

The Greek Review of Social Research

Vol 26 (1976)

26-27 A'-B'



Family relationships and the nutritional status of the child: An essay of sociological interpretation in three societies with different levels of development

Clio Presvelou

doi: [10.12681/grsr.208](https://doi.org/10.12681/grsr.208)

Copyright © 1976, Clio Presvelou



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Presvelou, C. (1976). Family relationships and the nutritional status of the child: An essay of sociological interpretation in three societies with different levels of development. *The Greek Review of Social Research*, 26, 22–33.
<https://doi.org/10.12681/grsr.208>

family relationships and the nutritional status of the child

*An Essay of Sociological Interpretation
in Three Societies with Different Levels
of Development*

by
Clio Presvelou
Ph. D.

statement of the research hypothesis

Family relationships and their impact on the nutrition of the child (from birth to the age of five years) are largely determined by two overlapping and interacting social values: 1) the ranking order that a given culture assigns to procreation as related to conjugal gratification—two functions which are regarded by sociologists as central to any marital union—and, 2) the place and importance of the child in terms of his contribution to the economic and noneconomic resources of his family.

Our hypothesis is that whenever a culture assigns first rank to procreation this is compatible with certain mechanisms of biological and social survival that the culture has devised. Having numerous progeny is then desirable and continues to be valued even if the threat to such survival disappears. In addition, the division of labor between the conjugal partners usually makes provisions for the mother so that she may look after the child, especially the newborn, to guarantee its viability and survival in adverse situations.

Under these circumstances the mother-child relationship will be more developed and salient than the father-child one. On the other hand, the children are expected to participate in the process of social and family survival by contributing to the family's resources. Hence, they are viewed as assets and are treated as such. This implies that with regard to nutrition and other needs children are considered as adults with the difference that their needs are reduced both qualitatively and quantitatively. When malnutrition is due to the culture rather than to poverty, it is to be attributed to the combined effects of highly-valued procreation and to the child's financial contribution—not to discrimination or indifference toward children and their needs.

Conversely, whenever a culture attributes first place to conjugal rewards within marriage, procreation is subordinated to the decision-making function of the couple regarding fertility. Since the biological and social survival of the society are guaranteed through health improvement, the number of children will be limited. The mother-child bond may be strong during the first few months after the child's birth but the father-child relationship also grows because in those societies customs assign to both parents an equal obligation toward the

— This paper constitutes a part of the study on «Priorities in Child Nutrition» carried out in 1975 for UNICEF under the Scientific direction of Professor Jean Mayer of the School of Public Health of Harvard University. I am greatly indebted to Professor Mayer for permission to publish it in *The Greek Review of Social Research*.

child. Furthermore, a market economy, typical of these societies, requires skilled manpower. Consequently, the socialization of the child in view of its adequate social preparation and entrance represents a financial burden for the parents; it also represents a noneconomic burden in terms of the psychological strains involved in the child-raising process. This, of course, does not imply that children are not sources of rewards for their parents, but whatever the reward, children remain important liabilities. Each child is considered as an individual full of potentialities whose needs must be satisfied. Hence, a heightened awareness is to be expected concerning his nutritional needs. These will be satisfied to the parents' best financial abilities.

From what precedes it is obvious that we are presenting, here, the two extreme and more clear-cut poles of a continuum characterized by an infinity of intermediate patterns. These poles represent also two kinds of societies which correspond to two different levels of development, i.e., the rural and predominantly subsistence-oriented societies on one hand, and the urban and essentially market-oriented societies on the other. Between these, we find the peri-urban situations. In them the parent-child relationships as well as the nutritional status of the family are not as clear, depending, as we shall see, on whether one refers to «detrIALIZED» settlements located at the periphery of large African cities or whether one deals with the urban proletariat produced by migration from rural to urban centers, as is the case at the periphery of Latin-American metropolises.

From this study will be excluded all factors such as dire poverty, desertion, divorce, death, and single-parent families which introduce stresses of a special kind into parent-child relationships. Our emphasis will be directed at the common or dominant practices in parent-child relationships and the impact they have on the nutritional status of the child, as these phenomena unfold within three different situations, i.e., the urban, peri-urban and rural situations, which imply different levels of development.

family relationships in traditional (rural) societies

Family and Procreation

The family is the socially recognized unit within which the function of procreation is performed. This unit, whatever structure it may take (be it the nuclear family, the extended family, or the joint family), constitutes the institutional framework which, in all societies, assumes responsibility for the renewal of society. It is also entrusted with the physical

and social protection of its members thus maintaining their integrity and ensuring the social identification of the children. To meet these two requirements, namely that of physical reproduction and the social orientation of individuals, the family seems to have monopolized the regulation of sexual relationships and reproduction everywhere.¹

Women and Procreation

If we consider traditional societies in Africa, for example, all customs point to the fact that child-bearing is one of the most important functions in these societies and certainly the most important one in every woman's life.

Everywhere, a woman's social status increases with the number of children she is able to bear for her husband, i.e., for his lineage and clan. The woman is aware that one of her major obligations is to give and maintain life. This maternal function is the reason for her very existence.

