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Conjugal Roles and Social Networks*

This paper will give an account of the sociological results of an intensive interdisciplinary study of 20 London families. It will be confined to one problem: how to interpret the variations occurring in the way husbands and wives performed their conjugal roles.

A joint conjugal role-relationship is one in which husband and wife carry out many activities together, with a minimum of task differentiation and separation of interests. Husband and wife not only plan the affairs of the family together, but also exchange many household tasks and spend much of their leisure time together. A segregated conjugal role-relationship is one in which husband and wife have a clear differentiation of tasks and a considerable number of separate interests and activities; they have a division of labor into male tasks and female tasks; they expect to have different leisure pursuits; both have their own friends outside the home. Yet, these are only differences of degree. All families must have some division of labor between husband and wife; all families must have some joint activities.

Early in the research, it seemed likely that these differences of segregation roles were related to forces in the social environment and an effort was made to explain them in terms of social class. This attempt was not very successful. Most husbands in joint conjugal role-relationships were professionals, but there were several working-class families that had relatively little segregation and several professional families in which segregation was considerable. An attempt was also made to relate degree of segregation to the type of local area in which the family lived, since the families with most segregation lived in homogeneous areas of low population turnover, whereas those with predominantly joint role-relationships lived in heterogeneous areas of high population turnover. Once again, there were several exceptions. But there was a more important difficulty in these attempts to correlate segregation of conjugal roles with class position and type of local area. The research was not designed to produce valid statistical correlations. Our aim was to study the interrelation of various social and psychological factors within each family considered as a social system. Attempts at rudimentary statistical correlation did not make

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clear how one factor affected another. Attempts to correlate segregation of conjugal roles with factors selected from the generalized social environment of the family did not yield a meaningful interpretation. I turned to look more closely at the immediate environment of the families, that is, at their external relationships with friends, neighbors, relatives, clubs, shops, places of work, etc. This approach proved to be more fruitful.

The external social relationships of all families appeared to assume the form of a network rather than of an organized group. In an organized group, the component individuals make up a larger social whole with common aims, interdependent roles, and a distinctive sub-culture. In network formation some but not all of the component individuals have social relationships with one another. They do not form an organized group and the component external units do not make up a larger social whole; they are not surrounded by a common boundary.

Although all the research families belonged to networks rather than to groups, there was considerable variation in the connectedness of these networks. By connectedness I mean the extent to which the people known by a family know one another independently of the family. I use the term dispersed network to describe a network in which there are few relationships amongst the component units, and the term highly connected network to describe a network in which there are many such relationships.

A detailed examination of the research data reveals that the degree of segregation of conjugal roles is related to the degree of network connectedness. Those families with a high degree of segregation in role-relationships had a highly connected network; many of their friends, neighbors, and relatives knew one another. Families with a relatively joint role-relationship between husband and wife had a dispersed network; few of their relatives, neighbors, and friends knew one another. There were many degrees of variation between these two extremes. On the basis of our data, I should therefore like to put forward the following hypothesis: The degree of segregation in the role-relationship of husband and wife varies directly with the connectedness of the family's social network. The more connected the network, the more segregation between the roles of husband and wife. The more dispersed the network, the less segregation between the roles of husband and wife.

If one is to understand segregation of conjugal roles, one should examine the effect of the family's immediate social environment of friends, neighbors, relatives, and institutions. The question remains, however, as to why some families should have highly connected networks whereas others have dispersed networks. In part, network connectedness depends on the family themselves. One family may choose to introduce their friends, neighbors, and relatives to one another, whereas another may not. One family may move around a great deal so that its network becomes dispersed, whereas another family may stay

put. But these choices are limited and shaped by a number of forces over which the family does not have direct control. At this point the total social environment becomes relevant. The economic and occupational system, the structure of formal institutions, the ecology of cities and many other factors affect the connectedness of networks, and limit and shape the decisions that families make. Factors associated with social class and neighborhood composition affect segregation of conjugal roles through direct action on the internal structure of the family, but indirectly through their effects on its network. Conceptually, the network stands between the family and the total social environment. The connectedness of a family's network depends, on the one hand, on certain forces in the total environment and, on the other, on the personalities of the members of the family and on the way they react to these forces.

