

Theorising Family, Kinship and Social Change

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Introduction

Governments are always in danger of presuming a standard model of family life for which they can legislate, by making the assumption that most families do in fact operate in particular ways. In reality it is very difficult to detect a standard model, in either a descriptive sense (what people do) or a normative sense (what they ought to do)...[T]he aim of policies should be to facilitate flexibility in family life, rather than shape it into a particular form...to ensure that people have maximum opportunity to work out their own relationships as they wish to suit the circumstances of their own lives. It is not the proper role of governments to presume that certain outcomes would be more desirable than others (Finch 1997: 130).

Taking Janet Finch's observation as a starting point, this paper traces theoretical developments in our understanding of family relationships and kinship obligations, drawing together insights from recent qualitative research. The paper begins by introducing the notions of family diversity and fluidity, mapping out the contours of these patterns and raising questions about their supposed novelty. There follows an analysis of a succession of dominant ideological models of family life, which became bound up with the legal regulation of marriage and divorce over the course of the 20th century. The limitations of these ideological models, which privilege the structural or institutional aspects of family life, are discussed. Alternative ways of conceptualising family life, which allow for a more nuanced understanding of the substance of relationships, practices and negotiations and grass roots moral reasoning, are then outlined. The paper concludes by examining the different ways in which changes in family life under the conditions of late modernity are being interpreted and suggests the value of realism as the basis for the development of flexible, supportive family policies.

Family Diversity and Fluidity

The notion of family is an intrinsic part of the way people think about their personal lives; it is also, for most people, deeply imbued with symbolic significance (and can, therefore, be said to have some empirical validity as a concept). Yet how families are constituted and experienced varies from individual to individual (Morgan 1996; O'Brien et al 1996; Smart and Neale 1999; Silva and Smart 1999). 'The' family perceived as a natural, a-historical and essentialist institution does not exist (and, on this basis some sociologists have advocated abandoning the concept altogether, lest we perpetuate the myth, see discussions in Finch 1989; Smart and Neale 1999 and Cheal 1999). What does exist, of course, are fluid webs of relationships and practices through which we define our personal, familial and kinship ties. This fluidity operates not only

historically, in terms of wider processes of social change, but biographically within the life course of individuals (Clark 1991). The imagery of the 'nuclear' family (a heterosexual, married couple and their legitimate children, sharing a household and operating as an economic unit) has dominated the popular imagination throughout the twentieth century. But in Western societies there is a growing recognition of the incongruity between this ideological construct and the rich variety of ways in which people live (and, perhaps, always have lived) their family lives (Morgan 1996). Family life can now be understood in ways that do not emphasise the centrality of the conjugal bond or insist on co-residence, and which may not be organised around heterosexuality, conventional divisions of labour or ethnocentric notions of family structures.

Changing attitudes towards marriage have, perhaps above all else, wrought transformations in the way we practice partnerships, parenthood and domesticity. The very concept of family is being re-invented in a post divorce context where the contractual obligations of marriage no longer pertain. Partnerships are occurring outside marriage as well as within it and these partnerships are just as likely to be based on notions of confluent love, with its contingent, negotiated quality, than on the 'for life' and 'one and only' qualities of the romantic love complex (Giddens 1992). Parenthood, too, is occurring outside as well as beyond marriage. The notion of the illegitimate child has lost its legal and social force. Birth control and abortion have brought women greater control over their fertility as well as greater sexual freedom, while the newer reproductive technologies offer the potential to separate out the psycho-social and caring elements of parenthood from its genetic and biological elements. A greater range of possibilities has thus been opened up for who might legitimately parent a child and when they might choose to do so. Re-marriages (serial monogamy), re-formed or step families, single parenthood, childhoods and partnerships lived across household boundaries, and families based on same sex relationships are increasingly visible aspects of the domestic landscape. Nor are families necessarily bound up with one household unit, either spatially or as an economic unit. They may operate over several households and over considerable geographical spaces, aided by developments in transport and telecommunications, and there are wide variations in the way partners and family members generate and manage their incomes and share their resources.

Alongside these changes, traditional gender roles have become blurred as new patterns of employment have enabled more women to sustain their place in the labour market and to provide economically for their children as well as caring directly for them. The 'new' men who combine parenting and household responsibilities with paid work, or undertake such domestic responsibilities on a full time basis (still, it seems, a small minority), are also beginning to confound conventionally drawn gendered divisions and the boundaries between the public and private spheres. These shifting gender patterns have also given rise to new patterns of sociability. This is reflected, for example in the growing numbers of economically active 'singletons', who can opt to live alone or share their domestic space with friends or colleagues rather than entering conventional domestic relationships.

These diverse and fluid patterns of partnering and parenting have implications for the way wider kin ties, for example, those between elderly parents and their adult children and grandchildren, are perceived and sustained, and for how familial responsibilities and relations of care are practised across households and across the generations. Added to these complexities, and further enriching them, are differences across cultural, ethnic, religious and regional boundaries, although the intersections between family values and ethnicity or religion in the UK remain under researched.

