LARA

LEARNING AND
RESIDENCE ABROAD

UNIT FIVE

Families and Households

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CONTENTS

Page No.

Section 1

1. Introduction 1

2. Links with other units 1

3. Background notes 2

Section 2

1. Outline of a session 11

2. Description of a session 11

3. Advice and comments 15

Section 3

1. Assignment 17

2. Handouts 18

3. Readings 19

SECTION ONE

1. Introduction

> All happy families are alike but an unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion.
> (Tolstoy, L 1969 (9th edition) *Anna Karenin* Penguin: 13)

> There are only two families in the world, my old grandmother used to say, the *Haves* and the *Have-nots*
> (Cervantes, M *Don Quixote* pt 2 chpt 20 Penguin)

This unit introduces students to family units and household units as areas of social organisation in which we can observe the operation of shared cultural knowledge in close detail. This is the first of several units (see Units 6, 7, 13, 15, 16 and 17) which introduce anthropological concepts related to particular themes – family, gender, belief and action and so on.

'Family', like other concepts introduced in the course is a 'universal' concept, but as with other concepts, it has to be viewed relatively as well. 'Family' means different things to different cultural groups. For example, the classic 'nuclear family', which is the British stereotype, is now widely challenged and in many societies outside Britain would not be counted as 'family' at all.

This unit suggests how ethnography can be used to explore the meanings created and shared by members of particular families within larger socio-political contexts and across cultures. The main areas presented to students are: the notion of family as culturally constructed; socialisation and interaction within families; cultural and social differences in cross-cultural perspective.

Students' attention can be drawn to the potential relevance and interest of studying family while doing an ethnographic project, even if family is not the main subject of research. It can often be explored as a socialising agency that may have been instrumental in shaping the attitudes of a cultural group or an individual.

2. Links with other units

In this session, students begin to apply the concepts and methods of ethnography to a major institutionalised area of social and cultural organisation. There are close links with the units on Shared Cultural Knowledge (Unit 4), Gender Relations (Unit 6) and Education and Socialisation (Unit 7) in which many of the same principles apply, in particular the key notions that:

a) the values, beliefs and meanings that inform the behaviour of the members of a particular group or society are to a significant degree culturally constructed and interactionally accomplished. That is to say, they are learnt, used and reproduced in interaction.

b) these meanings are to be found and can be observed in the often seemingly banal details of everyday life, e.g. Meal-time conversations, bed-time rituals and so on.

Since so many of our shared values are derived from family interaction, it is useful for students to explore in greater depth their existing notions of family and begin to deconstruct some of their familiar frames of reference. They should become aware of the importance of family in the study of cultural patterns in general.

The emphasis on rights and obligations attached to an individual's role within the family and the brief exercise looking at fictive kinship are both linked to the ideas of reciprocity and exchange that are explored later in the course (see Unit 15, Local level politics).

Conceptually, the unit provides students with further practice in undertaking detailed (micro) observations, making a preliminary analysis and then inferring broader generalisations from these. They are also encouraged to continue 'making strange' what is often taken for granted; a considerable challenge when the subject is, literally, so close to home.

3. Background notes

'Family' is presented as one significant area of social organisation in which our shared cultural knowledge operates, and as the context for primary socialisation through which roles, relationships, values, beliefs and patterns of behaviour are transmitted from generation to generation as well as challenged and modified over time.

Some students may have studied family in sociology or social studies at school. They may also feel familiar with some nebulous notion of the 'French' or 'German' family as encountered perhaps in language classes, and the family relationships and practices here may well be little different from those with which they are familiar in their own family. However, there are evident pitfalls of reductionism or over-generalisation in the assumption that one can make sweeping generalisations about the 'British Family' or the 'Spanish Family'. What one *can* generalise about are the processes (e.g. how children learn to be part of a family and part of a local community) inherent in any family or household, and what one can investigate are the detailed ways such processes take place within an individual family. Family, then, needs to be relativised – the notion of 'family' as relative to particular conditions and cultural assumptions – and 'made strange' and students should be brought to consider kinship relations that are organised very differently from their own. For example, when people say they are asking family over to their house, whom might they include? Such cultural variables have in fact led anthropologists to question the usefulness of 'family' as a conceptual base (it is suggested that to 'transport' the idea of the family may be to impose ethnocentric notions onto culturally varied ways of organising kinship ties).

