
VENSTER OP HET INSTITUTE OF COMMUNITY STUDIES

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In 1954 a small group of social investigators interested in contemporary problems concerning the family, kinship and the local community, began a series of studies in the East End of London. Their intention was to be independent of the Universities and to finance themselves by specific research grants obtained from charitable foundations. Later, the Institute of Community Studies as they eventually called themselves, hopes to extend their enquiries from largely working-class neighbourhoods to the outer London suburbs with their middle-class residents and to gather data on social class variations in family and kinship patterns.

So far three books and a number of articles have been published. They tend to take the form of descriptive accounts of working-class family life, illustrated with quotations from interview material, and related to some general social problem relating to the family. Thus the first of the three volumes published is devoted to the effect on family of post-war British town planning. For this purpose two areas were chosen, a working-class borough in the East End of London and a new housing estate on the outskirts of London, 20 miles away, selected because in the opinion of officials of the London County Council it was fairly typical of estates to which people from the borough had been moved after the war. Since the aim was to test the strength of kinship bonds by seeing how far they survived the transition to a radically different physical and social environment, the study of this second area was not conceived of as an enquiry into family life there but only as a survey of the family life of those who had moved from the first area. This gives strength to the study of family life in East London, although it weakens the value of the study as a description of life in the new towns.

It should be understood that theoretically speaking the studies have been thought out at an elementary level only. As the authors themselves point out the work is for them "a work of apprenticeship in sociology". Nowhere in the three books is there an explicit formulation of the hypotheses which guided the research, other than in a very general sense, such as "our initial object was to find out what happens to family life when people move to an estate" the assumption being that some change must have occurred. The line taken in the conclusion to this study, however, and more especially in the other two studies suggests that considerations of social policy largely guided the work.

Dr. Young and his colleagues are attempting to follow in the steps of the great poverty surveyists of the past, Booth and Rowntree. Moved by sympathetic concern for the fate of the underprivileged they have strong views about the need for social policy to be based on systematic accumulation of social facts, while at the same time they wish to see social surveys motivated by a reformist attitude. One of them, indeed, has gone on record for claiming that sociology should above all be concerned with "studying very carefully the life of the poorest and most handicapped members of society" with a view to discovering what their needs are, and to suggest how these needs are to be met. Sociologically speaking, moreover, it is also clear that the Institute of Community Studies have certain historical axes to grind and a desire to refute
one or two strongly held generalisations about social fact. *Family and Kinship in East London*, for example, was apparently conceived in terms of the thesis that kinship is more important in modern society than many social scientists appear to believe. Reviewing writings on the impact of industrialisation on the family, Young and Willmott argue that the general impression to be obtained from the literature is that the extended family system is disappearing in favour of the two-generation family. Their own research, however, to their own surprise resulted in the discovery „that the wider family, far from having disappeared, was still very much alive in the middle of London”.

It is possible to summarise these findings quite briefly, although reference should be made to the three books themselves to supplement this brief account. Perhaps the most striking feature of kinship in East London is not merely its extended but its matrilocal character. There is a great deal of weekly, and even daily, contact between married couples and their parents; but this contact is much greater between wives and their mothers than between their husbands and their husbands' mothers. Husbands in fact, appear to see a little more of their mothers-in-law than of their own mothers, whereas the contact between wives and their mothers-in-law is least of all. This is perhaps partly due to the fact that 47% of the couples began married life living with their parents and in 71% of these cases, living with the wife's parents; but it also appears to be related to a cultural system in which the bonds between mother and daughter are particularly close.

It is here that the study of the transition to the suburban housing estate demonstrates the importance of comparative material. The sheer physical difficulty of maintaining contact between the wife and her mother often, although not always, results in a feeling of dissatisfaction with her new home, in spite of its better amenities, on the part of the former. Husbands on the other hand, since they largely continue to work in the area in which they formerly lived, tend to maintain contact with their relatives there. Thus wives, especially those with small children — this was a chosen feature of Young and Willmott's sample — were thrown back on their own resources and felt the transition to the suburb more acutely than their husbands. It is here incidentally that the lack of a sufficiently sophisticated sociological approach shows itself in the work of the Institute. Clearly, the importance of family ties which is so much emphasized in the book as an underrated feature of modern community planning cannot be justified on the basis of a transition so recently made. What was needed, in fact, was a study of the oldest housing estate, in the London County Council's area, opened in the 1920's, in order to estimate how far permanent difficulties for families are created by distance and also the extent to which geographical migration of this kind does or does not result in the disappearance of the extended family. Too much concern for the unpleasant side of social change, it would seem, has caused the Institute to miss an excellent opportunity for studying the issue of whether it is geographical mobility rather than industrialisation as such which has given rise to the speculations of historians and sociologists on the impact of the industrial revolution on the family. A greater interest in sociology in itself might have led them more satisfactorily to consider whether there was not much truth in the speculation after all, although deriving from the relationship between industrialisation and migration, rather than directly between industrialisation and the family economy. Be that as it may, the Institute has nevertheless provided a graphic account of the matrilocal nature of working-class kinship in East London.

