I have thought of them in terms of current clichés. I have left my statements as they were, however, because more is to be learned from his criticism of those positions than would be from the specific alterations I might currently be able to make to eliminate the relevance of his remarks.

The work begun here has only just begun. I hope that by the use of computers,¹ and with the assistance of demographers and others, I can explore what the range of actual variation is likely to be given different ideal kinship structures with regard to numbers of individuals present by contrast with numbers of generations represented, etc. In some of these factors actual variation is likely to be much greater than in others. For example, numbers of individuals will vary more with variations in ideal family structures than numbers of generations represented. Since variations in any other of the factors mentioned below (p. 41, fn. 33) always involve some variations in number of members, actual variations in any other category must, in some sense, be less than the variation in number of members. One thing, however, seems to me crystal clear: preoccupation with the extent of variation of ideal structures of kinship and

¹ It is a pleasure to be able to note that during last year Professors Kunstadter, Buhler, Stephan and Westoff of Princeton University collaborated in developing a program for testing out assumptions about ideal structures of cross-cousin marriage on a computer. It became quite obvious that no society could survive unless the actual structures diverge from what are generally described as the structures of cross-cousin marriage. See Peter Kunstadter, Roald Buhler, Frederick F. Stephan and Charles F. Westoff, "Demographic Variability and Preferential Marriage Patterns," *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, N.S. Vol. 21, No. 4 (December 1963).

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family structure have obscured some of the most important common features of all human life everywhere.

I owe a debt to the University environment here at Princeton which makes such researches possible. I owe a detailed debt to the National Science Foundation for time off from regular teaching duties and funds for secretarial assistance that made possible two years of productivity on which I shall always look back with nostalgia and envy. Among my departmental colleagues at Princeton I owe special debts to Peter Kunstadter, Wilbert E. Moore, Frederick F. Stephan and Maurice Zeitlin. I owe a debt to the graduate and undergraduate students with whom I have had the good fortune to be associated. Their willingness to listen to me and squabble with me has helped. I owe special debts of stimulation to Paul Bohannon and Andrew Effrat. I owe debts to my colleagues in and out of the social sciences. Dr. Roger S. Pinkham of Bell Laboratories has helped me in ways that defy identification. Finally, I am obliged to the Princeton University Press for the help and interest of Mr. David Harrop in seeing this effort to publication.

I hope these brief essays—with their disagreements left in—will encourage the kind of criticism that will make these hypotheses as questionable as I obdurately believe they make most descriptions of kinship in our literature.

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Aspects of the Analysis of Family Structure

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PRINCETON

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as such, but little of it has been aimed at very general levels. In recent years, especially, no other literature in sociology testifies more strongly to the preoccupation of a great number of sociologists with an extremely limited and special range of all the social materials of world history. Even apparently generalized treatments are likely to be narrowly focused on such specific cases as the modern American family. If the focus is more general, it rarely extends the treatment further than the limit of the type of family associated with relatively modernized societies. Actual references to more general levels are rare. The appearance of greater generality is largely a function of supplementary ad hoc remarks about other cases or by confusion of the specific case studied with the more general.²

There are good reasons to suggest that these concepts and their associated phenomena should occupy a more central role in our search for general systems of analysis and general theory. Before going into these matters, however, I should like to define the terms "kinship structure" and "family" as I shall use them. Kinship structure is defined as "that portion of the analytic and concrete structures of a society in terms of which, in addition to other orientations sometimes equally if not even more important, the membership of the units and the nature of the solidarity among the members of the units is determined by orientation to the facts of biological relatedness and/or sexual intercourse."³ A family unit is defined

² See, for example, T. Parsons and R. F. Bales, *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process*, Free Press, Glencoe, 1955.

