COURSES BY NEWSPAPER

How the American family copes with modern society

By Marvin B. Sussman

Editor's Note: This is the eighth in a series of 15 articles exploring "American Families in Transition." In this article, sociologist Marvin B. Sussman discusses how families can cope, individually and collectively, with modern bureaucracies. This series, written for Courses by Newspaper, a program of University Extension, University of California, San Diego, was funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Despite dire warnings from some quarters that the family is in trouble, the family as a form of human organization survives.

It not only survives but does well by its members. It cares for its own and provides its young with skills and values they need to function in the world, to form relationships, and to deal with society and its organizations.

To provide for its members — both young and old — in today's society, the family must obtain goods and services from other institutions like schools, corporations, government agencies, hospitals. It must deal with bureaucracies that control the resources needed by family members to survive and thrive.

But families have neither relinquished all their major roles to bureaucracies, as some critics have argued, nor are they helpless — as individual units or in organized groups — in dealing with large bureaucratic organizations.

Families today, as in yesteryear, are the primary care system for their members, from the newborn to the elderly. Although organizations and institutions provide specialized services such as health care, relatively few persons grow up or live out their lives in institutions. Even among those over the age of 65, only about 5 percent are in long-term care facilities such as nursing homes or homes for the aged.

This is striking evidence that families are the best suited structures to provide growing human beings the nurturance, love, emotional support, caring, solidarity and instruction required for survival and for a reasonably satisfying life.

Inevitably in our complex society, a large part of the instruction that families provide must be in dealing with bureaucracies that are more powerful than themselves. This is a difficult task. For one thing, large-scale organizations like government and business often ignore or deny the existence of families. They deal only with individuals, because it is the individual worker, patient, consumer, or citizen whom the institution wishes to control and fit into its operation.

Looking at the individual as a member of a family complicates the work of the institution, adding complexity to decisions, requiring exceptions to the rules, and disrupting orderly functioning of the organization. When company officials order a manager to move to another part of the country, they assume that the manager will see that his or her family moves. The family's reaction has not traditionally been the company's concern.

On their surface bureaucracies are impersonal and rational. They are governed by rules, and are thus presumably fair and immune to personal influence. They are, ideally, systems designed to permit easy social exchange among strangers in a world that is too large and complex for exchange to be governed solely by kinship, friendship, and other informal, personal realationships. But the words "bureaucracy" and "bureaucratic" have come to connote an inefficient, rule-bound, maze-like system that obstructs rather than facilitates obtaining services.

To negotiate bureaucratic institutions to get what their members need (and have a right to), families learn to use informal and personal resources for leverage on the institution. Every formal bureaucratic institution has informal ties to the community through the kinship and friendship circles of the people who staff the organization. For example, a mother who wishes to see that her child gets fair treatment at school may visit the child's teacher, volunteer for field-trips or tutoring, or work with the parent-teacher organization. These gestures are not intended to bring undue influence, but they insure that the child will be visible to the teacher, a person rather than an anonymous face in a classroom group.

The point is, the family uses the people within the bureaucracy to get what it needs for its members to live good lives. And it teaches its young how to go about using such personal resources to grease the machinery in what can otherwise be the frustrating, rule-bound obstacles of bureaucratic encounters.

Let's look at a hypothetical case: A 16-year-old young man — call him Jack — tries to get a job and is told that he needs a driver's license and a social security card. He goes to the social security office, fills out forms, and waits what seems a very long time. Finally he is told that he needs a birth certificate to get his card and number.

By this time business hours are ending and Jack goes home. He tells his mother about his frustrations. He doesn't know where to get either his birth certificate or a driver's license. But his mother's cousin has a friend in the city clerk's office

who can give him the information and direction he needs. She phones the cousin, who tells Jack to come to her office the next day and she will introduce him to her friend.

This case — not at all untypical — demonstrates how families can use the informal system to get things done. Not only will Jack be able to get what he needs, but he will be learning important lessons about society and bureaucracy.

He will learn that when he is frustrated in dealings with formal organizations, he may be able to work that system through "connections." There is nothing objectionable or demeaning in such action, since the bureaucracy wants to serve its clientele but is often unable to do so efficiently because of regulations and because of unenthusiastic workers.

Some families have greater skill and resources in using this informal system of connections than others. The well-educated and wealthy are more likely to know people in power positions, and they know how to enter and make themselves visible in bureaucratic systems. When their children need jobs, these families know where to send them.

Sometimes families band together with other families to exert pressure on bureaucracies. One such example is the creation of FLAG, an organization whose members are the families of hostages held in Iran. Despairing over lack of information and communication from the State Department and about the reunion plans for the time of the hostages' release, they organized to confront the bureaucracy. FLAG not only deals with the State Department, but also handles the media and the public, protects families from crackpots, and, most important, provides a support group — a kind of extended family that give warmth, love, and understanding to all member families.

Currently, the State Department is providing support, offering its own communication facilities to FLAG to use for its own purposes. Officials are also listening. One wife of a hostage expressed the feelings of many FLAG members. Appalled at the reunion plans, she said (and I paraphrase), "We were to be flown over to some place in Europe and after some debriefing were to be reunited with our husbands. They were going to put us up in some hotel or motel like a Hilton or Holiday Inn. And there it was.