Students should also explore the numerous and shifting definitions of what constitutes a family or household unit within a given society. Recent debates around the marriage of same-sex couples and their rights to adopt and raise children are one example of how ideas on families and households are always subject to change. One could also cite the changes progressively taking place as people in the West live longer with the result that in many cases 'Three, even four generations are present as kin together, interacting materially, emotively, socially and symbolically' (Gullestad and Segalen: 1997 p.1). Students will be brought to take account of such changes through the assignment they are asked to carry out on their own practice and conception of family.

Various aspects of family life are studied by sociologists, psychologists, feminists, sociolinguists, cultural anthropologists, etc. from their respective disciplinary positions. While all have clarified and redefined notions of family, there is not a wide range of literature on family as such. More recent work has instead tended to focus on particular aspects of family life within specific contexts (e.g. as it relates to kinship, gender and social reproduction). This Unit does not attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of the subject, nor to engage in a theoretical debate. Instead, the three areas mentioned below are developed because these are the ones considered to be of greatest relevance and usefulness to students not specialising in anthropology who may wish to study some aspect of family life in a foreign country from an ethnographic perspective. The main areas to bear in mind are:

1. Family as culturally constructed
2. Socialisation, interaction and local practices
3. Cultural differences and cross-cultural perspectives

Family as culturally constructed

Any concept of family is cultural and must be analysed in context, and even the word 'family' is not neutral, but will be understood differently by different groups. So 'family' is a cultural construct made up of all the associations we have of it from our own experiences, the media, political and legal categories and so on. It is culturally constructed rather than having any static or absolute meaning. One of the central ways of looking at the family as culturally constructed is through kinship systems. These describe the range and characteristics of categories for placing people in defined relationships to one another, aside from the 'facts' of biology (birth, mating, parenthood, ageing) or purely material considerations. In other words, kinship systems are based on, but not reducible to, biological facts.

Anthropologists are particularly interested in drawing out the cultural and symbolic meanings that inform the roles assigned to family members. Indeed, one of the aims of ethnographic enquiry is, as Cohen (1982) suggests, to make such kinds of social organisation '"intelligible" to us through the terms in which they are meaningful to their members, rather than by attempting to isolate their putatively 'objective' manifestations.' So, the ethnographer is trying to find out what 'auntie' means to a certain group rather than define 'aunt' objectively as having some unchanging essential meaning. When anthropologists began to study kinship in the nineteenth century, they were concerned with discovering how people in 'primitive' societies managed to lead ordered social lives without a state or a nation to govern them.

They found that kinship networks, rather than written statutes, defined for people a system of rights and obligations in relation to marriage, land tenure and work. These principles have since been recognised as applying in all societies, whatever kind of formal political organisation they have. Contemporary anthropology no longer focuses primarily on 'primitive' or 'traditional' family systems but also studies family systems in modern, urban settings (e.g. Gullestad and Segalen: 1997). These too reveal patterns of rights and obligations, and illustrate how cultural knowledge is created and maintained through relationships and interaction. For example, in a modern, middle-class Hindu family, it is still expected that the sons will shave their heads as a sign of respect before their mother's funeral. A classic example of how the materials of anthropology and kinship theory have been applied to a contemporary urban situation can be found in Young and Wilmot's *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957), although the type of community it describes (one built on extended family ties) has all but disappeared since the 1950s. Or so we thought until a recent spate of articles suggesting that the extended family may be re-emerging as grandparents start taking a more active role in child care.