The barren woman has no social prestige whatsoever. If there is a case where women are oppressed, exploited and humiliated, it may very well be that of the barren woman. Customs of repudiating barren women are still very prevalent in many non-European regions ranging from the Arab world to the whole of Africa as well as to many countries of Latin America. The importance of the legitimate wife's reproductive function is clearly shown by the custom of levitate, i.e., «inheritance» of the widow by a close kinsman of the deceased husband, even by a son borne to him by another wife. The meaning of legitimate descendant to a deceased husband is well illustrated by the following radical rules of levitate found among the Kikuyu (East Africa):

If the widow is past child-bearing age she is expected «to marry» a wife and to give bride-wealth for her in the usual way. The marriage is consummated by ceremonial sexual intercourse with a man of the late husband's age-set, but later the wife lives with a man of her own choice. This man has no rights over her children or her property, since these belong to her legal «husband», the widow. [The] children a widow bears after her husband's death belong to his line.²

Even where low fertility is a general trait of the female population, as is the case for Ganda women in East Africa, barrenness still has severe consequences for women. «A woman who had no children was despised, and soon became the slave and

1. Presvelou, C., *Perspectives of Population Problems at the Family Level*, Rome, FAO, ESH: BFL/73/8, p. 4, 1973.

2. Middleton, J. and Kershaw, G., «The Kikuyu and Kamba of Kenya» in D. Forde (ed.), *Ethnographic Survey of Africa, East Central Africa, Part V*, London: International African Institute, p. 48, 1965.

drudge of the household.»¹ Although barrenness was not legal grounds for divorce, because the husband could take another wife, «the infertility of a union (among the Ganda) has often been the cause of its dissolution, both in the past and today.»² Their group ideal of procreation is so deeply rooted in the minds of people in traditional societies that, in exceptional cases, the husband shown to be sterile in his marriage to a second wife is threatened with the break up of his family. Among the Luo people, for example,

If though the second marriage the husband is proved to be sterile, his wives may, one by one, desert him. On the other hand, this great desire for children may lead him to carry on his name through the secret offices of the woman's brothers-in-law. Otherwise, he must face the inevitable fate of having his family broken up.³

Repudiation or divorce remain, of course, the most common prerogative by which the husband guarantees his social survival.

The Social Importance of Procreation

The customs of traditional societies in relation to procreation point to the fact that all these societies, without exception, give great importance to the child.

Religious and moral precepts attribute high valuation not only to having a child but to having many children. Many authors have also noted the preference of sons over daughters in the Arab countries,⁴ in India,⁵ in Africa⁶ and in Asia.⁷ Estimates between 1850 and 1970 and projections to the year 2000 of the world population growth broken down by the degree of a country's development clearly show that the less developed countries have been since 1850, the most populated, and more importantly, that their annual rate of increase has accel-

erated, by comparison with that of the more developed countries, since 1950.

In many countries, even today, having numerous progeny still constitutes the basic mechanism for social survival. In assessing nutrition in national development, Berg points to the fact that:

...with current estimated infant and adult death rate in India, a couple must bear 6.3 children to be 95% certain that one son will be alive at the father's sixty-fifth birthday.⁸

Even when this reason disappears, the ideal of having many children remains, for it is deeply rooted in the minds of people as a binding social norm. In a previous study,⁹ we showed that in developing countries, the low female celibacy rates and the high rate of early marriage for females were two mechanisms which formerly provided society with a sufficient number of children. Medical and health progress has drastically lowered the threat of depopulation. Despite this, these customs which account for high fertility are still valued, their maintenance illustrating the cultural persistence despite technological advances.

Family Relationships

The relationships among various family members, and specifically those of parents to their children, are determined in traditional societies largely by the importance of conjugal relationships within the broader social organization. As will be shown below, when the clan demands loyalty of its members the husband-wife relationships are distant while those between mother and children—especially babies—are very close. This pattern is also found in the extended family organization.

Husband-wife relationships. The intimate relationship of two adults, arising from intellectual and emotional exchanges, is virtually nonexistent in marriages in traditional societies. Most often the affection of a wife and young mother is not oriented toward her husband and, in any case, the husband is never the one who occupies first place in her emotional life. He is not, for her, the symbol of her own emotional security nor is he expected to offer her support and solace.

Dominant social norms prevent the growth of an intimate relationship between conjugal partners. The woman is subordinate to her husband and she must, therefore, respect and serve him. Thus, she

1. Fallers, M. C., «The Eastern Lacustrine Bantu (Ganda, Soga)» in D. Forde (ed.), *Ethnographic Survey of Africa, East Central Africa, Part XI*, London: International African Institute, p. 55, 1960.

2. Fallers, M. C., *ibid.*, p. 30.

3. Ominde, S. H., *The Luo Girl from Infancy to Marriage*, London: McMillan, p. 65, 1952.

4. Goode, W. J., *World Revolution and Family Patterns*, New York: The Free Press, pp. 111-112, 1963.

5. Almeida, A., *The Family in India. The Traditional Ideology of Fertility versus the Ideology of Family Planning in India*, (mimeographed thesis for the «Licence» Degree in Sociology), Louvain: Université Catholique de Louvain, p. 37, 1970.

6. Tsong-Shien Wu, «The Value of Children, or Boy Preference?» in J. T. Fawcett (ed.), *The Satisfaction and Costs of Children: Theories, Concepts, Methods*, Honolulu: East-West Center, p. 294, 1972.

7. Tsong-Shien Wu, *ibid.*, p. 294.

8. Berg, A. D., «Priority of Nutrition in Development,» *Nutrition Review*, Vol. 28, No. 8 (August), p. 202, 1970.

9. Presvelou, C., *op. cit.*, p. 7ff.

must prepare his meal and place it properly on the table inside the house. When the husband comes in he invites his friends and they take their meal together. The wife, however, takes her meal in the company of other women of her clan or with her neighbors, while the children make up a third, separate group. During her study among the Mukongo (Zaire), Knaper¹ never saw a family taking its meals together. For a wife to show affection to her husband in the presence of outsiders would constitute a breach of decency and respect for her husband. The same author notes her astonishment at seeing the wives change attitude as soon as their husbands arrived. Whereas a moment earlier they had been discussing with her they suddenly stopped for, according to them, their duty was to leave the initiative of discussion to their husbands.²

Generally speaking, an African wife will not talk unless her husband asks her to and in this case she will keep her eyes lowered for otherwise her attitude would mean a lack of respect. The conjugal union is limited to an association for the purpose of procreation. There is, therefore, no question of an intimate family community comparable to the Western one. For the same reason, husband and wife do not work out their projects together; neither do they work out a common plan for their children's training and education.