*Methods of Collecting Data**

Although this paper will be devoted primarily to discussion of the effect of external social relationship on the role-relationship of husband and wife, the research as a whole was designed to investigate families not only sociologically but also psychologically. The research techniques accordingly consisted of a combination of the field-work method of the social anthropologist, in which the group under investigation is studied as a working whole in its natural habitat in so far as this is possible, and the case-study method in which individuals are studied by clinical interviews. No attempt was made to use statistical procedures.

The families studied were "ordinary," in the sense that they did not come to us for help with personal or familial problems, and they were usually able to cope themselves with such difficulties as they had. We sought them out, they did not come to us. In order to simplify the task for comparison, only families with young children were selected. In order further to restrict the number of variables, only English families of Protestant background were selected. All 20 families lived in London or Greater London, but they were scattered all over the area and did not form an organized group. Although the families resembled one another in phase of marriage and in national and religious background, they varied considerably in occupation and in socio-economic status; the net incomes of the husbands after tax ranged from £325 to £1,500 (at 1953 values).

Much difficulty was encountered in contacting suitable families, and the effort to find them taught us a good deal about the way families are related to other social groups. The 20 families were eventually contacted through the officials of various service institutions, such as doctors, hospitals, schools,

*For an account of field techniques see Robb (1953) and Bott (1957, Chapter 2).

local political parties and through friends of the family. Introductions were most successful when the contact person was well known and trusted by both husband and wife, and the most satisfactory channel of contact was through friends of the family.

After the contact person had told a prospective family about the research and had got their agreement to an explanatory interview by one of the research staff, one of the field workers visited the family at their home to describe what the research was about and what it would involve for the family. The field worker explained the background of the research, the content of the interviews, and the time they would take, and made it clear that the family could withdraw at any time, that the material would be treated with professional discretion and that if we wished to publish any confidential material that might reveal the couple's identity, we should consult them beforehand. The research staff also undertook to pay any expenses that the couple might incur as a result of the investigation. Although the provisional and explanatory nature of the first interview was always emphasized, we found that most of the couples who got that far had usually decided to take part in the research before they met the field worker, chiefly on the basis of what the contact person had told them. We have no systematic information about couples who were consulted but decided not to participate.

After a family had agreed to take part, the field worker paid several visits to them at home in the evening for joint interviews with the husband and wife. He or she also went at least once on the week-end to meet the children and observe the whole family together. There were thirteen home interviews on the average, the range being from eight to nineteen. Each home interview began with half an hour of casual chatting followed by more focussed discussions on particular topics during which notes were taken. The topics discussed were kinship, family background and personal history until marriage; the first phase of the family from marriage until the birth of the first child; an account of family life at the time of interviewing, including a daily, weekly and yearly diary; a description of external social relationships with service institutions such as schools, church, clinic, doctor, with voluntary associations and recreational institutions, and more informal relationships with friends, neighbors and relatives; an account of the division of labor between husband and wife in overall planning, in the economic support of the family, in domestic tasks and in child care; and finally, questions about values and ideology concerning family life, social class, money and financial management, and general political, social and religious matters. These topics were used as a general guide by the field worker; their order and the form of questioning were left to discretion. Usually he or she raised a topic, and the couple carried on the discussion themselves with occasional additional questions. The discussion frequently wandered away from the assigned topic, but little attempt was made to restrict

such digressions, since all the behavior of husband and wife towards one another and towards the field worker was held to be significant data.

In addition to the interviews with the 20 families, discussions about families in general were held with various persons, particularly doctors, who had considerable knowledge of family life. Discussions were also held with various organized groups such as Community Centres and Townswomen's Guilds. These groups had no direct connection with the families we interviewed, and in most cases they were composed of considerably older people, usually women. These discussions were therefore not directly relevant to the analysis of the research families, but they provided useful information on the norms of family life. In a public, group situation, especially one which lasts for only one session, people seem much more willing to talk about norms than to discuss their actual behavior.