The following extract from an essay on family in contemporary France by Martine Segalen provides a useful perspective on family rights, obligations and exchanges that are relevant here and which are related in particular to the student assignment on life-cycle lines contained in this unit:

> …unlike rural societies in which the individuals constituted a family resource (an unpaid workforce ensuring the perpetuation of the line and of the inheritance), modern kinship has become a resource for individuals (a resource financially and in terms of identity). For the young in France who typify the new middle strata, the perpetuation of the family implies unfailing family support, more particularly to enable them to continue into higher education or in times of difficulty (divorce, sickness or unemployment); it implies a family memory rooted in a precise location and frequent family get-togethers; in short, the basis for an individual identity with a perspective of both the past and the future. The perpetuation of family is a construct, constantly reasserted in terms of duration – the span of a life, the span of generations – which is why the term 'exchanges' so often used in research, seems inappropriate since it takes little account of the temporal factor. The items – goods, services, assistance, advice – circulating among relations represent neither an equivalent amount nor an equivalent substance. Parents during a period in their lives give to their children, who will, in all probability, help them later on in their old age while they provide for their own children as well. The reciprocity which the notion of exchange implies is neither immediate nor identical; rather, as Lévi-Strauss remarks in regard to the exchange of wives, it is generalised. It would be more appropriate to refer to cycles insofar as this concept takes the notion of deferred return into account.

(Gullestad and Segalen, p.9).

Socialisation, interaction and other local practices

Family and household units construct and maintain sets of beliefs and values that can be observed in patterns of interaction and other local practices. Family is, therefore, the major context for primary socialisation, a term denoting the processes through which roles, relationships, values, beliefs and other shared patterns of knowledge and behaviour within a culture are transmitted from one generation to the next. A related term is secondary socialisation (see Unit 7, Education and Socialisation) which refers to similar processes of learning in schools, peer groups, the working environment and other contexts outside family units.

The socialisation of children has thus emerged as an important area of study, with the aim of uncovering and tracing the processes whereby a child learns to function as a member of, and identify with, a particular community. The anthropologist Dell Hymes suggests that we are all born ethnographers so that we can learn, from our earliest moments, about the beliefs, values and ways of doing things of our family. Sadly, we seem to lose the ethnographic habit as we grow up.

Because such learning begins early on in life, what is learnt becomes naturalised and functions at a tacit level. The ethnographer must pick through the obvious and routine and 'make strange' in order to be able to give an account of the things that are meaningful to group members. This is particularly useful when it becomes necessary to discern between manifestations of individual psychology or cognitive processes and expressions of social or collective cultural phenomena. Focusing on socialisation involves a recognition that the individual does not exist in isolation, but is somehow constituted by, and within, society. Sociolinguists argue that 'individuality' needs to be explained through an analysis of social relations and an account of how these act on people. As Bernstein (1971) affirms: 'the focusing and filtering of the child's experience within the family is in a large measure a microcosm of the macroscopic working of society.' Bernstein also provides a useful definition of socialisation agencies such as the family, the peer group, school and work. With regards to the family, socialisation is:

> The process whereby a child acquires a specific cultural identity, *and* his [sic] responses to such an identity. Socialisation refers to the process whereby the biological is transformed into a specific cultural being. It follows from this that the process of socialisation is a complex process of control, whereby a particular moral, cognitive and affective awareness is evoked in the child and given a specific form and content.

For example, from an early age, children are praised or punished for certain actions. So, long before they can speak, they begin to construct a moral world in which certain things are 'good' or 'bad'. Socialisation is also a political activity in which certain family ideologies get played out. Elinor Ochs and Carolyn Taylor (1992) have written an account of how the family is constituted as a political institution through conversational interaction and control of narratives. They suggest that 'while politics tends to be associated with the public domain, it is also an ongoing part of, and perhaps socialised in, the relatively private world of family life.' Thus the way family members tell stories and report events at meal times, is an instantiation of power conflicts expressed through control strategies employed by parents and children. All family members are shown to employ a wide range of strategies for assuming control of talk and asserting their rights and status within the family. (See Section III for the optional handout based on Erickson's study of an Italian American family.)

