FIRST AND SECOND GENERATION AMERICAN JEWISH FAMILIES: SOURCES OF CONFLICTS AND TENSIONS*

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It is difficult to say precisely when anthropologists developed a professional interest in the study of institutions associated with modern or industrial societies. Clearly this concern is increasing daily to the point where the anthropologist studying contemporary urban and rural conditions is no longer an anomaly. Within the context of American society the relationship between marital stability, family cohesion, intra-family role strains, and the orientation toward rapid upward social mobility has long held the attention of sociologists, but an anthropological interest in this area commenced around the 1940's (Mead 1949) and owed much to the stimulating work of Talcott Parsons (1942, 1943) and his associates (e.g., Parsons and Bales 1955). Particular concern has been with those stresses within the nuclear family that operate to disrupt its solidarity. A direct relationship exists between the loosening of marital and family bonds and the desire to raise one's social standing or class position. The explanation generally provided for this dysfunctional association is as follows.

An individual oriented to achieve upward social mobility can not accomplish this goal while also maintaining strong ties with a family that remains in a social position he considers inferior and from which he wishes to move out and and up. Such persons are caught in a dilemma: to move up the social ladder they must sever, or at least greatly weaken, their ties to their parents, brothers, and sisters if these kin remain static or downwardly mobile. But if they are too attached to their families to forego this sacrifice of kin ties, then they must relinquish their aspirations. To move up from a social class means not only to move out of it, but to be willing to leave behind family, friends, and community in the pursuit of ambition. Many persons in American society

accomplish this, but only at some psychological cost. They are subject to the strains immanent in the highly competitive occupational world in which they enter, and they are cut off from the sense of security provided by the intimacy of family and close community life. In their adult years such persons must continually be prepared to leave the communities into which they have settled and to abandon the friends they have acquired there, for the occupational system (as it impinges on the stratification system) requires that the successful who rise in rank and salary manifest their changed occupational position by changing other areas of their lives appropriately. To demonstrate their altered social status they must alter their style of life by moving to better homes and neighborhoods and acquiring social acquaintances in keeping with their new social standing. This lack of stability in family, friends, and community engenders a sense of loneliness that persons seek to alleviate by placing correspondingly greater emotional demands on the one person who, more than anyone else, remains the constant companion and associate--the spouse. Such a situation in our society leads to what is often referred to as the isolated nuclear family. At no other time in the history of man have husband and wife emotionally demanded so much of one another. On the basis of this paradigm the suggestion has been made, even asserted, that marriage partners often cannot meet the taxing demands made upon one another. This situation contributes to a rate of divorce higher than that of past periods in our society.

An example of an exception to the prevalent model presented above is first and second generation Jews in America. They have shown a marked emphasis on upward social mobility while at the same time have manifested remarkable marital stability with low divorce rates. Enough serious and popular literature exists to indicate that tensions generated by strong ambition for success are abundant in the Jewish family. Therefore, we are faced with seeking an explanation. While we must take into account the presence and nature of the moral bases that support family and marital solidarity and stability, these in themselves are an

insufficient explanation. We must look for additional and supporting conditions that allow these values and prescriptions to exert their infuence. Without these additional factors people will not be able to remain together despite the best intentions. Doubtless, many factors contribute to the marital stability of American Jews, but no comprehensive review of these will be attempted here. Rather, I would tentatively suggest that, among other supporting conditions, a particular mode of summer vacationing has helped make the American Jewish ideal of conjugal stability more of a reality.

The method of this essay is analytical and does not pretend to quantification of the behaviors described. It is based on the assumption that strains continually build up between the spouses and must somehow and at some time be released without threatening the marriage. Various cultural mechanisms may serve to drain off accumulations of tensions and hostilities before they can reach a critical, disruptive point. However, the focus of this paper is not on the means by which stresses are relieved but on the structural and other factors that generate them. Although my analysis may apply to other American ethnic groups, I will restrict my attention to first and second generation Jews who trace their cultural origins to Eastern Europe. These persons form the bulk of the American Jewish population, but they may not be considered typical of American Jewry as a whole, a population defined by several varying factors: the area in Europe from which emigration to the United States occurred, class position, and the number of generations removed from the time of immigration. What I will say about the immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe and their immediate descendants is not meant to apply to other groups of Jews.