Classification of Families

If families are classified according to the extremes of the two dimensions of conjugal role-segregation and network connectedness, four patterns are logically possible: segregated conjugal role-relationship associated with a highly connected network; segregated conjugal role-relationship associated with a dispersed network; joint conjugal role-relationship associated with a highly connected network; and joint conjugal role-relationship associated with a dispersed network. Empirically, two of these patterns, the second and third, did not occur. There were no families in which a highly segregated conjugal role-relationship was associated with a dispersed network; there were no families in which a joint conjugal role-relationship was associated with a highly connected network.

Six of the research families were clustered in the first and fourth patterns. There was one family that conformed to the first pattern, a high degree of conjugal role-segregation combined with a highly connected network. There were five families that conformed to the fourth pattern, a joint conjugal role-relationship associated with a dispersed network. These six families represent the extremes of the research set. There were nine families that were intermediate in degree of conjugal role-segregation and similarly intermediate in degree of network connectedness. Finally there were five families that appeared to be in a state of transition both with respect to their network formation and with respect to their conjugal role-relationship.

Among the twenty families, there was thus some clustering at certain points along a possible continuum from a highly segregated to a very joint conjugal role-relationship, and along a second continuum from a highly connected to a dispersed network. The families did not fall into sharply separated types so that

TABLE I Relationship Among Conjugal Segregation, Type of Network and Type of Occupation*

| <i>Families in descending order of conjugal segregation</i> | <i>Type of network</i> | <i>Type of occupation</i> |
|---|---|---------------------------|
| Newbolt | close-knit | semi-skilled manual |
| Mudge | medium-knit | semi-skilled manual |
| Dodgson (changing reluctantly from highly segregated to more joint) | transitional (move already made) | semi-skilled manual |
| Barkway | transitional (contemplating move) | clerical |
| Redfern | transitional (about to move) | semi-professional |
| Baldock | medium-knit | skilled manual |
| Apsley | medium-knit | professional |
| Wraith (becoming more joint) | transitional (several moves already made) | professional |
| Appleby | medium-knit | skilled manual clerical |
| Fawcett | medium-knit | clerical |
| Butler (changing eagerly from highly segregated to more joint) | transitional (move already made) | skilled manual |
| Thornton | medium-knit | semi-professional |
| Hartley | medium-knit | semi-professional |
| Salmon | medium-knit | semi-professional |
| Jarrold | medium-knit | skilled manual |
| Bruce | loose-knit | clerical |
| Denton | loose-knit | professional |
| Bullock | loose-knit | professional |
| Woodman | loose-knit | semi-professional |
| Daniels | loose-knit | semi-professional |

*All names are fictitious

divisions are somewhat arbitrary, but for convenience of description, I shall divide the families into four groups (shown in Table I): 1. highly segregated conjugal role-relationship associated with highly connected network; 2. joint conjugal role-relationship associated with dispersed network; 3. intermediate degrees of conjugal role-segregation and network connectedness, and 4. transitional families. No claim is made here that these are the only patterns that can occur; further research would probably reveal others. In the following discussion I shall be chiefly concerned not with these divisions, but rather with the fact that the order according to degree of conjugal role-segregation follows the order according to degree of network connectedness, and I shall attempt to show the mechanisms by which this relationship operates.

*Highly Segregated Conjugal Role-Relationship
Associated with Highly Connected Network*

The research set contained only one family of this type—the Newbolts (Ns). They had been married four years when the interviewing began and had two small children. In the following discussion, I shall describe their actual behavior, indicating the points at which they depart from their norms.

EXTERNAL SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Mr. N had a semi-skilled manual job at a factory in an East End area adjacent to the one in which they lived. He said that many other men in the local area had jobs at the same place, or were doing the same sort of work at similar factories and workshops nearby. Mrs. N did not work, but she felt that she was unusual in this respect. Most of the neighboring women and many of her female relatives had jobs; she did not think there was anything morally wrong with such work, but she said that she had never liked working and preferred to stay at home with the children. Mr. N said that he thought it was best for her and the children if she stayed at home, and added that he felt it was a bit of a reflection on a man if his wife had to go out to work.