³ Taken with slight modification from *The Structure of Society*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1952, p. 203. All concepts of structure and function, institutions, etc., as

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as any membership unit of the kinship structure for which in addition to other orientations, sometimes equally if not more important for the members, the membership of the units and the nature of the solidarity among the members is determined by orientation to the facts of biological relatedness *and* sexual intercourse.⁴

used here are taken from that source unless otherwise defined or cited. *Fictive* kinship structures are defined as those in terms of which the orientation to biological relatedness and/or sexual intercourse is via simulation.

⁴ One problem about this definition must be clarified here. The family unit is defined by the combination of orientations to descent *and* sexual intercourse. It in no way implies that sexual intercourse is the most important focus of a family as distinguished from a descent unit or any other. Indeed both family and descent units may have far greater emphases on descent or on something else altogether. The definition used here in no way implies that the "marital bond," i.e., the husband-wife solidarity takes precedence over others. It merely implies that no unit will be called a family unit without some orientation past, present, or future to sexual relationships among two or more of the members in addition to some orientation to descent. The importance of either or both orientations may vary greatly. Ordinarily I would expect both to be of considerable importance, but the range of variation even in this might be great.

There are many problems about this definition that need not detain us here. It should be obvious that with such a definition a single society may be characterized by several quite different types of family units. This is, of course, in addition to the distinction between the "family of orientation" and the "family of procreation." The flexibility or reference of this definition of the family concept is not without its disadvantages for analysis. At least, however, this strategy of definition does not predispose the analyst to fall implicitly into the assumption that each society has one and only one type of family (save for the orientation-procreation distinction). As a minimum the families of orientation and procreation—perhaps more than one of each—may be distinguished for all. Others may vary on various bases such as income,

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Given the two definitions stated above, one can, with relative precision of definition at least, distinguish four different types of concrete social structures of which three are kinship structures and the fourth is residually defined so as to encompass all other concrete structures. The three kinship structures are: 1) descent units (those oriented at least in part to biological relatedness but not to sexual intercourse); 2) non-family units oriented at least in part to sexual intercourse (perhaps a very special kind of kinship unit, not necessarily rare but ordinarily probably of short duration); and 3) family units. The non-kinship units constitute all concrete structures oriented to neither biological descent nor sexual intercourse. These distinctions may have some utility for general taxonomic purposes.⁵ It

ethnic background, etc. No definition of the concept should make it easy to speak of *the X* (e.g., *the French*) family without having to establish the monolithic nature of the family structures concerned. See L. A. Fallers and M. J. Levy, Jr., "The Family: Some Comparative Considerations," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (August 1959), pp. 647-651.

⁵ The conception of all relationships involving sexual intercourse without orientation to descent as portions of kinship structure does violence to some conventional usage. Professor G. P. Murdock has written me, and I am sure many others would agree, that in the context of societies characterized by less concern for confining sexual intercourse to the marital relationship such intercourse occurs "in a variety of social contexts, many of which relate in no way to kinship structure and family units." To some extent this is purely a matter of definition, but the procedure followed here is not used merely for conceptual neatness. Regardless of the differences among societies as to the institutionalized and non-institutionalized values concerned with sexual intercourse, the probability is extremely high that, either ideally or actually, intentionally or unintentionally, relationships involving sexual intercourse will have implications for descent units, fam-

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is conceivable that there could be societies in which all membership units are institutionalized as kinship structures.⁶ For reasons speculated on at length below, it is almost certainly not possible to have a society devoid of kinship structures, especially family structures. Certainly the variations in kinds and amounts of proliferation of non-kinship structures as well as of kinship structures is the essence of many fruitful distinctions among societies.

With these introductory remarks and definitions in mind, I should like to divide the speculations here into three parts: I. The ideal-actual distinction as applied to kinship analysis; II. A theoretical basis for the strategic role of the analysis of family structure in the general analysis of societies; and III. Some prospect of actual closure on the apparent problems of extreme variation in family structure.

