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THE DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL RELATIONS*

I use the term “social relation” to denote a system of functionally interdependent actions performed by two cooperating individuals who evaluate each other positively and assume definite duties toward each other. Anthropologists, ethnologists, historians, sociologists, and social psychologists have collected more factual material about social relations than about the other, more complex, social systems, and thousands of generalizations based on this material have been made.

Almost all these relations are found in communities, that is, collectivities of people who live in limited areas sufficiently near so that each individual can at least occasionally get into contact with every other individual. Many investigators have based their conclusions about social relations upon evaluative and normative judgments which they obtain from those people who control the social life of the participants in a community, instead of ascertaining what a social relation means to the individuals themselves who are active partners in it.

Moreover, most investigators limit their study to relations which they find in a community at a given time, and do not take sufficiently into consideration the fact that in every community which lasts for a lengthy period there is a *continuous flux* of social relations. Particular relations are constantly emerging. Further, the standards and norms which regulate a certain kind of relation are differently applied in the course of time by particular individuals. Separate relations in which individuals participate gradually before interconnected, and relations which were interconnected often become separated. And – what is most important – new kinds

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of social relations are initiated in certain communities and gradually expand to other communities.

Therefore, the most productive method for studying social relations would seem to be what I call the *genetic* method. Every social relation within a community should be investigated from its origin throughout its duration. This would enable us to ascertain what the partners are actually doing so long as their relation lasts, what connection their relation has with other relations in which they participate, and also whether their positive mutual valuation increases or decreases – a problem in which contemporary investigators are much interested. And in surveying comparatively social relations in many communities, past and present, we must try to discover what new kinds of social relations have evolved and expanded in the course of human history.

I have attempted to use this method in comparative studies of three kinds of social relations, maternal, fraternal, and erotic. (These relations are rather long-lasting, and found in all durable communities; and considerable factual evidence about them is available.) Here is a brief, inadequate summary of the results of my studies. They sum to comprise Sorokin's theory of "creative altruism."

The mother-child relation is usually the first in which a newly-born individual begins to be a partner. (We are using the term "mother" to designate a woman who has given birth to an infant, accepted it as her own child, and assumed toward it definite duties which she has learned to perform. We have no time to discuss other uses of the term "mother.")

Maternal duties vary considerably, but their common function is to make the child fit to participate in the community in which the mother participates. The first task which the mother assumes as soon as the child is born and performs for years is to keep him alive and healthy, to satisfy his needs, to protect him from dangers, and to promote his organic growth. Her next task is to educate the child; and this cannot be adequately performed unless the child learns to cooperate with her and becomes a conscious, active partner in their long-lasting social relation. For this purpose, she must help him to identify her and to appreciate her positively, as well as to identify himself as an object of her actions who is evaluated positively by her and as an agent whom she expects to perform certain actions. Her total educational task constitutes a dynamic process promoting and guiding the continuous expansion of the child's conscious life. At every stage of this process, she performs definite actions; and when their purposes have been achieved, she undertakes new actions. She teaches the child to take care of his own body, to speak the language of the community, to interact with other individuals with whom he gets into contact; she imparts to him some knowledge of

customs and mores, traditions, and religious beliefs and practices. If the child is a girl, she trains her in the technical skills reserved for females and prepares her for her function as a new mother.

The child's chief duty toward his mother, which he is expected to assume as he becomes conscious, is the duty of trustful obedience, that is, doing willingly what she tells him to do and trusting her judgment of right and wrong and her altruistic intentions towards him. A later duty is spontaneous gratitude for what she has done for him.

As we know, the mother cannot perform all these duties alone. She needs the help of a man in satisfying the child's needs, protecting him, and educating him, if he is a boy. (When she is very busy and has a number of children, she must delegate some of her duties to older children, sometimes to her own mother or sister.) In the course of history certain motherly duties have been undertaken by specialists, i.e., priests, teachers, public officials, physicians, nurses, psychologists, psychiatrists (who can perform them more efficiently than mothers). As a result, new kinds of social relations between children and adults have evolved. (But the study of mother-child relations still provides the key for the explanation of such relations.)