A distinguishing characteristic of the people under review is that they speak Yiddish and that their English is marked with a Yiddish accent. In order to avoid referring to them throughout this paper by such clumsy names as "first and second generation European Jews in America," they will simply be called "Jews." Their social behaviors and

cultural patterns are strikingly consistent wherever these Jews have concentrated in the United States.

These Jews, whose significant numbers in America date back less than a century, have been noted by many observers to have risen faster and further in the class pyramid than other comparable immigrant groups. From their humble beginnings in the United States about eighty years ago, proportionately more persons of this ethnic group have risen in social status, and have risen in a shorter time. Various studies allude to the middle-class status of American Jews (Glazer 1950:279, 1958:141; Gordon 1949; Hutchinson 1956:180, 189-190, 253-334; Koenig 1942:200-242; Mandelbaum 1935:229; Robison and Starr 1943:183 _et passim_; Rosenberg 1954:225 _et passim_; Sklare 1955:27), although all do not specifically point to the rapidity with which this has been achieved.[1] My concern here is not with the origin of Jewish social mobility; it is with the part this and other factors played in influencing nuclear family roles and especially the relations between spouses. It will be useful to first examine the social and cultural characteristics Jews brought with them from their earlier homes in Eastern Europe, then to trace the effects of immigration in undermining traditional family roles, and to examine the problems for family solidarity posed by the American setting.

The traditional form of Jewish family life in Eastern Europe, ably described by Zborowski and Herzog (1952), was not transplanted in America unaltered. In Europe, Jewish husbands and wives had a marked separation of labors and family responsibilities which they carried on largely independently of one another. Except for those things of immediate concern to the family, the spouses had separate interests and tended not to share even the friendships retained from their lives before marriage. Large areas of their social lives did not coincide. For example, a woman had a social network of her market acquaintances which provided recreation and social satisfactions, largely through gossip, as much as it provided household provisions. Similarly, a man had his own

social network of occupational associates and synagogue-scholastic colleagues. Within the confines of the traditional community each, too, had his network of relatives who were seen often and who provided a sense of identity and security. As a result, husbands and wives needed to depend little on each other as sources of emotional satisfaction, although this is not to deny that many could and did receive such blessings from their marriage.[2]

When compared with other European nationalities, the way in which the Jews immigrated to the United States had an important effect in changing traditional roles within the nuclear family. Unlike other groups, they did not emigrate in social units such as communities or a large body of relatives. Most often it was the Jewish husband who initially ventured alone, leaving his wife and perhaps children behind, as the cost of passage could barely be scraped together for even one person (Menes 1955:133ff.). Once in America the immigrant had the opportunity of earning enough money to bring the other members of his family across the Atlantic. But when the family was resettled in the United States, it found itself in an unaccustomed milieu of strangeness and isolation.

Within the ethnic enclaves of the great urban centers where they invariably settled, the Jews viewed the people of different ethnic origins with discomfort and suspicion. This was their response to thinly veiled expressions of derision and even overt hostility. The traditional parochialism of Eastern European Jews only served to increase their social isolation. Not only did they consider Western European Jews (mainly German) as strange as gentiles, but even among themselves they had a great distrust of those Eastern European Jews of different provincial origins (Cf. Zborowski and Herzog 1952:422-423). Feelings of isolation and insecurity were further aggravated by the fact that most of one's kinsmen and old friends were often still in Europe, elsewhere in the United States, or in a distant section of the same city. For instance, the earlier immigrants to America tended not to remain in the same neighborhoods as their relatives and friends who came later, for as

soon as their income increased they moved to areas where living conditions were better than those in the ghettos which harbored the newcomers.