Anthropologist Bruce Lincoln (1986) provides another example of how families can be studied as sites of socialisation. By observing his own family (white, American, middle-class) in the 1950s, Lincoln illustrates how dinnertime rituals are observable manifestations of hierarchical ranking. His investigation shows in a simple way that seating arrangements around a table, normally accepted by family members as a practical and functional measure, also 'provided a convenient map of the major family subsystems.' The four members of the family always sat in the same place with the father at the head of the table, the mother opposite the father, and Lincoln and his sister opposite each other. A system of values is therefore encoded in everyday practices. In this instance, Lincoln is concerned with the divisions to be drawn along the lines of age and gender in the patriarchal nuclear family:

> This system is logically constructed on two binary oppositions, the first based on distinctions of age, the second on those of gender. Moreover, such distinctions are hardly neutral or value-free. Rather, adults (i.e. those who possess the preferential age, that of majority) outranked children (those who lack it) and males (those who possess the preferential gender) outranked females. The result is a four-part hierarchic set, which in those days was commonly accepted as natural and right: 1) Father (Adult Male = + Age / + Gender); 2) Mother (+Age / - Gender); 3) Son (- Age / + Gender) 4) Daughter (- Age / - Gender). In daily practice this same hierarchy found expression in countless other fashions (rights in conversation, bedtime order, portions at meals, etc.)

Lincoln also makes the interesting point that such categorisations are not at all obvious. They are the implicit features of this type of family life and the children are socialised into accepting them. It is only by 'making strange' and applying these concepts that what is tacit rather than explicit becomes visible to the ethnographer.

What is also noticeable in Lincoln's study is the way in which his family unit reflects the broader values of 1950s American society, particularly in terms of gender politics. Interestingly, the family is often felt by its members to be a private unit, self-sufficient and autonomous. Family structures or practices, however, are clearly not detached from external forces, nor beyond the power of the state to intervene in the socialising process. Such intervention is routinely legitimised by the state's concern with the development of young people (who will later form part of the national labour force) into competent members of society. It may be important to take account of such factors when considering groups such as one-parent families, which deviate from the conventional nuclear structure, and which have in recent years been portrayed as a threat to the social fabric in some Western societies. In this case, the actual experience of being a one-parent family is set against the 'ideal' nuclear family, as represented by the state.

In a study of the socialisation processes in French bourgeois culture, Beatrix le Wita (1994) conducts an extensive ethnographic investigation into the elusive question 'what does it mean to be bourgeois?' Her focus is on the family unit and on the many local practices, ranging from expensive public rituals to small everyday aspects of behaviour, in which values are safeguarded and passed on from one generation to the next. Family photographs, heirlooms, coming-out parties, family meals, ways of speaking and interacting, and even ways of arranging the furniture in the house are all seen as instrumental in the process of socialisation. Le Wita's study, like Lincoln's, provides students with useful approaches to analysing the everyday. It is also interesting in that it examines both primary and secondary socialisation within a bourgeois milieu.

Cultural differences and cross-cultural perspectives

It has already been suggested that the terminology of kinship and the assignation of roles to family members have been of particular interest to some anthropologists. The ways in which people are slotted into such roles can be a useful way to begin studying families from a cross-cultural perspective.

As anthropologists Schultz and Lavenda (1990) suggest, there is continuity between cultures in as much as kin-ties and responsibilities are an emotive issue: 'Because the world of kin is a world of expectations and obligations, it is fundamentally a 'moral' world, and one charged with feeling'. They also point out, however, that there are differences across cultures in terms of the terminology used and the ways of calculating degrees of relatedness. Therefore 'the associations of "aunt" or "cousin" may vary considerably from one culture to another', and the historical, symbolic and social meanings we bring to the terms will not apply universally. Obligations to elderly relatives, for example, in terms of frequency of visits, letters, etc. and in terms of politeness in face-to-face interaction may vary considerably in and across different groups within Europe.

