Family Life in the Netherlands

M. M. Peters-Nanninga

1. Introduction.
His article is an attempt at a critical evaluation of the Leyden doctor’s thesis presented by the Indian sociologist K. Ishwaran: “Family Life in the Netherlands”. As this work is one of the few publications available in English to sociologists and others in countries outside the Netherlands, it is important that it should be evaluated also by Dutchmen engaged in this field of study.

2. Ishwaran’s study.
His study is mainly concerned with the urban middle class Dutch family of today, the main source being a stratified random sample of 415 University students from Leyden, to whom he sent questionnaires. After that a sub-sample (80) of the original sample was selected for intensive interviewing. Additional data were obtained from statistical sources. His central problem was: “Has the Dutch family, in fact, changed in its essentials during the process of social change through which Dutch society has been, passing since the beginning of this century?”
His conclusion was that the Dutch family has not changed in its essentials during the process of social change from a preindustrial to an industrial society. The exceptions do not seem to be numerous enough or significant enough to lead him to question the overall validity of this conclusion. He states that the changes that do occur are a result of adaptation to changing circumstances. He found a continuation of attitudes with respect to kinship ties and obligations, the love for children, the conception of the family as functioning in the transmission of cultural values from generation to generation, the familistic attitudes and, over and above all, the general conception of the “way of life” of the family. Moreover, the urban middle class family sets the pattern for family life among the other classes and other areas throughout Holland.

3. Some critical remarks.
It is quite a venture for a non-westerner who only lived for a few years in a western country and who did not speak the language, to write a book on the family life of that country. In spite of this it is a very important and interesting study, as Groenman says in his foreword: “Its significance is that it is an inductive study producing a storehouse of material in a field where there is too much talking and too little real evidence.”
From books Ishwaran had gathered the impression that the modern western family was, if not completely disintegrated, at least well on the road to decay and disintegration. He had heard that the family was losing its functions, that marriage was an affair of concern only to the marriage partners, based on romance alone, that children were “budgeted for” — acquired or avoided — like other commodities, from financial considerations, that old people were neglected. From his book one gets the impression
that Dr. Ishwaran tries hard to convince his readers that the Dutch family is not at all on the road to decay and "going to the dogs", occasionally even by neglecting facts and calling very important things not essential.

Another contestable fact is the representativeness of his sample for the whole of the Netherlands, or even for the urban middle class family, which he hopes to describe. The title of the study: "Family Life in the Netherlands" seems to be something too bold. His sample does not even seem to be representative of the Leyden student population, considering the numbers for the distribution of the students according to occupation of the father, derived from Ishwaran:

**Table 1. Distribution of students according to occupation of father.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>class</th>
<th>Leyden (C.B.S. 1955)</th>
<th>sample (1957)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>upper</td>
<td>2180 = 59,0 %</td>
<td>127 = 30,6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>middle</td>
<td>1343 = 36,4 %</td>
<td>241 = 58,1 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lower</td>
<td>171 = 4,6 %</td>
<td>47 = 11,3 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>3694</td>
<td>415</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is not clear what it is that causes the big difference between the sample and the whole Leyden student population. Ishwaran used the directives of the Central Bureau of Statistics for determining social class. Also his sampling must have been correct for he sent a questionnaire to every tenth student enrolled in 1957. Even when the distribution of the sample according to the occupation of the father is correct he did not study only the middle class family, for less than 60% of the students came from middle class families.

Another drawback is that Ishwaran because of the language barrier had to recruit his informants from students. A family from which one or more children are sent to university has some special characteristics. It is more progressive than other families, in many cases the parents also have an extended school education, often a university education.

Summarizing his sample is not representative of the Dutch urban middle class family, he is rather subjective in interpreting the facts and he, as a foreigner who does not speak the language, was handicapped in getting insight into Dutch family life in such a short period.

4. **Another study on Dutch family life.**

While reading Ishwaran's study we decided to do a similar study in Wageningen, among students of the agricultural university, for that would give us an opportunity to compare the urban and the rural family because of the greater number of students coming from rural communities:
Table 2. Distribution of students of the sample according to place of origin.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>student born in:</th>
<th>percentages:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rural community</td>
<td>39,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>industrialized rural community</td>
<td>12,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>urban community</td>
<td>40,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>foreign country</td>
<td>7,7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ishwaran did not use the C.B.S.-directives*) for the classification of communities, as we did, but most of his students came from the Randstad-area (the industrialized and urbanized western part of the Netherlands).

After scrutinizing his questionnaire we thought it better not to ask the students to go back in their memories ten years and tell about family life at that time, as Ishwaran did. It must be very difficult to remember from the time you were about ten years old, little things from everyday life, e.g. who locked the door at night and who did the bookkeeping for the taxes.

Finally we made a quite different questionnaire and at the same time our problem was different: “To what extent individualization\(^2\) made progress in different kinds of nuclear families and to what extent do they differ as to functions and structure?” We classified the families according to geographical origin (urban or rural), according to religion and occupation of the father (upper class, agrarian middle class and non-agrarian middle class).

