UNIT 7

Family in Caribbean

Overview

In the previous units we were introduced to social institutions and agents of socialization. We identified, then, the family as a key socializing agent for new members in society. In this unit we will take a closer look at the family but pay attention to family in the Caribbean.

The family is a key institution in society. It is charged with ensuring that new members of society learn the norms, mores and values of the society so that they can assimilate into the existing members of the society. This makes it a universal institution. In the market oriented economy in which governments are asked to do more privatization and less nationalization, the family has become increasingly important to meeting the needs of its members, as governments and the state are constrained by financial resources and the higher prioritization of other needs. Lowering debt to Gross Domestic Product, meeting conditions set by international banks or the quantity of resources that need to be committed to fighting crime and violence, have become the chief focus of governments' economic policy. These are present day Caribbean realities. In this unit, we look at the definition of the family, types of family and the appreciation of family types in the Caribbean. We also look at the ways in which expectations of gender roles function within the family.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this Unit you will be able to:

1. Define 'the family' and 'kinship'.
2. Identify scholarly perspectives on the emergence of family forms in the Caribbean.
3. Explain definitional differences of family and kinship as these are represented in western and colonial perspectives during the pre and post emancipation periods in the Caribbean.
4. Critically review assumptions and explanations of gender roles provided by scholars for relevance and adequacy.
5. Evaluate different perspectives on the modern and contemporary issues affecting family and kinship in the Caribbean.

This Unit is divided into two Sessions as follows:

Session 7.1: Defining Family

Session 7.2: Family in the Caribbean (evolution, matrifocality, women, new perspectives)

Readings & Resources

Required Readings

Barrow, C., & Reddock, R. (2001). Caribbean Sociology: Introductory Readings. Section 6, Chapter 27-28. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers. Retrieved via UWIlinC.

Mustapha, N. (2013). Sociology for Caribbean Students (2nd edition). Module 2, Chapter 5, pp. 128-158. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers. Available via UWIlinC.

Recommended Readings

Brown, J., & Johnson, S. (2008) Child rearing and child participation in Jamaican families. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 16 (1). Available via UWIlinC.

Mohammed, S. (1998). Migration and the Family in the Caribbean. *Caribbean Quarterly* 44 (3/4), 105-191. Available via UWIlinC at http://search.proquest.com.library.open.uwi.edu/docview/854855383/fulltextPDF/59659334B0DF4CB6PQ/1?accountid=42537

OpenStax. (2016). Introduction to Sociology 2E. OpenStax CNX. May 18, 2016. Sections 9.1-9.4. Available at http://cnx.org/contents/r-QzKsl_@7.23:Ix43J6k1@3/Variations-in-Family-Life

You are also advised to locate and read: Additional papers relevant to the topics covered.

Session 7.1

Defining the Family

Introduction

The family is a unit, a group, comprising of adults and children of different ages, that may share blood ties, share same residence and share in pooling of resources. Members of the unit may also share a surname, an important identifier for their sense of belonging. Based on this description it is possible to suggest that there is also some variation in the structure and membership of families. While family may be a universal institution, these matters of its structure and membership differ across the world and is influenced by value systems held by the society and individuals. A common (and, we might add, valued) characteristic of families is marriage existing between two individuals. This is partly so because of the heavy expectation on individuals to fulfill sexual desires through this legal or religious ritual of coming together and facilitating procreation and reproduction of new members in society.

There are several definitions put forward for the family. You must have ideas yourself of what a family ought to be and do and the kinds of relationship which is expected to exist between the various members. Do you know of any scholarly definitions for the family?

LEARNING ACTIVITY 7.1

We Are Family

Follow the instructions outlined below and post your responses in the designated forum. You must respond to the comments of at least two of your peers.

1. Search the web for the youtube video of the group, Sister Sledge's song, We Are Family. Jot down the characteristics that define family as these are presented in the lyrics of the song. Identify any of the characteristics, the inclusion of which you would query, and explain why you would make the query. Add to the list no more than three characteristics which you think ought to have been included and provide a justification for their inclusion.

2. Read **page 128** of Mustapha (2013) and paraphrase the definition offered by George Murdock (1949). When you are done conduct a key word search on the Internet for other definitions provided by scholarly and non-scholarly sources in the last ten years. Develop a two by two table and categorize your definitions by these two sources. Analyze what you have found and highlight what is common in the definitions and what has changed based on the ten year timeline. Share with your colleagues in the designated forum.

3. Explain in your own words and provide support from a scholarly reference what is (a) a household, and (b) kinship.

Having completed Learning Activity 7.1, you should be ready to move on to Learning Activity 7.2. The objective of Learning Activity 7.2 is to prove the diversity in family types, something you would have realized, is the basis of a major criticism of George Murdock's definition of family.

LEARNING ACTIVITY 7.2

Looking at Family Types in the Caribbean

Read Mustapha (2013) **pages 128-132** and note the definitions provided for the items listed below. Do a quick count of the number of families in your community. Record the total and indicate whether they include all the types in the list of the family types below. Is there any sociological explanation you can offer for the presence or absence of any of these types? Share your findings and comments in the designated forum. Be sure to comment on the findings of at least one colleague.