Fraternal relations are those between men who are considered brothers. In tribal communities, they constitute the primary variety of so-called "kinship relations," i.e., those in which individuals become partners because they are united by bonds of common descent. The closest of such bonds are those between male siblings, sons of the same parents. Similar bonds, however, even though not so close, unite all male descendants of more or less common ancestors, whether descent counts on the male or the female side, or both. A relation between two such individuals is supposed to last as long as they live. Each must accept the other as valuable and gradually begin, from childhood on, to perform definite duties toward him. These duties are essentially alike, though more exacting between siblings than between more distant kin. They are reciprocal, though not necessarily equal. Briefly speaking, they include sympathetic understanding, mutual aid by gifts and active services, and eventually collaboration, i.e., performance by both parties of certain actions for a common purpose.

Many relations analogous to these have been voluntarily formed by individuals who had no bonds of common descent, but agreed to treat each other as if they were brothers. In some tribal societies, such relations are established by sharing each other's blood. A curious revival of this method is the German *Bruderschaft*, where sharing wine instead of blood produces a lasting bond. Well known, ever since classical antiquity, is voluntary life-long *friendship*, with mutual duties

analogous to those between brothers. Wide-spread, though less exacting, are inter-individual or “fraternal” relations among members of certain groups – religious groups without priestly control, secular groups ranging from the ancient secret associations to the contemporary “clubs,” or “orders,” and college fraternities.

The broadest conception of the fraternal relation was initiated by religious thinkers who formulated the idea that “all men are brothers” because they have a common Father, the God who created them. This idea has been accepted, without its theological implications, by quite a few secular philosophers and has begun to be practically applied.

Inter-sexual relations are found between men and women who accept each other as partners for a certain time and carry on sexual intercourse with each other. There are two distinct types of such relations: *marital* and *erotic*.

Most sociologists and anthropologists have concentrated on the study of the first type and neglected the second. This is not due entirely to, prudishness. Marital relations always were and still are considered of primary importance, because the continued duration of an orderly community depends upon them. The purpose of marriage is supposed to be procreation of socially desirable children and their preparation for future participation in community life. And since the parents of each of the spouses assumed responsibility for his or her birth, growth, and education, they hold themselves responsible for his or her becoming a partner in a marital relation which will produce desirable new descendants. This explains why in most communities the parents select as mates for their son or daughter a girl or a boy who will prove valuable as future mother or father, arrange the wedding, and continue to exert some control over their later lives.

Erotic relations, or relations of mutual love, are not originally intended to contribute to the perpetuation of the community; their direct purpose is the mutual satisfaction of the partners. They select each other voluntarily, on their own initiative; and their relation is not subjected to the control of the older generation. Until recent times, nearly all of these relations were either pre-marital, as in some preliterate tribes, or extramarital; and most of them still are. This does not mean, however, that they do not follow definite standards and norms. The obvious, universal duty of each partner is to give a maximum of sensory pleasure to the other in sexual intercourse, and this depends, of course, on technical skill. (Nearly 100 techniques have been invented, according to various authors, and some of them are transmitted from generation to generation.)

Sexual duties, however, are not the only duties of lovers. Mutual love, like brotherhood and friendship, involves sympathetic understanding, as well as active cooperation. Ever since ancient Greece, cultural patterns of erotic relations

have come to include more and more of the personal lives of the partners. Lovers share many values and activities – aesthetic, social, economic, religious, and intellectual. This implies the gradual expansion of the cultural participation of women and growing equalization between the sexes.

However, as long as erotic relations were incompatible with marital relations, their duration was usually limited and their intimacy difficult to maintain. Consequently, during the last 100 years, among the intellectual classes of Europe and America, the ideal of a marital relation as a *permanent erotic relation* began to be explicitly formulated, accepted, and applied. This presupposes free mutual choice of husbands and wives and voluntary agreement to make their relation dynamic and harmonious by developing their personalities and expanding the range of their common values and activities. The old obligatory duties of a married couple have to be reinterpreted and undertaken as voluntary duties of mutual love. In particular, children become not so much the future continuators of the family as new bonds of love. Their lives are included in the personal lives of both parents, to be harmoniously shared with them.

Of course, such relations require more sexual and cultural education of the partners than the traditional marital relations did. Therefore, they are not yet so widely spread or so long-lasting as social ideologists want them to be. (The limits of this paper do not permit me to generalize about the dynamics of other categories of social relations or to explain why I have omitted entirely inter-individual conflicts, in which many investigators are primarily interested.)