Table 3. Distribution of students according to occupation of father.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>class:</th>
<th>percentages:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>upper</td>
<td>39.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>middle { not-agrarian</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>agrarian</td>
<td>37.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lower</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From a questionnaire sent to all students (1044), 313 were correctly filled in and returned. This number appeared to be representative of the whole student population.

Our study also has the drawback of being concerned only with the parental families of

*) C.B.S. = Central Bureau of Statistics, the Hague. The Bureau developed a classification of communities which is no doubt preferable to the "traditional classifications mainly based upon number of inhabitants.

\(^1\) C.B.S. = Central Bureau of Statistics.

\(^2\) Individualization in this context means: the growing independence of the nuclear family from its surroundings; above all from the extended family and from the neighbourhood.
students, but for reasons of comparison with Ishwaran's study and because we did not have the time nor the money to do a more extended study with a sample representative of the Dutch family, we thought it better to do it in this manner.

Our conclusions were:

a. The rural family is less individualized than the urban family and structure and functions do differ. Parental authority is stronger, the family size is larger, more working children give their whole wages to their parents, in contrast with children paying only for board and lodging and there is a closer tie with the church.

b. The upper class is less conservative than the agrarian middle class. There is not so much difference between the upper class and non-agrarian middle class families.

c. There is not much difference to be found between the various religious groups. The Roman Catholic and orthodox Protestant families, however, have more children and are more strongly tied to the church than other families.

Because the urban family developed from the rural family during the process of industrialization and urbanization, which for the largest part took place during the twentieth century, we can state that the family underwent important changes during this time.

5. A comparison between Ishwaran's results and ours.

Ishwaran assumes that the core functions of the family are:

procreation
maintenance
socialization
placement.

As secondary functions he distinguishes:

production
education
recreation
religion.

This distinction between primary and secondary functions is open to question. Which activities fall under maintenance and which under production? A family can not exist without production, even collecting food, preparing and serving meals must be called production. Ishwaran means by socialization the education and upbringing, consciously administered, which the child receives at home. It is not clear why one should mention education separately as a secondary function, when, according to this description, socialization includes education.

In our study we used the functions Kooy distinguished and which give a better de-
scription of the function of the nuclear family in our opinion. Core functions are: the sexual
reproductive
affective
educative
and economic function.

The secondary\textsuperscript{3} functions are:
the religious
recreative
status ascribing
and protective function.

The core functions are inherent in the family in every cultural milieu. In the various cultural milieus the secondary functions are more or less important; although they are not essential for the existence of the family, they are very important in some cultures.

Ishwaran concludes that the primary functions underwent only slight changes or no change at all. Of the secondary functions, however, he says: “The family can no longer be said to be a unit of production, economically speaking. The recreational, religious and educational activities, too, have tended to be taken up by special agencies. But examples of all these activities are to be found in the Dutch family of today and, in our opinion, the changes are a reflection of changing circumstances, rather than any kind of a marked shift in attitude. Religion still exerts a strong influence both with respect to the organizational and activity patterns of the Dutch family, especially in the orthodox churches. But it is on the decline even here, and among the unorthodox sector of the population, liberalism has made definite gains as compared with pre-industrial Dutch society. This is attested to by the higher rate of divorces, mixed marriages and the use of contraceptives. But this, too, may well be a reflection of the new and increased pressures of urbanization and modern industrialization. People still seem to hold the old attitudes, and at least regard them as superior, in as much as they desire their children to be brought up in accordance with them. Thus we conclude that the family is structurally and functionally the same today as it has been in the past, but that this organization and these activities have been modified somewhat to meet changing conditions without being altered in the essentials.”

It is not very logical to assume that a family could change much more during a period of fifty years than the Dutch urban family did. It is not logical to think it possible for the family to change from a self-supporting production unit to a nearly pure consumption unit, where housework is reduced to a small minimum, in such a short period. It is not logical to think it possible for the family to transmit all the education of the children to some specialized agency, in a period of fifty years. Nor is it logical to think that where the families were for fifty years strictly orthodox religious, they can

\textsuperscript{3} In the study of G. A. Kooy: „Het veranderend gezin in Nederland” the term „variable marginal functions” is used.
be very liberal or not religious at all now. Fifty years, is not such a long time, for it is in the nature of social change that developments take place slowly.

Because Ishwaran called some primary functions secondary he came to the conclusion that the core functions did not change. However, had he called production and education primary functions, he would then have concluded that the Dutch family had changed in its essentials. It is not clear, however, why he says that important changes are not essential because they are a reflection of changing circumstances. Ishwaran's statement that a marked shift in attitudes did not occur is not true in our opinion. Attitudes with regard to education, religion, divorce, the use of contraceptives, mixed marriages and the employment of women (even of married women) have certainly changed during the last fifty years.

It is interesting to go further into the core functions Ishwaran distinguishes. With regard to procreation Ishwaran found that the young want to have more children than their parents had, so that there is a gain instead of a loss of function at this point. According to our study we can remark that this is a result of the fact that Ishwaran studied only the most progressive middle and upper class urban families. In less progressive urban families the young do not want more children than their parents had. On the contrary they prefer less. In Roman Catholic and orthodox Protestant families, as well as in most rural families, we found the number of children preferred by the students to be lower than the number of children their parents had:

Graph 1.