1. The nuclear family
2. The extended family
3. The reconstituted family
4. The single parent family
5. The sibling family

Theoretical Perspectives on the Family

The learning activity you just completed should have alerted you to the variety of types with which the family may present. There have been many sociological explanations of these types. As we have already said in this unit, while the family remains a universal institution there is much diversity in its form and structure across the world. We also highlighted the fact that the family has particular functions – particularly the socialization of new members for continuity of society, for example – and the family has roles such as being a facilitator for monitoring wellbeing of individuals, to among others. But there have also been perspectives of the family that deem it as reinforcing a status quo of inequity, through the teaching of norms and values that do not just create order in society, but create an order which itself perpetuates inequalities. In the next learning activity, you will need to examine some of these perspectives.

LEARNING ACTIVITY 7.3

Reading and Reviewing Theoretical Perspectives on Caribbean Families

Following your reading of **pages 134-141** in Mustapha (2013):

1. Provide short notes in your own words that outline the main assumptions grounding each of the theoretical perspectives he highlights.

2. Reflect on the assumptions and, based on your evaluation, indicate which of the perspectives gives a better representation of the family in the contemporary Caribbean.

When you are done with the activity share your thoughts in the designated forum.

Session 7.1 Summary

In this session we were able to identify common characteristics of the family across multiple sources and agreed that family forms are diverse across the world. We also learnt that the family, one of the oldest social groups and a key socialization agent has been responsible for maintaining and to an extent ensuring the continuity of society through its transmission of norms, values held by the wider society. We were also introduced briefly to a perspective on the family, Social Pathology, as well as, the Caribbean experience with the family. This introduction provides an avenue for us to progress onto the next session where we discuss family in the Caribbean.

Session 7.2

Family in the Caribbean (evolution, matrifocality, women and new perspectives)

Introduction

At this point in the course and your participation, it should come as no surprise that we need to talk about the family in the Caribbean distinct from what we have read and know about family in the global literature. Scholarly work on the Caribbean produced by writers such as Christine Barrow, Edith Clarke and Hermione McKenzie, for example, has underscored the importance of studying the family as a unit functioning with the Caribbean space, the origins of its forms and the the factors that influence it in contemporary society. This functioning is influenced by a range of factors, some of which we have come across already in this unit and others in previous ones. Let us note some of these:

1. The retention of colonial attitudes towards the family by the Creolized or Afro- Caribbean male or female coming out of slavery and into emancipation is, also, a matter for consideration as we try to understand and explain the family forms and even child rearing practices. The retention of colonial attitudes to characteristics of the family as held by other institutions has also influenced perceptions on legitimacy affecting access to key services by women and men.

2. The proposition of Caribbean society being plural has meant that family forms and types and the transmission of norms of Caribbean society will also reflect the values of the multiple, differing groups in society. The diversity is based largely on ethnicity of members.

3. Delayed gratification and ageing is another factor. As people stay longer in school to advance themselves to meet the requirements of capitalism and become more career oriented and driven, it means settling down to start a family takes a longer process. Adults are older in families and families remain small in size.

4. Economic integration deepened by modern globalization has contributed to migration which has also affected family types and child rearing. A worthy example is child shifting, an arrangement through which children stay with a relative or close member of the family while their parent migrates for employment.

5. Globalization and the associated increasing need to be competitive has also affected family structure, household authority as women join the labour force and also develop the capacity to lead households.

6. Crime and violence have also impacted on the family. Males in the Caribbean who are mainly the perpetrators and victims of violent crime end up dead or incarcerated leaving their wives or girlfriends to become the heads of their households.

The factors aforementioned are just some influencing the structure, form and functioning of the family. They certainly make clear that gender, race, age are all important contributing factors as to what shapes the family takes on and the ways in which roles of the members of the family are expected to unfold.

Family in the Caribbean – Matrifocal, Visiting Union and Common Law Union

Many of us in the region have been taught to think that the nuclear family is really the only viable arrangement for family. Let us look at other arrangements: is there any good reason for these types of family? How much do we know about them and how they function? Remember: the purpose of sociology is not to make moral judgements, but, rather, to understand the ways in which society functions and organizes itself

LEARNING ACTIVITY 7.4

Read and Apply Family Types in my Neck of the Woods

In this learning activity there are two components. Please read and respond to the instructions below.

1. Read **pages 143-153** in Mustapha (2013) and make short notes for your-self on the organization and features of the family types listed below:

   • Matrifocal family   • Visiting union   • Common law union

2. The second component requires you to engage in some simple observation and note taking.

   - Identify the numbers of families in your lane or street which fall into the three categories listed above. Provide a count of the number of members in each of the families you have identified. How are these types of families viewed and valued in your community? What kinds of families are young children in your community encouraged to aspire to creating when they become adults? What does the advice proffered to young children about families say about the community members' understanding of family?

When you are complete, share your notes and results in the designated forum. Compare your findings with one of your colleagues by commenting on his/her posting in the forum.