Within most European, or Western, societies, there may not be significant differences in terminology, although there are certainly important variations in expectations of family members as well as of non-kin. Non-kin (or 'fictive kin') operate in similar ways to kin: i.e. a godparent may function as a family member, or a family friend may be known as 'uncle' and have certain rights and obligations. To speak of a friend, metaphorically, as a 'sister' or 'brother' to us is interpreted as a compliment, and it also designates a set of interpersonal commitments. These commitments may be informal and tacitly understood, or may include more formalised elements as in the example of godparents (see student handout in Section III). As Sarah Delamont points out with reference to many Catholic and Islamic communities, the relationship between a godparent and a family involves specific commitments that are of interpersonal, religious and political significance, and 'a wise parent establishes spiritual kinship ties so the family has a web of connections, legitimated by religion, beyond the family created by blood and marriage' (1995:p.160).

Groups of friends or gangs can also be studied in terms of shared codes, membership rules or the negotiation of solidarity and shared identity. In such instances, groups function 'like' a family in as much as roles and relationships may mirror those of the family. Similarly, any household group is interesting to study (hence the title of this unit). As anthropologist Joy Hendry (1999) points out, 'The sharing of a household is often an important factor to consider and in several systems of kinship, this will override relationships which may be described as 'natural' or 'biological''. For example, a single parent's partner may have stronger ties with the children than they have with their biological father.

In addition, the perceived importance of family may be stronger or weaker in some cultural environments than in others: sons or daughters may live in the parental home until a certain age; older people may live at home, or not, and so on. All of these may be of interest in exploring the cultural and moral world of family relationships. It may be useful to ask: 'just who *is* family?' and 'what rights and expectations do they have?'

Finally, micro-ethnographic methodology can be useful in studying interaction within the family from a cross-cultural perspective. The anthropologist Frederick Erickson carried out research on an Italian-American family, and conducted a fine-grained analysis of audio recordings of dinnertime talk which he transcribed. Erickson was able to pick out characteristics of the family's shared cultural knowledge and identify their styles of communication. Overlapping talk, interruptions, etc. which could be considered rude or inconsiderate in some cultures, were normal and acceptable in this family. Erickson analysed such interaction in terms of both the local knowledge that participants needed in order to negotiate all the overlapping allusions and, on a broader level, the more culture-specific knowledge, suggesting that their communicative style was an expression of Italian-American cultural identity. It is in such detail, seemingly banal, that one can obtain some understanding of what it means to be a member of a particular culture or community. (See Section 3).

Student projects related to the idea of family have included a student staying with a family in Brussels. He concentrated on socialisation of the two young children, examining how they were 'channelled' and 'controlled' by parents. He did detailed analyses of the spatial arrangements and boundaries in the house, and of how rituals which involved the whole family, such as the evening meal, were handled. He looked at the events where the children and adults were separated at various times of day and for a variety of reasons. By close examination of interaction and by analysing interview data from his informants, the student came up with a useful study of primary socialisation in one family. A second student who spent her time in Spain as an au pair undertook a detailed examination of the transmission of Catholic values to children in the household, asking the question 'What kinds of explanation are offered to children as part of their socialisation into religious practices?' She found that the rituals of food and eating were connected to religious practices and that family mealtimes were a good moment to observe the transmission of values. Finally, one Spanish student analysed the significance of Twelfth Night in his own family, where he saw ritual and gift-giving as a way of reinforcing family membership and confirming the hierarchies and roles within the family group over the years.