"It will be over a year (now longer), since I was with my husband; we have been living different lives and are different people. I don't know what he is like and I have been changed by this experience. We need time, the kids and I, we need to find out what he wants. We need a place where there is space to be together or alone, we need time."

Such communications are bound to have an effect on traditional procedures of State Department officials. The bureaucracy is responding, and its changes indicate that collectively families can have power and that bureaucracies can be changed!

Families and bureaucracies need one another. They have different functions to perform but they must tolerate and complement each other. Families have developed techniques and skills to handle the demands of bureaucracies. When internal resources are not sufficient to do this, families will increasingly band together and engage in collective action.

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John Anderson from two vantage points

By Walter H. Capps

We were in New York City on Columbus Day, and learned only after arriving that Jimmy Carter, John Anderson, and George Bush would be marching in the holiday parade up Fifth Avenue.

We positioned ourselves near the corner of 50th Street, directly in front of Scribners' Book Shop, waiting for the pageantry to begin. The bands that came first were playing the music of John Philip Sousa and not march-tempo arrangements of the ballads from yesteryear's Broadway shows.

Before long the street was filled with squadrons of police, secret service persons, and two truckloads of reporters and television cameras. Behind them by several yards was Mr. Carter, walking in flank with Senator Moynihan, Mayor Koch, lesser-known office holders, politicians, and aspirants. Though he was in the center, the president looked small in their midst. Waving and smiling as he marched along, he all but beckoned the quiet crowd to offer enthusiastic signs of recognition.

Within five minutes, in an entourage miniscule by comparison, came John Anderson, the independent candidate. A pause in the movement of the parade gave him opportunity personally to greet the spectators lining both sides of the street. He stood directly in front of us, shaking hands with the people assembled there, saying to each one he could touch, "nice to see you." He had accused the president of being "ineffective" and Ronald Reagan as being "irrelevant." He himself looked so stereotypically academic by comparison, his bright alert eyes penetrating through his heavily-rimmed glasses, and his two-piece suit being augmented by a woolly non-Fifth Avenue sweater. He almost seemed lonely out there in the midst of the bands, horses, motorcycles, and groups of marchers.

A man with an AFL-CIO button turned to me. "If only he had declared himself independent earlier," he sighed, "but I don't like someone who switches in the middle of the stream." A woman standing alongside nodded in silent agreement.

George Bush was next. Looking confident, success-oriented, and surrounded by persons for whom this neighborhood seemed very much like home, I saw him as a person who would always ride first-class on airplanes. Buoyant, the picture of good health, he might easily have been the coach of the winning team in the NFL.

Later in the same week I found myself in a contrasting position and on the other side of the country. As director of the Hutchins Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, I welcomed John Anderson to the Santa Barbara campus of the University of California, and introduced him to the audience when he made his presentation on the subject of American foreign policy. It was a campaign appearance for him, and much more for us a celebration of the recent re-establishment of the Center. I observed that the suit was the same one he wore on Columbus Day, with the same tie. The sweater, which would have been accepted on the campus, was missing, I presumed because of warmer weather.

His presentation was rich and stimulating. He talked about the conflict in Iran, describing what might happen if the hostilities widen. He outlined current developments in Saudi Arabia, analyzed prospects currently facing the Soviet Union, and explained the economic ramifications with rare skill. The audience became more and more his with each successive paragraph. Clear, definite, incisive, and specific, he became even stronger when questions were posed by the panel.

Though I hesitated, I felt obliged to ask about his exclusion from the debate between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. He had received news of this decision just moments before. He paused, his eyes dropped, he looked out as if peering into empty space. Though the words he selected said outrage, the tone was one of frustration and disappointment. His demeanor was sadness, on the edge of futility. He told of the struggle, the legal battles, how hard everyone had to work to have his name placed on the ballots. He believed this latest development to be in violation of the intention of the democratic process.

As the audience responded sympathetically and supportingly, he seemed able to rise to new heights of aspiration and anticipation. He talked of pressing on, of appealing to "the court of public opinion." Then, "won't it be wonderful to wake up on the morning after the election to learn that we have succeeded." He challenged his hearers that the grave problems facing humankind require "new modes of thinking."

The speech and responses were over, but the audience wouldn't let him go, and he was enjoying it. A woman next to me said, "something's wrong with the country when we can't get a man like this elected."

But it may have less to do with process, and more to do with substance, mood, and style. Mr. Anderson speaks in a tutored language about conflicts in U.S. foreign policy, the need for dramatic changes in the usage of energy, and the more comprehensive need to approach the most compelling issue of today and tomorrow with new modes of thought, analysis and perception.

But the issue of this campaign is inflation, and voters wish to register their preferences concerning the size of government. A prevailing condition has been formed by fears which hold that bureaucracy is demonic. Jimmy Carter played these forces to his advantage in 1976. Without them, four years later, he is being accused of lacking vision. Now the same cause is being championed by Ronald Reagan.

I watched Mr. Anderson continue to shake hands with people lining the campus road just as I had watched, until he was out of sight, on Fifth Avenue, just five days before. It was the same man, I believe, and I am not alone in reckoning him to be eminently qualified. The people here were ready for a full coronation. But no bands were playing the music of John Philip Sousa.

Mr. Capps is director of the Hutchins Center at UCSB and is a professor of religious studies.

Foreign editors view the election

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