Another feature of working class life which emerges from these studies is what might be termed „the self-help nature” of the kinship system. Local and neighbourhood friendships are important it is true, although more so in Bethnal Green where adult neighbours have usually known one another since school days forty of fifty years earlier; but at critical times the family fall back upon its own members. This is particularly true in cases of widowhood and old age. Peter Marris' study of widows in three boroughs of East London, widowed in the period 1953-1955 whose husbands were
fifty years old or younger at their death, demonstrated this point in some
detail. “Apart from neighbours”, he writes, “who were for the most part
only called upon for more trivial services — such as preparing refreshments
at the funeral, or giving an eye to the children when their mother was out
— the widows relied above all on their mothers, daughters and sisters”. 8) Similarly „in old age the family, compared with relationships outside the
family, became more important not less.” 9) Townsend, indeed, concludes
that “old people with daughters and other female relatives living near them
make least claim on health and welfare services, and second, that isolated
people make disproportionately heavy claims”. 10) He is inclined, as a con­sequence of his research approach, to make a case against the new housing
estates on the ground that the policy of moving only two-generation families
which has been followed so far, if continued, will result in us „depriving
ourselves of the principal support for the elderly and inevitably producing
grave new problems and incurring new costs of unknown dimensions.” 11)
Since the Institute's approach to sociology is avowedly social reformist
in character, it is not irrelevant at this point to digress a moment to con­sider the intrusion of this value element. It is clear that the organisers of the
Institute of Community Studies have no liking for the new housing estates.
Even their description of the amenities of the place carries a certain nostalgia
for the old and familiar as compared with the „artificiality” of the modern.
“Instead of the shops of Bethnal Green there is the shopping centre at
the Parade; instead of the street barrows piled high with fruit, fish and
dresses, instead of the cries of the costermongers from Spitalfields to Old
Ford, there are orderly self-service stores in the marble halls of the great
combines…. Instead of the hundred, fussy, fading little pubs of the borough,
there are just the neon lights and armchairs of the Merchant Venturer and
the Yeoman Arms. Instead of the barrel organ in Bethnal Green there is an
electrically amplified musical box in mechanical ice-cream van. In place
of tiny workshops squeezed into a thousand back-yards rise the first few
glass and concrete factories which will soon give work to Greenleigh's child­ren. Instead of the sociable squash of people and houses, workshops and
lorries, there are the drawn-out roads and spacious open ground of the
usual low-density estate.” 12)
This contrast between the scale of the new, dwarfing the individual by
dispersing his numbers over a wide area, and the “comfortable” crush of
humanity in the old, might of course be read not as the subjectivity of the
researchers but as that of their informants. The Institute employed relatively
free interviewing on the basis of a relatively small number of key questions
and hence have been able in their studies admirably to combine statistical data
with descriptive reports composed largely of the words of the interviewees
themselves. The passage quoted above is not, it is true, given as if from an
informant but it might nevertheless sum up the gist of what many of the
“ex-patriates” may have felt. On the other hand, the general impression to
be derived from the work suggests that even if the respondents did feel
hostile to the new estates the feeling was also shared by the researchers.
This is shown particularly well in the curious four pages at the end of
Chapter 10 of Family and Kinship where Young and Willmott attempt
briefly to consider the question of whether what is happening is only tem­porary. The children on the new estates, they point out, do not feel about
the East End of London like their parents. To them the new estate is home;
but, say the authors, by the time they are adults they may not continue to
feel like this. They will not repeat the pattern set by their parents. Why not?
“Our time has its own values, perhaps prizing more the individual and less
the group, whether of family or any other kind. To grow up may mean
increasingly to grow away…. These are subtle influences, stemming from
different conditions of life and continually re-crystallised in new sets of
value-judgments.” 13) A better example of *ignotum per ignotum* it would be
difficult to find. This however is not really what is at the bottom of the
four pages, but a desire to castigate the London County Council’s policy and
a conviction that people will not want to live in these estates when they
are adult because presumably the researchers would not want to live in them themselves. Once again, the real test would have been not a reference to vague possible changes in the future but a study of family relationships in the older housing estates. Rather than make such a study, or wait until such a study is made, the Institute has rushed into print without realising that the evidence actually presented does not support, even if it does not contradict its policy castigations.

A similar failure to consider the relationship between social fact and social policy is to be noticed in Townsend's work on the old people of East London. A housing policy which makes family contact more difficult is deplored because it deprives the state of "the principal support for the elderly". But he fails to notice that 31% of his respondents had 5 or more children alive and that on average the family size of the whole group was 2-6 children. Contact between parents and children, it is true, was greater per child per week for the smaller families, but the total amount of contact per week was greater for the larger family. Why, then, not support a policy in favour of larger families? Or, again, working-class parents had least contact with their most socially mobile children. Why not support a policy putting an end to social mobility? Either of these, if successful, would lessen the burden of old age on the state. The fact of the matter, of course, is that this claim is not the real basis of the policy statement but some, perhaps unconscious, desire to maintain the existing family structure, and it may well have been this desire which led the Institute to study the family in the first place. A housing policy which moved people out as three generation families to the new estates is preferred by them to the current practice but most preferred of all would be a rebuilding of the centre of existing cities.

These criticisms, to be sure, represent something of a counsel of perfection in research. The Institute, after all, is not primarily a sociological body although it has produced work which is sociologically relevant. It has set out to fill a gap in our knowledge of modern family life and if it can follow these studies of the working-class in the East End of London, with a study of family life in the West End, students of both the sociology of the family and the sociology of social stratification will be grateful to them. At the same time a greater familiarity with the more sophisticated sociology of the Universities will clearly benefit the Institute in its further studies and it is to be hoped that independence in the matter of finance will not also be pursued over the matter of the recruitment of research staff and of intellectual discussion with University trained sociologists.

3) ibid p. xix.
4) ibid p. xv.
6) Young and Willmott op. cit. p. xvi.
7) ibid Table 8, p. 49.
10) ibid p. 193.
11) ibid p. 197.
13) ibid p. 137.
14) Townsend: The Family Life of Old People, op. cit. Table 5, p. 32.
15) ibid Table 21, p. 87.
16) ibid Table 23, p. 92.