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SECTION TWO

1. Outline of a session

1. Introduction.
2. Student assignment feedback: Life-cycles lines.
3. Reading: Extract from *French Bourgeois Culture*, Beatrix le Wita.
4. Fictive kinship.
5. Family conversations at the dinner table: cross-cultural perspectives (Erickson transcript).
6. Conclusion and handout.

2. Description of a session

2.1 Introduction

Begin by pointing out that one of the 'filing systems', or ways of categorising, we use to make sense of and organise reality is the system we call 'family'. It is therefore interesting to interrogate the idea of family and to look at how it is perceived, represented, maintained, and what it means to us and to others.

The guiding question with which to start the session is 'what is family?' Ask students to give five definitions or 'facts' about family as a basis for discussion. Write these on an overhead projector then deconstruct them with students with the aim of eliciting further thoughts and making strange. Are these really 'facts'? Remind them that the family takes many different forms through history and across cultures, i.e. it is culturally relative.

Try to establish where students think their ideas about and images of family come from (e.g. from their own family experiences, from media representations of 'typical', 'ideal' or 'dysfunctional' families in advertisements, newspaper stories or television programmes, etc). Introduce the idea that daily acquaintance with such images is one way the idea of family is learned and maintained. In other words, the family is not a 'given', but something that is always reinforcing or reinventing itself. It is fluid to some extent and subject to change resulting from internal and external factors. It is not an autonomous, self-sufficient unit, but an expression of the wider culture and cultural practices prevalent in a given place and time. In other words, it is culturally constructed.

Introduce the concept of family as a socialising agency and briefly explain primary socialisation. This is one of the most important aspects of the interpersonal relationships within families. Relate the idea to the previous session on shared cultural knowledge (Unit 4).

Introduce the term 'Kinship' and associated terminology and relations. Point out that we all have multiple roles within the family (we may be daughter, aunt, cousin, sister, etc.). What do terms such as 'aunt', 'cousin', 'brother' 'father', 'mother' describe? What does it mean to be 'an aunt'? What does a brother 'do'? Discuss the idea of categories people are slotted into with certain rights, expectations and obligations attached to these roles. How do these roles get negotiated? How does an uncle know what to do? Point out that people use family in ways legal or biological definitions cannot capture. To say somebody is your uncle is not just naming his relationship to you, but also providing you with certain courses of action. Kinship roles therefore have cultural and symbolic meanings. People do not sit down and write family contracts, so rather than being explicitly referred to, these cultural and symbolic meanings are usually tacitly understood. In other words, many family rules may be strong, but they are usually hidden and need teasing out.

Point out the usefulness of this unit even if students do not undertake a project specifically about 'family'. Whatever students decide to study, the individuals and groups they encounter during field work will have been affected by their family lives and the processes of primary socialisation within them.

To conclude this introduction, make the point that it is probably better to look at what families *do* rather than at what they *are*. That is, we are looking at families not as something static and monolithic, but as a dynamic practice of interpersonal relationships.

2.2 Student Assignment Feedback

Ideas introduced in the opening discussion are further developed here. Prior to the session, students will each have prepared a life-cycle line indicating the stages of life when family assumes particular importance and plays a major role. These are then compared in small groups (usually of two or three students) who decide between themselves what data to give as class feedback. The exercise involves discussion of the *continuing* importance of family at various stages beyond childhood (see background notes for the idea of rights, obligations and exchanges between family members). What expectations do students have of family? It is important to encourage relativity (e.g. theirs is not the *only* way) and awareness of how we classify people and assign their roles within the family.

It may be useful to begin by commenting on the interesting interim position in which many students find themselves; the position of having left the family home but not yet set up their own family unit (although some of course will be parents, aunts, uncles, godparents, etc.) They should be encouraged to be reflexive about this 'independent' period in their adult lives when considering what their future involvement will be.