**THE IDEAL-ACTUAL DISTINCTION
AS APPLIED TO KINSHIP ANALYSIS:**

I should like to introduce the discussion of the distinction between ideal and actual structures (or patterns) by reference to the distinction between an emphasis on the relational approach to kinship as opposed to the membership unit approach. Rightly or wrongly, I believe the emphasis on the former approach has had much to do with failure to recognize the importance of the ideal-actual distinction in this field.

ily units, or both as those are defined here. It is banal to point out that love affairs if long continued, and even casual sexual intercourse, frequently have issue. Such issue always raise the question of descent whether or not attitudes toward such issue are calm and permissive.

⁶ See below, pp. 26-28.

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Briefly recapitulated from earlier presentations,⁷ the relational approach to kinship or family analysis takes a given member of the system concerned, designates him (usually as "ego"), and studies the permutations, and combinations of all the various interrelations and their aspects between this individual and all other actors presumed to be related to him on a kinship basis. The membership unit approach focuses attention on systems of action involving a plurality of individuals interrelated, in this case, at least to some extent on the basis of kinship criteria—these systems of action being considered as units or entities for fairly general purposes both by the members of these systems themselves and by members in general of the society in which these systems are found.⁸ In the long run, of course, all treatments of these matters involve some combination of both approaches. One cannot, after all, discuss the units concerned without reference to the interrelationships among the members of the units, and equally one cannot set the scope of relationships to be discussed without some reference to the units in terms of which they occur. Until recently the most highly developed of this literature in America seems to have been preoccupied with the relational approach.⁹ In the sources mentioned above, I have speculated on

⁷ See: M. J. Levy, Jr., *The Family Revolution in Modern China*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1949, pp. 4-5, and *The Structure of Society*, pp. 207-209.

⁸ Discussion in detail of why these units are defined as systems of action and not as aggregates of individuals, what is meant here by membership in such units, etc., may be found in *The Structure of Society*, pp. 19-22, 113-127, etc.

⁹ As brought out in the remarks of Fallers, this charge cannot be leveled with any justice at the modern work of English anthropologists whose emphasis has been very heavily upon what is here called the membership unit approach.

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the basis of this preoccupation and some of its difficulties. Two difficulties are of greatest concern for this essay. In the first place description, analysis, and the gathering of data on kinship matters in terms of the relational approach tends to give an individualistic bias to the work done. This is likely to be true if only because the questions asked in terms of the relational approach use an individual actor's point of view as the major referent. I suspect that such a general orientation to individualism is realistic for only a few societies. The individual members of most societies in world history think of kinship and family matters in terms of the systems concerned rather than in terms of articulated sets of relationships of individual actors. This in turn contributes to the second and even greater difficulty, namely the tendency to gather and present material on these matters overwhelmingly in ideal rather than actual terms.

At this point it is necessary to elaborate a bit on the concepts, ideal and actual. This distinction is fundamental to all three parts of this essay. By the term *ideal* I mean here a particular way of looking at social phenomena, more specifically a particular subjective view of these matters by some specific set of actors. *Ideal structures* are defined as those structures in terms of which some specific set of actors think action should take place. In the context here the relevant ideal structures are in general those institutionalized for the societies concerned or the segments of them under discussion. These ideal structures, at least in theory can be objectively discovered by a scientific observer. The *actual structures* referred to may be defined as the structures in terms of which action in fact takes place, as discovered (or as in theory could be discovered) by a scientific observer of the action under discussion. This distinc-