Even if, geographically, the husband and wife leave their clan at the time of marriage, morally, socially and psychologically they remain members of their respective clans. Membership in the clan appears in several circumstances. This duality of interests is all the more evident as concerns children and the family economy.

Mother-child relationships: The privileged bond. The wife's affection is not divided between her husband and her children. Conjugal life does not monopolize most of her emotional forces. The emotional strength of the wife and mother are almost wholly oriented toward her child. In African countries a special relationship links the mother to her child. According to Knaper,³ among the Bakongo, this mother-child relationship is a very special one; indeed, the mother *needs* this child because she can bestow all her love and affection on him.

The mother belongs, in a more total way, to this child, she is more involved in this relationship because she is much less absorbed by the relationship with her husband.⁴

1. Knaper, M.-Th., *L'enfant Mukongo. Orientations de base du système éducatif et développement de la personnalité*, Louvain: Ed. E. Nauwelaerts.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

3. *Op. cit.*, p. 94.

4. *Op. cit.*, p. 94.

Maternal affection is possessive. The mother satisfies all her infant's desires. She helps him out. It is this same phenomenon that Margaret Mead described when she wrote:

The closer, warmer and more frequent the mother's contact with the child, the more the mother studies the child's own rhythms, and the less she imposes external rhythms ... the better the chance that the child will grow up in good communication with his own body and with other people.⁵

The affection of the mother is expressed through her solicitude concerning the child's well-being. Her attitude is a total and passive adaptation to the child himself.

Her destiny is to protect and reply to all the child's needs. She is sensitive to her child's smallest desires and tries to attend to them as closely as possible. This intimate attachment lasts two years, or, practically until the time that she expects another child. The special relationships that exist between mother and children cannot be fully understood unless 1) the importance of the clan or of the extended family, as related to the nuclear family, and 2) the spatial arrangement of the dwelling, are examined.

The clan as a form of social organization. In many traditional African groups the nuclear family we are familiar with does not, socially speaking, have an autonomous existence. It constitutes an integral part of the clan. The clan, made up of individuals who consider themselves to be the descendants of a common ancestor, may be either patriarchal or matriarchal. Hence, the system of lineage is unilateral. It is according to this regime that the various Bakongo groups in Zaire, for example, are organized. Among the essential aspects of clan organization are to be found the *law of reciprocal solidarity*, which requires all members of the clan to help each other, and the *idea of collective responsibility*, according to which each individual is responsible for the activities of the group, whereas the latter is responsible for the activities of each member.⁶ In the Bakongo group the husband and wife, even after marriage, remain the representatives of their respective clans with which they continue to keep a close and permanent relationship.

The spatial arrangement of the dwelling. The spatial arrangement of the house also increases the intimacy between the mother and her children. In

5. Mead, M., «Some Theoretical Considerations on the Problem of Mother-Child Separation» in D. G. Harring (ed.), *Personal Character and Cultural Milieu*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, Vol. 3, pp. 637-649, 1956.

6. Van Wing, J., *Etudes Baongo*, Bruxelles: Goemaere, 2 volumes (especially Part I: Histoire et sociologie), 1921.

Africa, for example, the group of neighbors or members of the same clan gather outside the hut in small groups. It is also here that the social life of the wives and their children takes place. Food is prepared outside the house, while women and children eat either together or in groups. Here, too, the women rest after work. Finally, it is outside that they get together in the evening, staying there often very late into the night.

The husband leads a completely separate life. For example, he never mingles with the group made up of his wife and children nor will he take meals with them. Even if he comes back from work at noon, he will always find a meal set aside for him and will eat it inside the hut in what could be called a living-room; here he also receives his friends or a passer-by. Hence, no meal is shared between husbands and wives, nor is there one between the father and his children.

Breast Feeding and Weaning and Their Effects on Family Relationships

Since mankind's earliest days the feeding of infants throughout the world has depended on the availability of human milk. Traditional rural societies still depend on this source of food for the infant. It is a well known fact that prolonged breast feeding, not supplemented by other nutrients to cover the protein and energy needs of the growing child, can result in severe malnutrition.¹

The mother satisfies the child's need for food in all and any circumstances, that is to say, not only in the domestic and private environment but also in public (in the street, in the market or at church). The mother who allows her child to cry without giving him the breast is severely criticized. Even when she is working in the field, she usually responds rapidly to the child's crying. As long as the child keeps the mother's breast in his mouth she will never bother him even if she is in the most uncomfortable position.

Breast feeding is not accompanied by the emotional attitudes familiar to those of Western culture. It is considered as a realistic and quite ordinary thing which does not take up the mother's time. When she goes out to the fields she feeds her child as she walks. When she works she takes up her occupation again as soon as the child starts to suckle her actively. She also continues her conversation, often in the other direction, that is to say, away from the suckling.

As soon as the mother knows that she expects another child she stops breast feeding her youngest child. The Mukongc mother believes that her milk will be harmful to her child; she thinks that it may even poison him. Even if the child loses weight and suffers from various nutritional disorders the mother will not go back on her decision to stop breast feeding him.

As soon as weaning begins the mother depends on her daughters, sons and to a lesser extent on her husband to care for the child. The child is left partly to himself and partly entrusted to the siblings. Usually the child will be taken up by his elder sister who is responsible for him.