This activity ought to have, once again, drawn attention to the variety of forms and types into which the family can arrange itself. Hopefully, it has made you stop and adopt an inquiring (not inquisitive!) about these arrangements from sociological perspective.

Gender Roles and the Family

We have accepted that one of the key roles of the family is the socialization of the young into the expected roles they must play as males and females in the society. Born biologically male and female, there is an expectation for males to assume roles the society considers to be masculine, and for women to assume role which are considered by the society to be feminine. So, strength, both physical and emotional, is seen as a masculine quality whereas nurturance is seen as a feminine quality.

Let us be clear, those roles which the society determines are masculine and feminine are essentially gender roles. When we speak of gender, we speak as Joan Scott (1988) says, of the social organisation of sexual difference in such a way as to understand gender as not determined by biologically, but, rather, influenced by a society's interpretation of the acceptable social functions for male and female bodies. Gender is a system which is embedded with power and inequalities since the differences that are understood to demarcate biological males from females, and socially constructed men from socially constructed women, are not ascribed equal value. Maleness and masculinity have, historically, in the Caribbean and many other places in the world, been more highly valued than femaleness and femininity.

N.B

Remember, we spoke in Unit 6 about social constructs which are concepts which we have created in our society out of our social and cultural practice. Gender is one such and the terms we associate with gender, terms such as masculinity and femininity are also social constructs. When we speak of male(ness) and female(ness) we are referencing the biological criteria which bodies need to satisfy before they are confirmed as being male or female.

It is important, then, that we look at the men and women who comprise the family so we understand the roles they play and the ways in which these roles, changing as they have over the years, have helped to influence the forms and types we see of the family.

We know that one of the common phrases used to describe the behavior of many Caribbean men who are perceived to be absent from the family is expressed as coming from the child of such a man-my mother who fathered me. This description is attributed to Edith Clarke and is the title of her (1957) published study of intriguing and complex arrangements of family life in three Jamaican communities. It highlighted the arrangements made in areas of Jamaica where marriage was not that common and many fathers were not involved with their children: mothers and grandmothers tried to overcome the gap in parenting. In the following activity we will read two chapters which will expand the discussion on gender roles and how these are supposed to function in our society through the

family. One of these is a rebuttal to the ideas espoused by Clarke's (1957) study and the other looks at the ways in which East Indian women, as migrants to the Caribbean, sought to forge a particular kind of femininity as they became part of the social and familial arrangements of their transplanted community.

LEARNING ACTIVITY 7.5

Read and Review Roles of Women and Men in the Caribbean

Read and follow the instructions below and post your response in the designated forum. You must engage with the post of at least one peer.

1. Read Mustapha (2013), **pages 137-138** on the Feminist Perspective on family.

2. Read **Chapter 27** of Barrow and Reddock (2001), **pages 389-402**.

3. Finally read Chapter 28 of Barrow and Reddock (2001), **pages 403-413**.

4. In a paragraph no more than 170 words, provide a critical review of Lazarus-Black's thesis in **Chapter 27**. (You must include a discussion as to its relevance to the family arrangements you see in your community.) Ensure that you integrate the ideas of at least two relevant scholars in this discussion.

5. Create a list of important points that you have drawn from Chapter 28 which can be used to explain how creolization has impacted both Indian women and their families in the Caribbean.

6. Based on your understanding of what you have read in the three readings explain what you have learnt about the role of gender in shaping family arrangements.

Did you note that the value attached to tasks and roles was a very important point in this topic about gender roles for which the family has been assigned the responsibility to pass onto the younger generation? This has implications for the power (or lack thereof) available to members of the family based on their biological sex and the social value assigned to it. Did you see that gender roles and family are not fixed and can be altered based on the context in which they are required to exist? Are the feminist perspectives on the family applicable to our circumstances in the region?

These are all matters for deep reflection and further reading. Look at the list of recommended readings and seek out further elaboration and discussion on this issue.

Session 7.2 Summary

In this session we covered types of families and based on our readings and observations noted that the nuclear family type has long being postulated as the ideal family type. But as is elsewhere and in the Caribbean specifically, this is not so. The Caribbean has several family and cohabiting types, innovative in some regards as a response to the Caribbean cultural space and the pressures of survival. Survival and reinterpretation of the family is also a matter of coping and is made easier by the sense of community and kinship amongst the various groups.

We also looked at the ways in which gender roles help to shape understandings of the family and expectations of the role that males and females ought to play.

UNIT SUMMARY

The unit exposed students to the definitions of the family, its role and functions and as well as type of family. In the unit it was clear that there was no broad consensus on the definition of the family and, in fact, for the Caribbean post emancipation, that family type was largely prescriptive. The adaptive and cultural ways of the people post emancipation brought on new family types and forms, intentionally and unintentionally as the pressure of social relations and economics played its part it influencing the choices of Caribbean people. We also learnt about perspectives of the family from the functionalist, Marxist and feminist schools of thought. Women encounter different but more levels of oppression than men across all perspectives and this is largely due to institutions such as patriarchy and the overlapping of it to private and public spheres.

In the next unit we will examine education in the Caribbean. The unit content will explore the issues of educational achievement and access in the Caribbean.

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