In the setting of the New World the patriarchal authority of the father over his family diminished. While several writers have noted this change and treated it as a manifestation of the increasing secularism of American Jewish life (Gordon 1959:60-63; Menes 1955:140), I think it is more useful to understand these changes by examining them from the point of view of the changes in the role of the father as provider and representative of the family to the community. In Europe, where trades or occupations were practiced in or very near the home, the father could keep an eye on his household, thus maintaining constant and effective control. In the United States, however, the father's pursuit of livelihood kept him away from his family for much of the day. His absence tended to undermine his authority over his wife and the children while correspondingly strengthening that of the mother. In both Europe and the United States, Jewish families hoped the breadwinner would be successful in his endeavors and consequently raise the family's status and standard of living, but only in the United States was this a realistic possibility for most. In Europe, a lack of success did not matter as much as in America, for few could hope to rise substantially under the prevailing conditions. The husband's lack of monetary success was largely compensated for by his instrumental role as the family's representative in the local community and in sacred activities. This role was denied women, who were regarded as secular or profane (Zborowski and Herzog 1952). However, even in the United States the economic level of the new immigrant family remained low, and in the time- and energy-consuming pursuit of his occupation the husband-father could not afford the luxury of devoted prayer and sacred study available to him under the conditions of Eastern Europe. Moreover, in many cases the immigrant wife had to take on wage-work in the home or part-time work outside in order to supplement the low income of her husband.

Traditional family roles thus became ambiguous and fluid after emigration from Europe (Cf. Bressler 1952; Park and Miller 1921).[3] Under conditions of radical social change individuals encounter uncertainties and strains, although it is often difficult to indicate the manifestations of stress in individuals or families. The usual sociological yardsticks used to measure these pressures are high rates of alcoholism, neuroses, and divorces and separations. Jews have a famously low rate of alcoholism (Snyder 1958), and their separation and divorce rate is one of the lowest in the United States (Seligman and Antonovsky 1958:61, 92). Not so well established statistically is the apparently higher rate of neuroses among Jews (Loewenstein 1951:131, 174, *et passim*).

Apart from impressionistic evidence it is difficult to make a categorical statement about the nature or extent of tensions common to the families described here. While these tensions are quite apparent in fictional literature, little definitive documentation exists on the subject.[4] But let us examine what factors might have helped keep pressures in the Jewish family from being manifested in separations and divorces. First, there are the strong traditional values prescribing family solidarity and the sanctity of the marital bond. According to Orthodox law, divorce is permitted only under limited and clearly specified conditions, such as a woman's protracted barrenness. Even in such circumstances divorce carries a stigma (Zborowski and Herzog 1952:130, 270ff.). Another important consideration is that Jewish parents see the rewards of their efforts toward upward mobility depending to a great extent upon the success of their children, and they seek to stabilize and extend their gains through the equal if not greater success of their children. Consequently, they recognize the need for continual cooperative effort between husband and wife to give the children maximum opportunity to achieve success. While these factors may have contributed to stabilizing the conjugal relationship, they were also accompanied by the tensions brought about through the immigration experience, which had brought about a shifting role relationship within the family. Not only was there less

differentiation in conjugal roles, there was also a much greater mutual emotional dependence between the spouses.[5]

In seeking to determine the sources and quality of tensions in the Jewish family in America, we would find that they are not the same for all its members. The status-role positions within the family, differentiated along the sex and generation axes, receive unique stresses. The differences are evident in what is expected of the children. Both sexes are brought up directed to improving their class position, but unlike sons, Jewish daughters until recently had extremely limited means of doing so. They were not encouraged to train for a career in which talent, education, and effort could bring the desired reward. For them, upward social mobility usually had to be achieved through a successful marriage, acquiring the husband who would raise their status. Jewish daughters were constantly reminded it was their purpose not only to marry but to marry well in order to enhance their status and that of their parents.

However, a girl could not do much to improve her chances of a successful marriage. She could enter the marriage market with some fortuitous advantages, such as a well-to-do father, a good family background, or an attractive appearance. Other assets, such as being well-groomed, having a reputation as a good housekeeper or a superlative cook, might be achieved by the girl herself. She could try to marry a man whose economic or social position was above her own, but failing that she was forced to gamble, marrying a man whose position was not above hers but who appeared to hold the promise of upward mobility. It was, of course, difficult for a girl to find the first kind of husband if her family was less well-to-do than the suitor or his family. The man she married must also be Jewish, which placed a decided limitation on the range of suitable husbands. Moreover, Jewish girls were urged to marry while they were still young, for the older they got the less attractive they would be when compared with the younger competitors. Parental pressure to marry well and to marry early caused a two-fold dilemma: if a girl would