This exercise generally provides the opportunity to explore the symbolic aspects of family maintenance through the idea of ritual (e.g. christenings, weddings, birthdays, Christmas, etc.) and shows the variations in conceptions of kinship roles (e.g. the duties of an aunt may vary considerably within families). The tacit rules, hierarchies, guidelines for treating the very young and the very old, etc., should emerge to reveal the family as a moral community. Prompt students to explore this notion by asking them questions such as the following: 'what expectations govern your behaviour towards your relatives?' 'What gives rise to family feuds or arguments?' 'What does your mother mean when she says "this isn't an hotel"?' 'Are you expected to perform certain duties/spend time with your family?' 'Does behaviour change throughout the life cycle?' 'What will your responsibilities and involvement be through the rest of the life cycle?'

Students should come to look at the family as a moral community and to see that socialisation and re-socialisation are never-ending, two-way processes in which children and parents learn from each other. We are always taking on different family roles in changed situations in successive phases of our lives and even family members who have lived together for years learn and re-learn what kind of family they are.

This exercise should help students to challenge stereotyped notions of family both in Britain and in the countries where they are going to spend their period of residence abroad.

2.3 Discussion of reading: extract from *French Bourgeois Culture*, Beatrix le Wita.

Use the questions that were distributed to students with the reading prior to the session (see Section 3) to guide the discussion. This reading follows on from the assignment feedback by concentrating on a study of family in a particular culture and a particular social class. The reading stresses the idea of primary socialisation and the transmission of values and traditions, linking present generations to previous ones. Le Wita shows how analysis of micro data allows us to observe within the household much about power conflicts, issues of hierarchy and the mechanics of socialisation (e.g. at the dinner table). In other words, we see how a complex system of values is deeply embedded in, and transmitted through, everyday practices.

The reading shows how a number of rituals are used to reinforce and maintain family ties, to renew and refresh beliefs and to define roles. One of these is the 'ball-system', a symbolic aspect of family maintenance which controls courtship and reinforces the message that marriage is not simply individualistic but a guarantee that shared identity will be maintained and handed down.

The study of eating·events could briefly be compared to Bruce Lincoln's study of his own family meal table as well as to Erickson's study. The importance of mealtimes as rituals where teaching and learning take place and where family solidarity and shared identity are confirmed (or of course, in some cases, challenged – but in any case highlighted) is shown by these three studies.

Another important issue in the reading concerns social space and the use of the physical environment. (Remind students of these issues from Unit 3). The layout of the household, which is arranged to control the movement of children and encourage civilised behaviour in the presence of adults, is described by le Wita who also includes photographs as evidence – something the students may wish to do in projects where the physical environment is important. There is also a very strong sense of the efforts made to maintain family identity through traditions, narratives, photos or other objects which link the generations. This daily awareness of family history appears to be a particularly strong factor in the French bourgeois families studied by le Wita.

Asking students to look for similarities and differences between these families and their own can also throw up useful perceptions on family. Finally, a further topic of discussion should involve the difficulties involved in researching on the family – both one's own (the difficulties associated with making strange or with emotional involvement) and others' (questions of sensitivity, intrusiveness and ethics). On this score, students should be encouraged to notice how le Wita is careful to account for diversity within bourgeois families and not to make sweeping generalisations.

2.4 Fictive kinship

Introduce the notion of fictive kinship through discussing the example described in '*Compadrazgo* in Latin America' (see Section 3). Point out that the issue of choosing godparents of superior social standing who can 'fix' things for you, and of entering into a system of mutual support or favour-exchange is a good example of what we may refer to as 'local level politics' – something students will explore later in the course (Unit 15).

Further examples of how kinship can be extended metaphorically may be elicited from students to explore cultural variations within extended family systems and the role of fictive kin or non-kin in families. It may be useful to use some of the following prompts: What are the boundaries of family? Where does it start and end? Whom do you invite to family 'dos'? Why do we consider some people to be honorary family members (i.e. call them 'auntie' when they are in fact just next-door neighbours)? Are pets family?