The Ns used the services of a local hospital and a maternity and child welfare clinic. They expected to send their children to the local elementary school. They were also in touch with the local housing authority because they were trying to find a new flat. These various service institutions were not felt to have any particular relationship to one another, except in the sense that they were all felt to be foreign bodies, not really part of the local life. Mrs. N was a little bit afraid of them, particularly of the hospital and of doctors. On one occasion, while waiting with her baby and the field worker in an otherwise empty hospital room for a doctor to attend to the baby, she said in a whisper, "My husband says that we pay for it [the hospital services, through National Health subscriptions] and we should use it, but I don't like coming here. I don't like hospitals and doctors, do you?"

To the Ns, the local area was definitely a community in the social sense, a place with an identity of its own and a distinctive way of life. They spoke of it with great pride and contrasted it favorably with other areas. "It has a bad name, they say we are rough, but I think it's the best place there is. Everyone is friendly . . . there is no life in the West End compared with the East End. They drink champagne and we drink beer. When things are la-di-da you feel out of place." They took it for granted that the other inhabitants had similar feelings of local pride and loyalty. Both the Ns had grown up in the same area, as had most of their relatives and friends. Trips outside the area were like adventures

into a foreign land, especially for Mrs. N, and very few informal social relationships were kept up with people outside the area. Physical distance was felt to be an almost insuperable barrier to social contact.

Physically, the area was far from ideal as a place to live. The houses were old-fashioned, inconvenient and crowded. The Ns were faced with a difficult choice of whether to move out of London to a modern flat on a new housing estate, or to stay put in cramped quarters, in the old familiar local area with their friends and relatives. They knew of several other young couples who were faced with a similar dilemma. Group discussions at a local community center and the research of the Institute of Community Studies indicated that many local residents feel this to be an important social and personal problem (Young, 1954).

The Ns felt that their neighbors were socially similar to themselves, meaning that they had the same sort of jobs, the same sort of background, the same sort of outlook on life. Because the Ns had grown up in the area, as had many of their relatives and neighbors, they knew a very considerable number of local people, and many of the people they knew were acquainted with one another. Their social network was highly connected. In fact there was considerable overlap of social roles; instead of there being people in three or four separate categories—friend, neighbor, relative and colleague—the same person frequently filled two, three or even four of these roles simultaneously.

The Ns took it for granted that Mr. N, like other husbands in their social circle, would have some form of recreation with men away from home. In his case it was football, although the most common form of recreation was felt to be drinking and visiting in the local pub, where many husbands spent an evening or two a week with their friends; quite frequently some of these men were friends of old standing, men who had belonged to the same childhood gang and others were work colleagues. Mr. N had kept in touch with one or two friends of his childhood; he also played football and went to matches with some of his colleagues; he mentioned that several of his friends knew one another. Mrs. N knew a bit about these men, but she did not expect to join in their activities with her husband. She had a nodding acquaintance with the wives of two or three of these men, and occasionally talked to them when she was out shopping.

Mrs. N also had her own separate relationships in which her husband did not expect to join. She knew many of her female neighbors, just as they knew one another; she took it for granted that a friendly relationship with a neighbor would be dropped if the woman moved away. Neighbors saw one another on the landings, in the street, in shops, occasionally over a cup of tea inside the flat or house. They talked over their own affairs and those of other neighbors. Neighbors frequently accused one another of something—of betraying a confidence, of taking the wrong side in a children's quarrel, of failing to return

borrowed articles, of gossip. One has little privacy in such a situation. But if one wants to reap the rewards of companionship and receive small acts of mutual aid, one has to conform to local standards and one has to put up with being included in the gossip. Indeed, being gossiped about is as much a sign that one belongs to the neighborly network as being gossiped with. If one refuses to have anything to do with one's neighbors one is thought odd, but eventually one will be left alone; no gossip, no companionship.