The relationships with his parents will tend to become more varied. The child, from the very beginning, learns to recognize family and clan relationships. This training contributes to make him understand that his home is not made up solely of his small nuclear family but also of the entire clan. The terminology used to name each member is indicative of this new link to the larger family group. All cousins and nephews are called brothers and all the mother's sisters are called «mother.» The child feels at home within his own limited family circle as well as with all the members of his own clan. This intimate link and mutually strong dependency is one of the main traits of African society. Little by little the child learns the complicated system of family relationships. He does not learn them formally but through his presence and participation in the life of the group. He acquires knowledge by imitating what his attitude toward the various members of his group should be. He learns through his total participation in the adults' lives. (This, as we shall see, was also current behavior in Europe during the Middle-Ages.) From the age of three and a half on the child is progressively integrated into his own age group and into that of those a little older than he. Through this integration the child becomes acquainted with his own natural milieu. Gradually, the child also comes into contact with adults in his environment. He is entrusted, at a very early age, with small everyday tasks and errands.

Slowly the child finds out that his group is not a restricted unit characterized by all-absorbing relationships with his two parents. He discovers that he is part of a larger social reality, i.e. the clan, and learns how to contribute to its well-being.

The foregoing discussion shows that the customs and practices related to breast feeding, weaning and the feeding of young children determine to a very large extent the relationship of the child to his family as well as his nutritional status.

1. FAO/WHO/UNICEF PROTEIN ADVISORY GROUP, *Lives in Peril. Protein and the Child*, Rome: FAO, World Food Problems, Series No. 12, pp. 26-27, 1970.

To start with, it is fairly clear that in traditional rural societies the mother is much more psychologically oriented toward the child than is her Western counterpart. Her attachment to the child is much stronger than her attachment to her husband. Furthermore, infant care takes most of her time, not only during the day but also at night. The initial relationship between mother and child is thus characterized by its exclusive and all-encompassing character. As far as the nutritional status of the child is concerned, a recent review of the literature on the social habits of nutrition¹ indicates the unequal distribution of food within the household. The quantity and quality of food distributed depends on the position of an individual within the household. The established hierarchy within the household for the satisfaction of individual needs seems to be first those of men, then those of women, pregnant women, infants and children. With slight variations, this pattern seems to be applicable to a wide variety of developing countries as the review of data by den Hartog conclusively shows.²

The malnutrition of children could not be attributed solely to any one of the following factors (which have often been suggested), namely, their low social position and prestige with respect to adult males; their minimal participation in the distribution channel^{3*} or neglect due to lack of affection or tenderness.

Setting aside the possible explanation of the children's low nutritional status by the above-mentioned factors (limited to individual cases) our hypothesis is that the underlying and unifying factor of this state of behavior is the status of children in terms of economic and noneconomic benefits.

The «Asset» Status of the Child and Its Implications

There is no evidence whatsoever that a particular culture neglects its children. On the contrary,

1. den Hartog, A. P., «Unequal Distribution of Food within the Household,» extract from *FAO Nutrition Newsletter*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Oct.-Dec.), WS/D 7683, 1973; den Hartog, A. P., and Bornstein, A., *Social Sciences, Food and Nutrition*, Rome: FAO, ESN: MISC/74/3, 1974.

2. den Hartog, A. P., *ibid.*, pp. 9-15, 1973.

3. Lewin, D., «Forces Behind Food Habits and Methods of Change,» *Bulletin of the National Research Council*, No. 108, pp. 35-65, 1943; Presvelou, C., «Nuclear Family Consumption: A Sociological Phenomenon» in M.B. Sussman and B.E. Cogswell (ed.), *Cross-National Family Research*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, pp. 102-118.

* Lewin's «Channel Theory» [1943] does not explain, among other things, the direct influence of adolescents in shaping the family's food habits and tastes (Presvelou, 1968, pp. 56-70 and 1972a) or the more subtle influence of younger children through their rejection of undesired food (den Hartog, 1973, p. 11).

there is unanimous recognition by all students in this field—ethnologists, anthropologists and sociologists—that children everywhere in traditional rural societies are cherished and placed at the center of parental and clan concern. Yet, available data on social habits which have been gathered in a variety of countries and cultures agree that their nutritional status is very low by comparison to that of adults—especially males—and this despite the fact that breast feeding and weaning habits are related, to the best ability of the group, to the children's well-being.

Our hypothesis is, then, that being an asset in the sense of a potential contributor, in the short and long term, to the society's and to the family's welfare and wealth (both material and non-material), the child is viewed as a «diminutive» adult. He has the same needs as the adult does, only these are reduced in quality and quantity.

The concept of the «diminutive adult» is not a new nor an alien one. Philippe Ariès, in his now classical study (1973) of the child in European society from the Middle Ages onward,⁴ convincingly showed that there was no special transition by initiation or education from infancy to adulthood. As soon as the child was weaned he assumed a place, although subordinate because of his limited capabilities, in adult society. Paintings of the time depict the child with the features and body proportions of an adult, merely smaller in size. Being a «diminutive» adult, the child always lived in the company of adults from whom he obtained his education and training.

The parallelism between customs in European society prior to the seventeenth century and those still being practiced in traditional societies strikes the social scientist. But this similarity in situations, at two different times, does not, in any way, postulate in our mind an evolutionary theory. (According to that viewpoint, traditional societies will, in due course, «catch up» through imitation or other incentives, with the practices of technological societies, like trains running on the same tracks but getting to the same railway station at different intervals.) The comparison between similar practices draws attention to the importance of the adult society as a structural support for the development of the child. In a situation of this kind it is only understandable that the child's contribution to the life of his society is taken for granted and not noticed.

The recent interest in the study of population growth and fertility behavior has led to the study of children in terms of costs and benefits.

4. Ariès, Ph., *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime*, Paris: Le Seuil, 1973.

Generally speaking the benefits of having children can be broadly classified into economic and noneconomic.

Depending on the particular culture, the noneconomic (or psychological) benefits of children to parents may be:

- the derivation of adult status (Africa, Asia)
- social status and a certain kind of power for the family (Africa, the Arab world)
- expansion of the self and family lineage (especially for male babies) (China, Japan)
- a sign of the mother's fertility and proof of her husband's virility.