wait she may get a better husband; but if she would wait too long she might reach a point of diminishing returns in her attractiveness as a potential wife. Parsons has discussed the theoretical implications of this problem (1942:613ff.). This pattern of "marriage calculus" in America is similar to the traditional matchmaking of Jews in Eastern Europe (Zborowski and Herzog 1952:273, 357) and need not necessarily conflict with the so-called "romantic love complex" of American culture. As one elderly informant put it, "You can just as readily fall in love with a rich boy as with a poor one, so why not the rich boy?" All these cumulative pressures are subsumed under one still greater: through the man a girl marries she expects to fulfill her own aspirations. The choice of a husband is perhaps the most crucial decision a girl will have to make, for he is her essential, if not exclusive, avenue of upward social mobility. This goal constitutes one of the primary orientations of her life.

Marriage does not, however, guarantee the Jewish woman the higher class position she seeks. It is impossible for <u>all</u> husbands to rise as quickly and as far as their wives desire and it is, of course, the wife's subjective expectations and evaluations that measure the degree of her husband's success. Jewish women do not conceal feelings of disappointment from their husbands. It is not uncommon to witness, as I have, a woman complaining to her husband that she lacks the material symbols of prestige she sees her female friends and relatives receiving from their husbands. While they will demand a new fur coat or ask for superior summer vacation accommodations, it is significant that I have never overheard such women complain to their husbands, or to others, that they drink or gamble away their salaries, or that they lavish money on other women or frivolities. This would indicate that women who make such complaints are not seeking a bigger share of their husband's income, but that they regard the income itself as insufficient.

To strangers, or women of superficial acquaintance, wives will tend to portray their husbands favorably, but a woman who does so may

actually see herself as linked to a man who is either stagnant with respect to upward status mobility or not upwardly mobile enough. For example, one of the first questions women ask one another, when they strike an acquaintanship, is "What does your husband do?" Their husband's incomes and symbols of success are a frequent topic of conversation. Undoubtedly the women know that each exaggerates, but this knowledge does not alter a wife's sensitiveness to the circumstances as they exist for her and as she would prefer them to be. The discrepancy between the picture she presents and the man as he actually is, in her estimation, represents the contrast between wish and reality, and situations which force an awareness of this discrepancy all too frequently occur. If the contrast gives rise to frustrations and aggressive impulses, their direction will be toward the husband, who is regarded as having failed to fulfill his obligations. Under these circumstances, the wife may eventually relinquish hopes of achieving her aspirations _as a wife_, but will, _as a mother_, look to her son (presuming that she has one) for vicarious fulfillment.

Sons, among both American and European Jews, have always been regarded as potential means of status elevation for their parents. The concern for status and the efforts of parents to help their sons rise is so well known it has become the source of a particular genre of humor, of which jokes on the theme of "my-son-the-doctor" is one variety. Zborowski and Herzog verify the existence of this concern in Eastern Europe (1952:286, 297, 309), and they show us how intense this feeling of investment in the son can be (1952:293, 294, 297, 334). The reader of their classic study cannot fail to be impressed by how intense this investment is manifested in the mother's over-indulging her son. She may call him by such endearments as "my treasure" and "my life." So closely does she identify with him that she views her own gratifications and deprivations as dependent upon his actions . This identification is communicated to the child as the following quote from _Life is with People_ illustrates:

> The mother's phrases to her child often include "for me" or "to me" as if whatever the child does or experiences is for or against her....
>
> Vulnerability becomes a weapon especially for the mother. Her suffering serves not only as a rebuke for the past but also as a control on the future--"If you do that you'll bring me to the grave." Almost any illness can be traced to "troubles from children" (1952:334, 297).