With the exception of visiting relatives and an occasional Sunday outing with the children, the Ns spent very little of their leisure time in joint recreation; even though they could have got their relatives to mind the children for them, they rarely went out together. There was no joint entertaining of friends at home. From time to time Mr. N brought a friend home and Mrs. N made tea and talked a bit to the friend; female neighbors often dropped in during the evening to borrow something, but they did not stay long if Mr. N was there. There was no planned joint entertaining in which Mr. and Mrs. N asked another husband and wife to spend an evening with them. Such joint entertaining as existed was carried on with relatives, not with friends. Poverty does not explain the absence of joint entertaining, for the Ns considered themselves to be relatively well off. It did not seem to occur to them that they might spend their surplus money on entertainment of friends; they felt that such money should be spent on furniture, new things for the children or large gatherings of relatives at weddings, funerals and christenings.

There was much visiting and mutual aid between relatives, particularly by the women. The Ns had far more active social relationships with relatives than any other research family, and there was also a great deal of independent contact by their relatives with one another in addition to their contacts with the Ns themselves. The network of kin was highly connected, more so than those of neighbors or friends. The women were more active than the men in keeping up contacts with relatives, with the result that the networks of wives were more highly connected than the networks of their husbands. Although husbands were recognized to be less active in kinship affairs, Mr. N paid occasional visits to his mother, both by himself and with Mrs. N. There were some activities for which joint participation by husband and wife was felt to be desirable. At weddings, funerals and christenings, there were large assemblages of relatives, and it was felt to be important that both husband and wife should attend. Recent and prospective weddings, twenty-first birthday parties and christenings formed an important topic of discussion throughout the interviews with the Ns.

In a group discussion, a man living in the same local area as the Ns and having a similar sort of family life and kinship network summed up the situation by saying, "Men have friends. Women have relatives." For Mrs. N, there was no independent category of friend; friends were either neighbors or

relatives. She had had a succession of girl friends in her adolescence, but she said that she did not see so much of them since they had all got married and had had children. She always described them as girl friends, not as friends. Both Mr. and Mrs. N used the term friend as if it applied only to men; the term neighbor, on the other hand, seemed to refer only to women. Mr. N looked rather shocked when I asked him if he saw much of the neighbors.

Later on in the group discussion, the same man observed, "Women don't have friends. They have Mum." In Mrs. N's case the relationship between herself and her mother was indeed very close. Her mother lived nearby and Mrs. N went to visit her nearly every day, taking her children along with her. She and her mother and her mother's sisters also went to visit Mrs. N's maternal grandmother. Together these women and their children formed an important group, helping one another in household tasks and child care, and providing aid for one another in crises. Within the network of relatives there was a nucleus composed of the grandmother, her daughters, and her daughters' daughters; the relationships of these women with one another were sufficiently intense and distinctive to warrant the term organized group in the sense defined above. Mrs. N's female relatives provided some of the domestic help and emotional support that, in other research families, a wife expected to get from her husband. Mrs. N felt tremendously attached to her mother emotionally. She felt that a bad relationship between mother and daughter was unnatural, a complete catastrophe. She would, I feel sure, have been deeply shocked by the seemingly cold and objective terms in which many of the women in the other research families analyzed their mothers' characters. The close tie with the mother is not only a source of help, however; it may also be a potential source of friction, for if her husband and her mother do not get along well together a young wife is likely to feel torn by conflicting loyalties. Mrs. N felt that she was particularly fortunate in that her husband and her mother liked each other.

There was considerable segregation between Mr. and Mrs. N in their external relationships. Mrs. N had her network and Mr. N had his. The number of joint external relationships was comparatively small. At the same time, there were many links between their networks: the husbands of some of Mrs. N's neighbors were men who were colleagues of Mr. N, some of Mrs. N's relatives also worked at the same place as Mr. N, and in a general way, his family was known to hers even before Mr. and Mrs. N got married. The connectedness of the combined networks of Mr. and Mrs. N was high compared to that of the families to be discussed below. But the Ns' total network was sharply divided into the husband's network and the wife's network. Furthermore, her network was more highly connected than his: many of the relatives and neighbors with whom she was in contact saw one another independently of her, whereas there were fewer independent links between Mr. N's colleagues, his football associates, and his friends from childhood.