As for the economic aspects, having many children is an economic advantage for several reasons. The most convenient scheme is the one suggested by Leibenstein,¹ distinguishing between the value of children as productive agents and their value as a source of security in emergencies and in old age.

Children have value as *productive agents* if they help on a family farm or in a family business (cottage, industry) while growing up. Or they may work for someone else and turn all or part of their earnings over to their parents.

Data on this point are scarce and scattered. A recent study by Moni Nag (1973) based on labor statistics in 64 countries with varying degrees of industrialization shows that 23.9 per cent of children aged 10 to 14 years old are economically active in agricultural societies against only 4.1 per cent in industrial societies.² This finding tends to provide quantitative support for the assumption that children in developing countries are economically productive. The percentage values may, however, be questioned both in the agricultural and industrial societies.*

Yet, it is still true that, in all agricultural societies, boys and girls participate along with their parents in a variety of activities. They may concern the family, e.g., household tasks such as cleaning, preparing meals and carrying water from the well, doing baby-sitting for younger brothers and sisters. Or they may be related to agricultural labor, for example, participation in planting and harvest-

ing operations, herding cattle, carrying meals to farmers in the fields, etc.

The relatively few field investigations carried out from the 1930s on which have been conducted in various regions of the world and give detailed accounts of the type of work done by children of both sexes at different ages agree that children start working about the age of six or seven and acquire full-fledged responsibility at a very early age. Among the Tallensi of Africa a 12 year-old may already have a small groundnut plot and a fowl or two of his own.³ Lewis (1951) made similar observations in the Mexican village of Tepoztlán in 1943-44 and 1947-48.⁴ Little information is available on the relative productivity of children as compared to that of adults. According to Fried, in the Chinese village he investigated «a man is considered as one unit while a woman, older man or child is considered as half a unit.»⁵ From his observations of workers on a plantation in Brazil, Johnson estimates that the productivity of a boy of 10 to 14 years old may be set annually at one-fifth of that of the married male.⁶

In view of these data our hypothesis that there is an association between the «asset» status of the child and his being treated as a «diminutive» adult; both in his activities and his nutritional needs, receives support.

Being considered as an asset is by no means an expression of disregard for the child. Whiting is quite correct when she writes, «I know of no traditional society where the majority of infants and pre-school children are neglected.»⁷ This statement stands in sharp contrast to the practices of child neglect, abandonment and cruel treatment which were inflicted on children in European and Catholic societies as recently as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries or even the beginning of our own. For example, in France during the eighteenth century, child abandonment was not an isolated phenomenon. Moheau (1778) states that in 1770 he counted, in Paris, no less than 3,785 abandoned children for 19,035 births, i.e., 20 per cent whereas, in 1771, he counted 7,156 abandons for 17,140 births,

1. Leibenstein, H., *Economic Backwardness and Economic Growth*, New York: John Wiley and Sons, p. 161, 1963.

2. Moni Nag, «Economic Value of Children in Agricultural Societies: Evaluation of Existing Knowledge and an Anthropological Approach» in J. T. Fawcett (ed.), *The Satisfaction and Costs of Children: Theories, Concepts, Methods*, Honolulu: East-West Center, pp. 58-91, 1973.

* The inaccuracies of labor statistics regarding the definition of «economically active» populations are well known.

Also, legislative measures in the developed countries against child labor misrepresent the real economic contribution of children to the family budget.

3. Fortes, M., «Social and Psychological Aspects of Education in Taleland,» *Africa*, Vol. 11, Supplement to No. 4, 1938; Fortes, M., and Fortes, S. L., «Food in the Domestic Economy of the Tallensi,» *Africa*, Vol. 9, pp. 237-276, 1936.

4. Lewis, O., *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Restudied*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1951.

5. Fried, M. H., *The Fabric of Chinese Society* (Reprinted 1970), New York: Octagon, p. 110, 1953.

6. Johnson, A. W., *Sharecroppers of the Sertao*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 77, 1971.

7. Whiting, B., «Rapid Social Change: Threat or Promise?» UNICEF, *The Neglected Years: Early Childhood*, UN Publications, Sales no. E. 73, IV, 1.

i.e., 42 per cent.¹ The information available for other Catholic societies shows similar trends. In Madrid, in 1786, 16 per cent of the baptized were abandoned children. In Venice, between 1680 and 1719, 15 per cent of the children were abandoned.^{2*}

Likewise, Dickens' social commentaries and descriptions of the cruelty and suffering inflicted on children in England were not a product of his imagination; he merely described what was a common practice in urban, destitute milieux. From the end of the eighteenth century the misery of urban families and their children in that country was repeatedly denounced.³

parent-child relationships in industrialized societies

This subject has been extensively studied by family sociologists. We will, therefore, treat it here only briefly and as a reference point for the other two kinds of societies, i.e., the agricultural and the peri-urban.

To understand parent-child relationships and their impact on the nutritional level of the child three factors must be briefly analyzed: 1) the changes in the family toward the child; 2) the insistence by psychologists on the uniqueness of child development; and 3) the place of the husband-wife relationship as compared to the parent-child relationship.

Historical perspective is needed to clarify the relativity of the present parent-child dynamics. Observations from child psychology will provide the background necessary to understand the specificity of educational principles for children in the contemporary Western European family. As for husband-wife relationships, their analysis will reveal the ambiguous emotional status of the child within the restricted nuclear family.

The Feeling for Childhood

Ariès (1973) applied historical analysis to the adult-child relationship.⁴ According to him, the ideal childhood did not exist in medieval European

society; this is not to suggest that the children were neglected, forsaken or despised. The idea of childhood corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood which distinguishes the child from the adult, even from the young adult. In medieval society, however, this awareness was lacking. The feeling for childhood appeared, in Europe, relatively late, i.e., toward the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century. The source of this change lay outside the family itself. Clergymen, moralists and educators forged it. A revival of interest in education in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries introduced the idea that a period of special preparation was necessary before the individual could assume his place as an adult. Childhood became the period set aside for this training. As the child was treated differently from the mature adult, he was expected to behave differently and his nature was understood to be different.