A son who is socialized under this kind of pressure develops high aspirations and strives to succeed for his mother's sake as well as his own.[6] As in the case of the Jewish daughter, additional elements of strain are introduced into the son's attitude toward upward social mobility. If he resents an overbearing motherly prodding, he also knows that his mother was the person most indulgent toward him. Any resentment he may bear toward her is therefore tempered with feelings of guilt. The son relates to his father in a different way, but one that is particularly important. The socio-economic position achieved by his father is the standard by which he must measure his own success, for he may be considered a failure if he cannot surpass this achievement. For example, if the father, as an uneducated immigrant who could not speak English well, was able to earn as much as six thousand dollars a year, the son, lacking these disadvantages and having the additional advantages that give him a head start, is compelled to earn substantially more.[7]

When such a male becomes an adult he may experience periods of doubt regarding his achievements, and if his wife expresses an ungenerous appraisal of his measure of success, inwardly he may consider her criticisms justified, and these concerns can be, and are, a source of acute anxiety. Thus, the evidence suggests that the Jewish wife acts toward her husband as a replacement or surrogate for his mother in the sense of being a constant spur toward success.

In this paper I attempted to explore the dynamics of Jewish family relations as these apply to the sources and development of conflicts and strains among the family members. I also tried to show how the conditions of immigration to the United States restructured family

roles, and how these changes relate to the uncommon success in middle class achievement of American Jews. The model of analysis provided in this paper may not account for the more generalized American behavior of the children and grandchildren of second generation Jews, but it may serve to point to the areas of potential structural weakness in middle class oriented American nuclear families of other ethnic derivations.

NOTES

[*] Almost ten years have elapsed since I wrote this paper as a graduate student. Its publication was first delayed so that I might work up comparative material for non-Jewish American families and thereby test my hypotheses, conclusions and assertions. This projected research was put aside when I carried out field work in Africa for my dissertation. Subsequent teaching commitments and research tasks in other topics have made the prospect of returning to my earlier interest in the American Jewish family remote, if not hopeless. Several persons who have read this paper in manuscript have urged me to publish it, for its discussion of the dynamics of family roles under conditions of immigration should be of interest to the general reader.

A rather different version of this paper was read at the Third Annual Meeting of the Kroeber Anthropological Society in Berkeley, May 16, 1959. Many people have generously contributed to the substantive and analytical parts of this paper, and I am especially indebted to Sidney Aronson, Harumi Befu, Lloyd A. Fallers, Donna and Leonard Kasdan, David G. Mandelbaum, Robert F. Murphy, Paul Rosenblatt, and L. Bryce Boyer, M.D.

[1] It is fair to characterize persons of the older generation as having made their major emotional investment in the upward social mobility of their offspring. Thus, it would be more accurate to describe changes in class position by reference to the succeeding generations rather than to leave unqualified the implication that the older generation itself rose rapidly. In Europe--and even more in America where there was greater opportunity--Jewish parents felt that the condition of their children should be better than their own, and they willingly accepted great hardship in order to achieve this.

[2] Much of my analysis here finds inspiration in the work of Elizabeth Bott (1957). In her terminology, Eastern European Jewish spouses have a _segregated conjugal role relationship_.

[3] Parsons and Bales have stated that a "secure attitude of [family] members depends...on a clear structure being given to the situation so that an uncertain responsibility...raises significant problems for the stability of the system" (1955:312, their italics).

[4] Seely, Sim and Loosley arrive at the conclusion that the strains within the Jewish family, between spouses and between parents and children, are largely due to an acute achievement orientation (1956: 221-223).

[5] Many of Bott's conclusions, derived from studies of English families, apply very well to the Jews after immigration. She says:

> Networks become loose-knit when people move from one place to another...Such continuity as they [spouses having a loose-knit social network] possess lies in their relationship with each other rather than in their external relationships. In facing the external well together, they must help one another in carrying out familial tasks, for there is no sure external source of material and emotional help....
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> They must seek in each other some of the emotional satisfaction and help with familial tasks that couples in close-knit networks can get from outsiders. Joint organization becomes more necessary for the success of the family as an enterprise (1957:94-95, 218).

In reference to the discussion of American upward social mobility and marital instability with which I began this paper, it should be noted that a greater emotional need of spouses for each other may not necessarily be a source of marital tensions. It may instead, or even simultaneously, strengthen marital ties and contribute to family cohesion.

[6] For illustrative material on Jewish mother-son and mother-daughter conflicts, see Wolfenstein (1958).

[7] For this observation I am indebted to Erving Goffman (personal communication).

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