CONJUGAL ROLE-SEGREGATION

The previous description reveals considerable segregation between Mr. and Mrs. N in their external relationships. There was a similar segregation in the way they carried out their internal domestic tasks. They took it for granted that there should be a clear-cut division of labor between them, and that all husbands and wives in their social circle would organize their households in a similar way. One man said in a group discussion: "A lot of men wouldn't mind helping their wives if the curtains were drawn so people couldn't see." Although the Ns felt that major decisions should be made jointly, in the day-to-day running of the household he had his jobs and she had hers. He had control of the money and gave her a housekeeping allowance of £5 a week. Mrs. N did not know how much money he earned, and it did not seem to her that a wife would want or need to know this. Although the Ns said that £5 was the amount most wives were given for housekeeping, Mrs. N had great difficulty in making it cover all the expenses of food, rent, utilities and five shillings' saving for Christmas. She told Mr. N whenever she ran short, and he left a pound or two under the clock when he went out the next morning. She said that he was very generous with his money and she felt that she was unusually fortunate in being spared financial quarrels.

Mrs. N was responsible for most of the housework and child care, although Mr. N did household repairs and helped to entertain the children on week-ends. Mrs. N expected that he would do some of the housework if she became ill, but this was usually unnecessary because her mother or her sister or one of her cousins would come to her aid. Indeed, these female relatives helped her a great deal even with the everyday tasks of housework and child care.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE ROLE-RELATIONSHIP OF HUSBAND AND WIFE

Mr. and Mrs. N took it for granted that men had male interests and women had female interests and that there were few leisure activities that they would naturally share. In their view, a good husband was one who was generous with the housekeeping allowance, did not waste money on extravagant personal recreation, helped his wife with the housework if she got ill, and took an interest in the children. A good wife was a good manager and an affectionate mother, a woman who kept out of serious rows with neighbors and got along well with her own and her husband's relatives. A good marital relationship was one with a harmonious division of labor, but the Ns placed little stress on the importance of joint activities and shared interests. It is difficult to make any definite statement on the Ns' attitudes towards sexual relations, for they did not come to the Institute for clinical interviews. Judging from Mrs. N's references

to such matters when Mr. N was absent, it seems likely that she felt that physical sexuality was an intrusion on a peaceful domestic relationship rather than an expression of such a relationship; it was as if sexuality were felt to be basically violent and disruptive. The findings of clinical workers and of other research workers suggest that among families like the Ns, there is little stress on the importance of physical sexuality for a happy marriage (Slater and Woodside, 1951).

*Joint Conjugal Role-Relationships
Associated with Dispersed Networks*

There were five families of this type. All the husbands had professional or semi-professional occupations. Two of the husbands had been upwardly mobile in occupation relative to their fathers. All five families, however, had a well-established pattern of external relationships; they might make new relationships, but the basic pattern was likely to remain the same. Similarly, all had worked out a fairly stable division of labor in domestic tasks.

EXTERNAL SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

The husbands' occupations had little intrinsic connection with the local areas in which they lived. All five carried on their work at some distance from the area in which their homes were located, although two did some additional work at home. But in no case was there any feeling that the occupation was locally rooted.

Whether or not wives should work was considered to be a very controversial question by these families. Unless they were very well off financially—and none of these five families considered themselves to be so—both husband and wife welcomed the idea of a double income, even though much of the additional money had to be spent on caring for the children. But money was not the only consideration; women also wanted to work for the sake of the work itself. It was felt that if she desired it, a woman should have a career or some sort of special interest and skill comparable in seriousness to her husband's occupation; on the other hand, it was felt that young children needed their mother's care and that ideally she should drop her career at least until the youngest child was old enough to go to school. But most careers cannot easily be dropped and picked up again several years later. Two of the wives had solved the problem by continuing to work; they had made careful (and expensive) provision for the care of their children. One wife worked at home. One planned to take up her