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tion is an ancient and an humble one, both in the general common sense of mankind and in the social sciences. It is so humble that we often tend to overlook the fact that some of our most general and useful theorems arise from applications of these concepts, e.g., 1) there are no people who do not distinguish between ideal and actual structures—regardless of their vocabularies; 2) in no society (or social system) do the ideal and actual structures coincide exactly; 3) some of the major sources of stress and strain characteristic of all societies (or social systems) inhere in the failure of the ideal and actual structures to coincide exactly; 4) some of the possibilities of integration and adjustment characteristic of these units inhere in the failure of the ideal and actual structures to coincide exactly (appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, this is not paradoxical when taken in connection with the preceding generalization); 5) the failure of the ideal and actual structures to coincide exactly for any society (or social system) as a whole is never explicable solely in terms of hypocrisy of the members of the system; and 6) exact coincidence of the two types of structures for any society (and probably for any social system as well) is forever out of the question for two reasons. The knowledge necessary would overload any probable cognitive mechanisms (in this case, those of human actors), and if there were not the cognitive problem stated, the perfect integration of systems of such coincidence would of necessity be highly brittle, leading to fracture of the general system by any change (including biological or geographical change) in the setting of the system concerned which had any implications whatever for actions in terms of the system.

There is, of course, a general tendency for observ-

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ers of social phenomena to be given answers in ideal rather than actual terms by the members of the societies who sooner or later must be questioned or whose attitudes must be inferred. To ask questions in what is in essence a specially individualistic and unfamiliar form for most societies tends to intensify this problem. As will appear in the third section below, there is some reason to speculate that to a paralyzing degree social scientists and others have tried to deal with the ideal rather than with the actual structures of kinship or with a combination of the two. For example, the family which time and time again has been described as *the traditional Chinese family* was certainly the ideal family of that society, but it was also certainly never the actual family of any except for a small proportion of the members of that society.¹⁰ This latter fact and its implications

¹⁰ Perhaps the earliest clear-cut self-conscious indication of this fact is to be found in F. L. K. Hsu's "The Myth of Chinese Family Size," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 48, No. 5 (March 1943), pp. 555-562. In my own research on the Chinese family system I had only begun to speculate along these lines for theoretical reasons when I came across Professor Hsu's article and the remarks of Professor Olga Lang (*Chinese Family and Society*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1946) along the same lines. It was not until I sought to check a reference for this footnote that I discovered that in my volume on the Chinese family, Professor Hsu's article was not cited along with Professor Lang's work in the relevant footnote, despite the fact that his work did appear with indication of its use in the bibliography of my volume. This oversight took place more than fifteen years ago, and I am at a loss to account for it. I mention this matter here in a belated attempt to do justice to the help I received from that article. In modern attempts to understand Chinese social structure, it is an article of great importance. Its use in the present connection nearly two decades after it appeared is at least one instance of the fact that its relevance is by no means confined to Chinese materials alone.

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when taken in conjunction with the ideal structures have only recently been discussed in either the literature of sinology or the social sciences.

Take another example. Literature of all sorts, technical and otherwise, abounds with descriptions of peoples as polygamous (usually referring to polygyny rather than polyandry) and implying that most if not all males (or females) have plural spouses at any given point of time after achieving maturity. But consider, every little child born into this world alive, though not necessarily either a little Liberal or else a little Conservative, is highly likely to be either a little male or a little female. Their ratio at birth has an order of variation of 103/100 to 107/100. (This is one of the few matters in which race in the biological sense seems to make a difference.) The males are less viable than the females, and as time passes in the life cycle, the ratio approaches 1 even more closely. Under the circumstances, peculiar customs are necessary if polygyny as the term is often taken is to be achieved. Fifty percent or more of males could be slaughtered before or at marital ages, for example. There are other possibilities, but these do not accompany the descriptions. Reference to polygyny is never more than reference to an ideal structure for any society. Only a minority of males—usually a small one—ever achieve it, and they almost certainly constitute an elite by that fact alone in such social contexts. Many further implications could be drawn from this. Few if any of the most fruitful hypotheses about polygamy can be discovered if the distinction between ideal and actual structures is not kept clear.