Further Differentiation of the Child

The separation of the child from the adult world was upheld by psychologists like Jean Piaget and the Freudian theory of ego development.

Piaget (1932) showed how children at different stages of maturation can impart altogether different working meanings to the same sets of rules or moral imperatives (e.g., morality of *constraint* applicable to younger children as opposed to the morality of *cooperation*, applicable to older children).⁵ He then urged that the child's conception of the rules reflected his relationship with the rule giver. To younger children, the rule giver was a parent whose status of dominance was translated into the absolute character of the rules. To older children the rule giver was the peer group in which decisions were reached on the basis of relatively equalitarian exchange. The character of the rules derived from the nature of the child's relationship to his peers.

From this and another earlier work (1926),⁶ Piaget and contemporary educators derived the rules of education appropriate for each age-group of children by means of which the «society of children» is separated from that of adults.

Sex role identity which begins early adds an element of stress to family relationships and further contributes to the child's dissociation from adults.

Whereas the infant is relatively asexual, except for the distinguishing clothes and toys by which parents identify it and the subtle differences in

5. Piaget, J., *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1932.

6. Piaget, J., *ibid.*

1. Moheau, *Recherches et considérations sur la population de la France*, 1778.

2. Mols, R., «Introduction à la démographie historique des villes d'Europe du XIV^{ème} siècle du XVIII^{ème} siècle», Louvain: Publications universitaires, Vol. II, 1955; Bergues, H., *La prévention des naissances dans la famille. Ses origines dans les temps modernes*, Paris: PUF, Chap. VI, pp. 163-189, 1960.

3. Presvelou, C., *Sociologie de la consommation familiale*, Bruxelles: Ed. Vie Ouvrière, pp. 22-27; 78-79, 1968.

4. Ariès, Ph., *op. cit.*

* It should be noted here that the abandonment of children in Europe was not supported by cultural factors as was the case, for example, with female infanticide in old China.

tone of voice and general treatment given it on the basis of its sex, childhood, by contrast, is the period during which sex identities take strong roots and boys and girls develop increasingly separate spheres of activity.

In late infancy and early childhood there are typical changes in the identification with and the preferences shown toward the father and mother. The infants' early responsiveness to the mother is often supplanted by a period in which young children of both sexes prefer the father. The famous Freudian sequence culminating in the Oedipal crisis is one effort to describe a constant phenomenon characteristic of this period.

The Strong Conjugal Bond

A third distinctive trait of family dynamics in industrial societies which helps to understand parent-child relationships is the importance of the nuclear family.

This family unit derives its reason for being essentially from the strong emotional link that binds the conjugal partners. Sexual gratification between husband and wife, mutual help and assistance, strong emotional ties, intense communication, the intimacy of togetherness are the essential traits of the nuclear or conjugal family. To be sure, economic and technological developments in these societies were instrumental in the emerging of this family configuration. It is, furthermore, strengthened by an extensive moralistic and functionalistic literature which considers that the conjugal family is the better one or the one that fits advanced societies best. Goode (1963), in a study in which he assembled family data covering roughly the past fifty years in the West, Arabic Islam, subSaharan Africa, India, China and Japan, provides some test of the argument that the nuclear family is, progressively, becoming the dominant family form in the world. The author concluded from this analysis that:

...the alteration appears to be in the direction of some type of conjugal family pattern—that is toward fewer kinship ties with distant relatives and a greater emphasis on the nuclear family unit of couple and children.¹

The strengthening of conjugal intimacy was to establish unexpected barriers between the child and his parents.

The nuclear family in the West is not, as in the case of traditional rural societies in Africa, a social group which must first guarantee social survival through procreating. The mutual understanding of the conjugal partners takes precedence

over procreation. It follows that the child is, above all, desired for himself and is viewed as the fruit of mutual love. However, he is also an «intruder» in the conjugal unit. He is going to disturb, in a more or less permanent and perhaps negative way, the relationship between the conjugal partners.

The Transition to Parenthood as a Crisis

The strain of the husband-wife relationship following the child's birth is a recurrent theme in sociological literature.

To the young married couple introduction of an infant signals an entirely new kind of relationship and demands extensive revision of the husband-wife pattern of interaction. The mother-infant pair is pivotal, and it is the character of this novel pair interaction that demands accommodative changes in the husband-wife association and in the relationships with any other children in the family.²

Changes in the husband-wife relationship often start the minute the wife suspects she's pregnant. Individual reaction to impending parenthood varies widely.³

It is important, for our purposes, to point out that this alteration of conjugal relationships is viewed by the authors with great apprehension for, according to them, it may lead to a dissolution of the partners' initially privileged relationship. The literature of family counseling is most vocal on this point.

A rather recent current in sociological research and thinking is what has been called a «normal» crisis of parenthood.⁴ These (and many similar studies published since) draw attention to the fact that the transition from marriage to parenthood is a crisis—though they qualify it as a normal one. Alice Rossi (1969) has rightly argued that the concept of «normal crisis» be dropped and that one speak, instead, directly of the transition to parenthood.⁵ According to this author:

...there is an uncomfortable incongruity in speaking of any crisis as normal. If the transition is achieved and if a successful reintegration of personality or social roles occurs, then crisis is a misnomer. To confine attention to one «normal crisis» suggests, even if it is not logically implied, a successful outcome, thus excluding from our analysis the deviant instances in which failure occurs.⁶

2. Turner, R., *Family Interaction*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, p. 377, 1970.

3. Klemmer, H., *Marriage and Family Relationships*, New York: Harper and Row, p. 288, 1970.

4. LeMasters, E. E., «Parenthood as Crisis,» *Marriage and Family Living*, Vol. 19, pp. 352-355, 1957; Dyer, E. D., «Parenthood as Crisis: A Restudy,» *Marriage and Family Living*, Vol. 25, pp. 196-201, 1963.