A = number of children in parental family.
B = preferred number of children by students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
<th>IV</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>VI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>our study</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ishwaran</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I = Roman Catholic
II = "gereformeerd" (orthodox Protestant)
III = "hervormd" (orthodox and liberal Protestant)
IV = other denominations (mainly liberal Protestant)
V = non-denominational.
VI = total.

These numbers only relate to the last 25 or 30 years. One should have asked for the number of children in the families of the grandparents, too, to learn something about
the changes in the procreative function of the family in the last fifty years or so. As to fulfilling the function of maintenance, Ishwaran says that the children are kept alive and that the aged and other relatives are supported economically when needed. This is not astonishing; we have never heard of a society where children died of hunger when there was plenty of food. Supporting the aged is not necessary as often as it was in the past because of the general old-age pension. Nowadays widows also receive a pension.

With regard to socialization, Ishwaran says: "The family functions as the transmitter of the moral and cultural values of the society, so that the aim of society, the orderly pursuit of its collective and individual ends, may be attained." He says that the mother has a slightly greater part in the socialization process, and that the father plays a significant role, especially at the secondary school level. It is difficult to believe that the mother should not take a much greater part in the socialization of the children than the father, who is away the whole day and in the evening often absorbed in his daily work, too. He also says that "the Dutch family is based on a patriarchal substructure, which goes so far as to carry with it strong elements of primogeniture. The patriarchalism is not despotic, but consists of the institutionalized leadership of the father, benevolently exercised and implicitly recognized by all. The father is a "court of last appeal"; the mother makes many decisions with the father or alone, but never contrary to his expressed or implied claim to final authority. The general authority pattern is not only vital and in force, but apparently completely internalized by all members of the family, ideological currents in modern society notwithstanding."

In our study we also found that the Dutch family is more patriarchal than matriarchal, though there are many exceptions where the whole family life centres around the mother and she is the "court of last appeal". But in general it can be said that the Dutch family is more democratic than patriarchal, especially the urban family. We must strongly deny any elements of primogeniture that Ishwaran found, for we did not come across the slightest indication of its existence in our sample. The fact that the oldest child has to look after his little brother or organizes the washing up party is no indication of the existence of primogeniture, but merely a result of being older and therefore capable of more things.

Besides the functions and the structure of the nuclear family, its position has also to be discussed.

Ishwaran says that an important feature of the Dutch family lies in its considerable interest in relationship by blood, and that there exist close kinship bonds between the members of the extended family. According to our findings we can say this is mainly true for the rural family, but in the urban family the interest in relatives is much less. The same can be said for the relations of the nuclear family with the neighbourhood. The urban family shows a steady growth of individualism during the last fifty years.

6. Conclusions.

Ishwaran's investigation represents a very important contribution to the study of Dutch family life in that it contains a great deal of factual information. Nevertheless it has
some weak points. The author is rather subjective in his interpretation of the facts, his sample is not representative for the urban middle class family and much less for the Dutch family, and his distinction of core and secondary functions of the family is open to question.

In our opinion it would have been better to conclude from Ishwaran’s findings that the family did in fact change in its essentials during the last fifty years.

Sociologie in levenden lijve

H. M. Jolles

I.


De officiële deelnemerslijst bevatte 959 namen, gespreid over 51 landen. Het is van enig belang, deze gegevens nader te bezien. Daartoe zijn de deelnemers eerst gerangschikt in enkele groepen.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Land</th>
<th>Deelnemers</th>
<th>Gemiddeld per land</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verenigde Staten</td>
<td>539</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engeland, Nederland, W.-Duitsland, Canada, Frankrijk, Italië</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rusland, Japan, België, Polen, Noorwegen</td>
<td>67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overige landen</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Het meest pregnante feit van deze rangschikking zal het minst verwonderen: de Amerikanen vormden op deze conferentie met 56% van de deelnemers veruit de grootste groep en tevens de absolute meerderheid. Dit wordt uiteraard ten dele verklaard door het feit, dat voor Amerikaanse deelnemers de reis een relatief gering bezwaar vormde, en waarschijnlijk ook doordat de Amerikaanse collegae zich de rol van gastheer zagen toebedeeld. De afstandsfactor zal mede verklaard hebben, dat de Canadese groep met 39 leden relatief groot was. Wanneer men echter weet, dat voorafgaande aan het I.S.A.-congres de jaarlijkse bijeenkomst der Amerikaanse sociologen vereniging plaatsvond, waarop naar verluidt 1800 deelnemers waren dan mag men concluderen, dat de Amerikaanse hegemonie op het internationale vlak, kwantitatief beschouwd, nog slechts zeer bescheiden tot uitdrukking kwam.

Wanneer men de vraag zou stellen, welke landen in staat zouden zijn door hun eigen aantal vakbeoefenaars het getal der I.S.A.-congres deelnemers te overvleugelen,