One may at least speculate that the rich, bewildering and highly relevant variations in the ideal structures of kinship which in fact do characterize human societies have either diverted attention from or frus-

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trated attempts to generalize about kinship structure and the family in any society. Finally, to close the circle, it may be asked if the great emphasis on the relational approach has not tended to emphasize the range and intrinsic fascinations of these variations without calling adequate attention to the implications of the discrepancies between the ideal and actual states of kinship structure and the family.¹¹

On the other hand, much of the sociological literature which has been dominated by the membership unit approach has been overwhelmingly concerned with the details of one interesting but peculiar case of societies in general—relatively modernized society and especially that form characteristic of the United States. This enormous literature has been so little concerned with either analyzing or comparing radically different kinds of societies that it too has failed to bring these questions clearly to the fore. The history of science is not without broad generalizations launched from a restricted base, but the kinship and family structure of this particular restricted case is not likely to be fruitful from that point of view. Intrinsically, the kinship and family structure of mod-

¹¹ The recent work of William J. Goode, with whom I discussed this paper in an earlier form delivered before a panel on "Sociological and Anthropological Study of Kinship and the Family" at the Annual Meeting (September 1959) of the American Sociological Society, is something of an exception to this. He has made the only general use of this hoary distinction (he tends to use the terms *ideal* and *real*) of which I am aware in recent literature on the family. See his *World Revolution and Family Patterns*, Free Press of Glencoe, New York, 1963. He applies it in his use of available empirical materials on family structures about the world. The descriptive and bibliographic materials he has collected are invaluable to anyone interested in generalizations of the type presented here. Had they been available when this essay was written, it would be longer.

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ern United States society is on the whole quite unusual in social history. Even more unusual, however, is the manner in which these structures fit into other parts of the general social structure. The rich anthropological literature which has focussed on the membership unit approach has also failed to generalize. The authors of these works have almost inevitably been concerned with a single society and quite understandably have not been concerned with the possible general implications of the discrepancies between ideal and actual family structures which their works have turned up.¹²

In summation, the following statements may be made. 1) In the analysis of kinship structure in general and family structure in particular, questions about the distinction between the ideal and actual structures have not been systematically raised. The implications of such distinctions when present have not generally been explored. 2) To some extent this failure of exploration may have been a function of the heavy emphasis in much of the literature on the relational approach to kinship structure. 3) Those portions of the literature most dependent upon the membership unit approach have tended to neglect the general relevance of the distinctions between the ideal and actual because of a lack of comparative orientation of the work. A considerable part of this literature has fallen into this state because it is preoccupied with the state of affairs characteristic of one specific society—and preoccupied with that for its intrinsic interest rather than any general comparative relevance.

¹² Examples of this sort will be found in the works cited by Fallers below.

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A THEORETICAL BASIS FOR THE STRATEGIC ROLE
OF THE ANALYSIS OF FAMILY STRUCTURE
IN THE GENERAL ANALYSIS OF SOCIETIES

Some of the fascination with kinship in general and the family in particular as a focus for social analysis has been sentimental, some ethical, and a great deal therapeutic. However far the source of concern may have been removed from scientific considerations, the concern itself has hardly been misplaced from the point of view of social science. It is particularly apposite for those interested in highly generalized theory. For many years, through all the vicissitudes of cultural relativity and its opposite, certain propositions on the most general level of analysis have been relatively well accepted and verified. Most obvious is the fact that there is no society known historically or currently in which there is *no* institutionalized family structure. How the family structures are organized, what is done in terms of them, and how they interrelate with other membership units and aspects of the social structure are all subject to extremely wide variation, but the fact of their presence is as certain as the fact of evolution.

Hardly more controversial is another proposition that always furnishes a minimal lead on the interrelations of these and other structures. This is the existence of an incest taboo. There is no known society totally lacking in an incest taboo. Indeed, only relatively rarely, and then for carefully defined and delimited members of the society is some form of the incest taboo held in abeyance ideally. The members involved in such an abeyance never form anything approaching a substantial portion of the members of a society. Usually, if such exemption is present at all, no more than a ruler's kinfolk or a similarly re-