5. Rossi, A. S., «Transition to Parenthood» in R. S. Cavan (ed.), *Marriage and the Family in the Modern World*, New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, p. 487, 1969.

1. Goode, W. J., *op. cit.*, p. 1.

With some exceptions, sociological, psychological and psychoanalytical literature has been oriented to the ways of attenuating the conflict that the child (intruder) introduces into the parental relationship. Parents realize that the child is an individual who has his own needs and interests, a human being quite different from either of his parents or his brothers and sisters who must be guided to maturity through their joint efforts. Ideas on how the child should be brought up may create stress leading to arguments between husband and wife. This, it has been argued, is true especially when the partners have come from homes with different value systems.

Traditionally, the male has more often been the authoritarian figure who attempts to maintain strict discipline by the use, if necessary, of severe punishment. This, of course, isn't always true. Many wives complain of husbands who will not assume any responsibility for punishing the children or who tend to be too lenient with them. Elizabeth Hurlock (1964) refers to studies of the treatment of babies by mothers which reveal that the way they treat them during infancy is related, significantly, to the way they treat them as they grow older.¹ Changes are likely to occur in the quantity rather than in the quality of treatment. That is to say that indulgent parents tend to become more indulgent and rejecting parents, more so.

The potential conflictual situations which exist in a family with young children are further highlighted by the inclusion, in sociological literature, of findings by psychologists. These summarize the parent-control conditions that lead to poor parent-child relationships and the possible effects of these conditions on the child's personality.

Not only can these conditions affect the developing child's personality and behavior but might (so the argument goes) also affect his later behavior in marriage, thus creating a new round of marriage problems and another generation of disturbed parent-child relationships.²

From the relational point of view, the child in developed countries is at the center of his parents' concern. Valued for himself, he is overly solicited. Every movement, gesture, word or delay in his intellectual or emotional development becomes a major topic for the parents' concern, or a reason for argument and tension between them.

Every change in the family constellation whether due to the birth of an additional child or to changes in family status also has effects on the parent-child relationships. The arguments about the detrimental

effects on the development of the child's personality when the mother takes on paid work is a case in point. Another illustration is the debate on the positive versus negative effects of day-care centers on the child's development.

On the nutritional level too, the child in developed countries, in some cases at least, tends to be overfed because the parents lack the right information about the proper nutrients the child needs. Dental caries, for example, are widespread in economically developed countries.

In sharp contrast to the customs which prevail in the traditional societies of Africa and elsewhere and to the conditions which prevailed in Europe from the Middle Ages to the beginning of the seventeenth century, the child in contemporary Western societies is completely set aside from adults besides his own parents. It is not exaggerated to say that our children suffer from social starvation, the absence of warm, meaningful contacts and relationships with adults, other than their parents, who should normally supply them with different models of behavior and who should also help to ease them into the grown-up world.

The child's sense of responsibility towards adult society begins very late, at a time when he will be called to fill adult roles. He learns their variety in terms of economic and noneconomic benefits, mainly through two adults—his parents—and through the contradictory messages gleaned from the mass media.

The Child as a Financial Liability

This trend spread as the education of the child became a prerequisite for his deferred economic contribution. The growing demands of the technologically advanced societies for highly skilled manpower increased the responsibility placed on the nuclear family to supervise the training of children, and led to compulsory education which, in most of these societies, lasts from the age of 6 to the ages of 15 to 16. This education is, however, considered a minimum requirement. Additional training will be needed to prepare the child for future employment. Furthermore, the tendency to confide the children to nurseries and day-care centers (considered as places for the socialization of children) has also expanded considerably so that a child from the age of 2 to about 17 or 19 is completely (financially and otherwise) dependent on the small family unit.

Various laws prohibit child labor and tend to stretch out compulsory education still more. These two factors bring to the forefront the costly nature

1. Hurlock, E., *Child Development* (Fourth Edition), New York: McGraw Hill, p. 656, 1964.

2. Klemmer, H., *op. cit.*, p. 295.

of the economic upbringing of the child in the Western society.

parent-child relationships in peri-urban areas

Most African countries are presently in a transitional stage of economic and social development. Material innovations are quickly adopted if their usefulness or prestige value are recognized. Social structures such as the nuclear family may fail (or take a long time) to take root. In some areas traditional life patterns still prevail, in others they have completely disappeared. In most parts, the old and the new coexist. The stage of development, hence, varies not only from one area to another but also from one institution to another and from one life sphere to another within the same group of people.

The existence, side by side, of monogamous and polygamous family units partly explains the difficulty of finding consistent patterns typical of African peri-urban populations with regard to parent-child relationships.

The native elite, because of its social origin and training tends to adopt Western family patterns and behavior towards their children which do not vary significantly from those of their European or American counterparts.

By contrast, natives of lower socio-economic status have kept closer contacts with their relatives in the countryside. By that very fact they attempt to combine—often unsuccessfully—the demands of the technological world concerning parent-child relationships with those of traditional society. The requirements of the clan can, at times, become extremely urgent, in which case, one can expect a conflict to arise between the norms of the city and those of the clan about the education and place of children within the family. In a recent study on family consumption in Kinshasha (Zaire), Houyoux supplies examples illustrating the difficulty of disentangling the nuclear family settled in the city from the family group still living in traditional villages.¹

To obtain the status of an urban worker is not the sole concern of the individual but of his whole family. In the majority of Kinshasha families, it is customary for the young employed person's first salary to be handed over, completely, to his progenitors or to the head of his extended family. They give him part of the salary and the rest goes to all the family members who helped to bring up the

young worker. If one loses his job his financial contribution to his family is suspended; furthermore, he has the right to receive financial aid from his family.

