

# Family



By many standards, the definition of a “family” is influenced by a diverse stream of factors that are embedded with among other things, the sociocultural posture that serves as the foundational basis of the society in which the family is being looked at. An interesting phenomenon that has crept into the discourse surrounding what actually constitutes the family is an extension of the definition beyond the traditional scope of blood ties, with the increasing number of cases of adoption especially in the western world serving as a case in point. Within this scope, emphasis will therefore shift from the traditional strata into discussing deeper questions such as what family members have in common, and what the standard expectations are amongst family members.

Beyond the foregoing superficial discussion of the family in its broader dimension, I remain convinced that the Asian conception of what the family is and the corresponding contending dynamics are of contemporary relevance in the overall process of defining the family within the most ideal context. Going by what the Asians contend, then a family is a patrilineal and patriarchal kinship unit, bonded together by the sharing of a housing facility and often times a common household budget. For good reasons, my choice of this definition over others is motivated by the ensuing illumination that accompanies the

foundational theoretical emphasis of the “patrilineal” and “patriarchal” components of what the family is in its most absolute sense. Being patrilineal for instance, means that a family member’s descent is taken from the standpoint of the masculine gender. To illustrate this point, my surname provides an explicit attachment that will not leave anybody wondering my descent the very moment an inquiry is made in my native village. Naturally, all members of my family answer a common surname that traces its origin to the most senior masculine head of everybody within this family unit.

Indeed, the above illustration also creates the engaging platform to usher in the second theoretical concept of the patriarchal constitution of a typical Asian family. The family unit within this setup is therefore carved up along a streamlined hierarchical structure in which considerable leadership authority is vested in the most senior male member of the family. In western parlance, this system will easily be synonymous to the so-called external family system; whilst in the most imperative case there is no distinction within the Asian understanding of the family and what it represents. My family is headed by my granduncle, who just like every one of us bears the name of his deceased father. Authority in the family is seamlessly vested in this granduncle as the head of the family. My grandfather notwithstanding being somewhat advanced in age, is subordinate to his elder brother within the leadership hierarchy by dint of the significant differences in their ages.

Not too long ago, I had an interesting conversation with a fellow

passenger onboard a Singapore-London bound flight. It turned out during the most part of the conversation that this young British lady made several references to her mother when talking about her family. This prompted me to pose a somewhat prying question about other members of her family, of course judging from my Asian background I am excused to ask. She explained to me that her mother is a single parent, who apparently never even got married to her father. After several weeks of my stay in the United Kingdom, I was stunned by the startling revelations about the very loose connotation placed on what the family is. Understandably, shifting demographic factors and a clone of other socioeconomic issues according to an article I read in the NEWSWEEK magazine account for this phenomenon. The article citing government statistics did also allege that there has been a significant increase in the number of single-person households over the last three decades.

Mr. Goh Tui Fui is a Vietnamese immigrant to the United States also recounts the difficulty he has in assimilating the western American family concept into his Vietnamese background. Consequently, he has lately been having hard times dealing with his children. Goh feels deep within himself that this conflict represents a subtle progression towards undermining his ability to raise his children within what he considers to be the Vietnamese ideal family system. It is easy for me to understand Mr. Goh because Vietnam like the rest of Asia elevates the family to the status of the microcosm of the society. What is also profound in Mr. Goh's saga is that Buddhist and Confucianism theological teachings have crafted the framework of defining the

family. It is not unlikely that anybody unfamiliar with these foundations would wonder what the difference is? Unlike within the liberal American society that gives premium to freedom within all aspects of society, the Asian society is regulated on the premise of reverence for authority. The family being the basic social unit is therefore obliged to be the nucleus of this social consciousness.

In contrast to the American understanding of what constitutes the family, the Vietnamese father typically exerts unlimited authority and control over all members of his household. It is the same stern authority that informs the non-compromise stance on rigid disciplinary codes regulating the relationship father and children within the family system. Because of the hierarchical role stratification that regulates the family system, children must always be submissive and under no circumstance challenge any of his or her parent, flouting any of these conventions attracts strict disciplinary action including inflicting physical pain through striking. Whilst this is the norm in Asia, it is criminal in the United States. Mr. Goh's inability to beat his children due to the limitation placed on him by Child Abuse legislations in the United States inadvertently makes him feel that the basic building block of his family has been taken away from—authority.

Suffice to revisit the definition I offered in the opening paragraphs of this essay, by alluding to the fact that the typical Asian family is what is described in the western parlance as the extended family structure. Being what it is, other senior members of any given Asian family will

also have some degree of authority over younger members of the family. In fact they even have the right to mete out disciplinary sanctions against younger members should they behave in an inappropriate manner. It is yet another fact that goes to illustrate the hierarchical structure imbued in the patriarchal framework of what constitutes the typical family.

Like most people, my world view has been significantly influenced by my family and the values that we espouse collectively as a social unit. These values put in their right perspective are genuine replicas of the evolving strands of the family unit and how they provide the cohesive ingredient required to knit the individual members together. It is abundantly evident that there is very little distinction between the religious values we stand for and what can be said to be the exclusive preserve of the family's value chest. In other words piety is the undeclared norm that frames the values that lubricate the relationship between members of the household on the one side and our relationship with the rest of the world on the other side. Having said so, I am inclined to cite another conversation I had with a young American friend I met during the summer of 2006 during a youth festival in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Talking on a wide ranging of subjects, we eventually got it politics. I was especially interested in knowing his stance on some of the crucial electoral issues that engaged the American public during the build up to the November 2008 presidential elections.

My friend Jason was very eloquent in expressing his opposition to

then candidate Barack Obama's bid for the presidency. What was so conspicuous about all the reasons he cited against candidate Obama all boiled around his liberal stance on abortion, stem cell research, and gay marriage. When I enquired about other relevant considerations such economic, foreign policy and healthcare, Jason was not very enthusiastic about these questions as much as he cared about the moral risk an Obama administration would bring upon the United States. He did not mince words in telling me that everybody in his family is a Republican and he comes from the state of Texas, a Republican stronghold. Moreover, Jason's family as he told is one that is inherently conservative in their political and religious views. It turned out that dating back to several generations all members of his extended and nuclear family are evangelical Christians. What is of significance to me is that Jason's perspective on every national issue emanates from his evangelical conservative family value system. Effectively, as long as his strong evangelical Christian interests are upheld then every other wrong can be corrected.

In summing up, thanks to the readings in the course material, my attention has been markedly re-focused on the diversity in the comprehension of what constitutes the family system. Indeed, as stated in the opening section, my immediate concern has been to say that sociocultural factors do also contribute to the understanding of what constitutes a family.