Students could finish this activity by finding examples to illustrate how kinship terms permeate our language and thinking. For example, 'Shall I be mother?' (when pouring tea); 'You're not my father' (when rejecting advice or a command from somebody outside the family); 'she's like a sister to me' (to designate the quality of ties with a friend). And what about the habit of married couples with children referring to each other as 'mother' and 'father'?

2.5 Family conversations at the dinner table

Full notes on introducing and analysing this material are included on the handout, since it is useful for students to have the accompanying contextual and analytical information as well as staff.

2.6 Conclusion and handout

To conclude, summarise briefly the approaches to family adopted during the session as shown on Handout 3 (see Section 3). and briefly outline the ways some students have drawn on ideas of family for their ethnographic projects (see Background notes).

3. Advice and comments

With such a diffuse subject as family the most successful approach is to look at clearly defined contexts and at students' own experiences. Family is a prime example of something that appears so obvious to students they find it difficult to make strange. Conceptualising their own interdependent roles within a family structure as culturally ordered, or thinking of the family as an 'institution' (whereas in daily experience it feels private, natural and personal) can be an uphill struggle. The aim throughout is to encourage them to look for the symbolic and culturally patterned in family life, as well as describing what is specific to a particular family

Teachers must obviously take care during the session since students may not wish to be forthcoming in discussing their own families. Clearly they should not be pressed to talk about very personal issues such as divorce, and equally clearly teachers must not assume that all students have parents/grandparents etc.

Finally, try to help students to see the potential relevance of this subject during the period abroad. Discuss how former students have drawn on these ideas (see background notes). Even if family is not the direct object of study, it should still be considered as a socialising agency relevant to the cultural patterns students will encounter when abroad. For example, one of the students, Rachel, who did her study on blind students in Marburg, Germany, found that they wanted to distance themselves from their families whom they now saw as over-protective.

When interviewing informants, they should be aware that views expressed may be only partially the product of individual psychology and should bear in mind the importance of the socialisation process in discerning what is socially and culturally determined.

Student Comments

> People's ideas about what family means were very different. For some, it was not just the immediate family: parents and siblings but also close friends and even pets. One student described how she had family in another country who she has never seen. Although they are family because they are related to her, she could never think of them as such.

SECTION THREE

1. Assignment

For this assignment the aim is to start to reflect upon the nature of family ties and the role/importance of the family as an institution at various stages of the life cycle.

Complete the chart below with further examples of when family has been important to you (and when you expect it will be in the future) and bring your chart to the next class. Think of this chart as part of what Pocock calls your 'personal anthropology'.

AGE / PERIOD IN LIFE	EVENTS / ACTION	SIGNIFICANCE OF RESPECTIVE ROLES
Few weeks old	Christening in church	Role of parents/godparents Choosing suitable names (whose names?) Presents for a girl/boy? Future responsibilities? Ceremony: special clothes?
Being at College	Moving out of home? Financial support?	? ?
Buying first flat	Help with moving? Mortgage?	? ?
Birthdays		
Christmas		
Coming of age (18th / 21st)		
Funerals		

UNIT FIVE – Families and Households

Handout 1 – families and primary socialisation

To bear in mind:

- Families are cultural constructs
- Look at: Socialisation, interaction and local practices
- Cross-Cultural Perspectives

And:

- The values, beliefs and meanings that inform the behaviour of the members of a group or family are culturally determined and interactionally accomplished.

> "The focusing and filtering of the child's experience within the family in a large measure is a microcosm of the macroscopic workings of society." (Bernstein, 1971)
>
> "Because the world of kin is a world of expectations and obligations, it is fundamentally a 'moral' world and one charged with feeling." (Schultz and Lavenda, 1990)
>
> "[Kinship] is a variety of social idiom, a way of talking about and understanding, and thus shaping, some aspects of social life." (Geertz and Geertz, 1975)
>
> "There is more to life then kinship, but kinship provides one holistic framework for interpreting life."
> (Schultz and Lavenda, 1990)