This constant interpenetration of the traditional and urban milieux explains why even in the city the child continues to belong to two different worlds, i.e., the nuclear family and the traditional milieu.

Another factor which explains the persistence of traditional and urban ways of life in family relationships is the makeup of the male-female population in these areas and the mentality of «temporary urbanites» which the majority of migrants seem to adopt. Urban African centers such as Dar-Es-Salaam, Kampala, Nairobi or Kinshasha are characterized by a rapid population increase due mainly to male migration from rural areas. Many townsmen have not settled in town permanently but live there with the intention of returning, sooner or later, to their home area.²

Only a small percentage of urban women are wives brought to town by their husbands. Most of them are unmarried women who come to town with a relative or on their own. The preponderance of young men and the great number of young, single women, both of whom are subject to a severe housing shortage, and the limited professional opportunities open to women are conditions which favor irregular, unstable and relatively short-lived unions up to and including prostitution (Ethiopia: Addis Ababa).

Temporary and Single-Parent Families

Temporary unions seem especially prevalent among the lower socio-economic layers of the urban population. In Kinshasha, 6.8 per cent of the people on the lowest socio-economic level who participated in a budgetary study, live in extramarital unions. This number drops to 3.5 per cent in the upper socio-economic layers. As is to be expected, these unions are particularly numerous among the young generation. Of the temporary unions, 65.4 per cent are contracted among people under 30 years of age.³

This single-parent families in which unmarried women support families are also part of African peri-urban life. In most cases they live from their sexual «services» because there is a tremendous demand for the sexual «services» of the scarce women in town.⁴

2. Fallers, M. C., *op. cit.*, p. 48.

3. Houyoux, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

4. Southall, A. W., «The Position of Women and the Stability of Marriage» in A. Southall (ed.), *Social Change in Modern Africa*, London: Oxford University Press, pp. 56-57, 1961.

1. Houyoux, J., *Budgets menagers, nutrition et mode de vie à Kinshasha*, Kinshasha: Presses Universitaires du Zaire, p. 268, 1973.

Economic and Nutritional Status of Families

The Kinshasha study is but an illustration of the dire economic situation of peri-urban populations in developing countries.

In residential areas the households average 7.8 persons, who spend an average of 116.04 Zaires per month as against only 22.71 Zaires spent by inhabitants in the poor areas (where the average number of persons per household is 5.5). Malnutrition is severely felt by the peri-urban population. Only 60-70 per cent of their calorie needs are covered (as against 117.2 per cent for inhabitants in residential areas). Likewise, 70 per cent of their protein needs are met while in the residential sectors the satisfaction of needs is exceeded by 61.5 per cent. The daily amount (in grams) of food per consumption unit of the population is also very unequal if one considers the socio-economic status of the household. The lower economic strata have an intake of 481 grams per day as against 1,167 grams consumed by the upper economic strata. It should be added to this already gloomy picture that among inhabitants of the peri-urban areas 79.2 per cent declared they had suffered from hunger or at least five days (the percentage falls to 15.7 per cent for inhabitants of residential areas).

Since the percentage of large households is much higher in the poorer sections of a city and since the economic level of the families decreases as a function of their household size we can safely deduce that malnutrition is their lot and that increased family responsibilities fall on the fraction of the population least able to cope with them.

conclusions and recommendations

We have based our study on two sets of variables in order to evaluate family relationships and nutritive status from a sociological point of view. We have examined three types of societies with different degrees of development.

The first set of variables concerns marital relationships and attitudes toward procreation. When marriage is based primarily on emotional and sexual intimacy between husband and wife, the conjugal bond is of paramount importance. Here, the child may be desired but he is also feared as an intruder in and possible trouble-maker for the conjugal relationship. Owing to current educational principles the child is considered as a personality laden with potentialities which must be developed. At the other end of the marital continuum the family is established on the basis of extended family arrangements and the procreative function dominates. The child is desired and wanted not only for the immediate family unit but also for the purposes of the extended family or of the clan.

The second set of variables enabled us to examine the «asset» versus the «liability» status of the child. It has been found that an «asset» ideology closely associates the child to the life and work of adults. His emotional and professional preparation and training are taken up by his family and broader society. Yet his nutritional needs tend to be filled inadequately. The social habits of nutrition give him a fraction of the food needed by the adult. The traditional societies closely follow this pattern.

At the other extreme of the continuum it has been found that under the joint influence of ideological, psychological and economic factors, the child tends to be considered as a financial liability until adulthood. His nutritional needs are generally satisfied though malnutrition, through overfeeding, is not rare. The developed countries and the elite native groups in the developing countries adopt this pattern. Between these two groups we find populations living in precarious conditions created by the transition from a rural to an urban way of life. This makes up the most vulnerable group in terms of both parent-child relationships and nutritional status of family members.

Recommendations for Future Action

Confronted with the tremendous social problems as revealed by this analysis, which result from the unequal distribution of wealth and opportunities in life, and from ignorance and social taboos, we recommend bold and dynamic action leading to tangible, practical results. Four topics seem to require immediate study to open the way for action. These are:

(1) Elaboration of a plan of action to protect children living in peri-urban areas. This is the most vulnerable group in the short and medium term; they are the «olvidados» the forgotten ones.

(2) Increased knowledge (and information) of the ways through which the child raises parental aspirations. This would enable the structuring of appropriate plans of action to motivate changes in parental attitudes concerning the child's present and future contribution to the well-being of the family.

(3) Appropriate study of the cultural elements presenting the greatest amount of hindrance to improvement in the social and nutritional status of the child.

(4) Rediscovery of the adult-child solidarities. For technological societies this implies lowering the «liability» status of the child and a concomitant increase in his «asset» status. Conversely, in traditional societies, the «liability» status must be upheld so that the child can enjoy not only the traditional values but also those of a technological society which best suit his own and society's needs.