Such diversity and change need not be interpreted in terms of decline, immorality and deviation from a norm (although family moralists continue to do this, of course). In practice there is no longer one dominant family form that could provide a useful benchmark. Rather, change can be understood in relation to evolving patterns of employment and production, shifting gender relations, increasing options in sexual orientation, cross cultural influences in a multicultural society, technological advances, and changes in the legal, political and welfare spheres. Families, at least in sociological thinking, are no longer expected to remain unchanged and unchanging. They are seen as transforming themselves in relation to post industrialism and major structural changes under late modernity. But families are also sources of change in themselves that can impact on wider society and on state policy (Silver and Smart 1999). They are bound up with changes in the way individuals, as reflexive agents, perceive and negotiate their personal relationships and seek to mould their identities as partners, parents, friends, employees and so on. These internal changes have been explained in terms of the process of individualisation. In Beck's (1992) account, this is an evolving relationship between social structures and human agency that encompasses a personal liberation from historically prescribed obligations, a loss of traditional security, followed by the conscious development of new types of social commitment. However individualisation is also commonly interpreted to mean the rise of selfish individualism, thereby obscuring the relational thinking and reasoning that is integral to the negotiation of family change (Mason 2000). By its very nature, being a partner, parent or friend implies a relationship with others that is open to negotiation. We therefore need to take relational thinking and reasoning into account if we are to reach a full understanding of the interiors of family practices and family change.

The diversity and fluidity of family practices and domestic arrangements is now well documented, although how new these diverse patterns actually are, and the extent to which they represent continuities with past patterns of behaviour continues to be debated (McRae 1999). Mapping these transformations remains an important and challenging task for demography. But what is of interest for our purposes here is to understand why these transformations in the domestic landscape are occurring, what meanings they hold for those engaged in them, and how commentators are interpreting them. Are we to celebrate diversity and fluidity or, taking a more measured approach, at least accept the reality of these shifts and attempt to work with them? Or should we view them as a cause for concern and oppose them? This is a perennial question. It was the starting point, for example, for a review of trends in family life that was carried out in the late 1950s (Fletcher 1962: 12) and it continues to be fiercely debated. I will return to this point at the end of the paper.

Another important question concerns the extent to which these transformations are reflected in the actual practices of family life or represent a shift in dominant ideologies around personal relationships, which may or may not be translated into practice. Whatever changes have actually taken place in family relationships, the various accounts of these changes (what Morgan (1991) calls 'family talk') can be said to constitute a field of enquiry in its own right. Ultimately, of course, as Morgan (p115) points out, social change and talk about change cannot be separated, for each constitutes the other. In what follows I will trace a succession of ideological constructions of marriage, family and divorce found in public, legal and academic writings, which have become bound up with changes in the legal regulation of family life in the UK. Such ideological models, of course, do not supersede each other in neat, logical sequences any more than changes in domestic practices do. Shifts in thinking and practice occur gradually, so that established precepts are continually modified by the infiltration of new ideas and old elements gradually discarded. Competing ideologies are also likely to co-exist at any one time. The

provenance of ideological models is also varied, with grass roots thinking and experimentation feeding into and in turn being influenced by notions of public morality (Morgan 1991). What I have set out below is, therefore, a greatly simplified version of these ideological constructs and how they have shifted over time.

The Indissoluble Family

In the early part of the 20th century the ideology of the nuclear family was one that, it seems, most people aspired to (although by no means necessarily achieved). At this time, clear cut gender divisions and inequalities were central to this ethos. Wives undertook parenting and domestic duties in the limited sphere of the privatised home, while their husbands were the breadwinners and paternal protectors of the group, mediating between the family and the public domain beyond. This patriarchal family was rooted in ties of legality (the affinal contract of marriage-for-life), in ties of blood or consanguinity (biological parenthood), and overlaid with the romantic love complex (the requirement to find the one-and-only true partner in order to forge an exclusive, life long sexual relationship). Marriages at this time, could hardly be broken, let alone replaced. The indissolubility of marriage was bolstered in the 19th century by a legal precept known as father-right, a rights-based discourse that vested authority over children in the patriarchal head of the household. If mothers left their husbands they automatically lost their children, a device which was seen as a safeguard to preserve the institution of marriage (Smart 1989). With the development of a discourse of child welfare, which at this time constructed mothers as vital to their children, the notion of father-right gradually lost its potency. It was replaced by an alternative discourse of rights which was bound up with the notion of the matrimonial fault. These faults (adultery and, after 1937, cruelty, insanity or desertion) had to be proved before a divorce could be granted, and a distinction was then drawn between the so-called innocent and guilty spouses by awarding the children to the 'innocent' spouse. In the early part of the 20th century, however, divorce did not imply remarriage, even for the 'innocent' spouse, for the marriage vows were still regarded as indissoluble (Thery 1989). The original family was diminished in size through the exclusion of the 'guilty' party but it still continued as an entity from which neither party could fully escape.

The Companionate Family

With the outbreak of the Second World War the ideology of the indissoluble nuclear family came under threat as domestic lives were fragmented, spouses separated from each other and from their children, sexual liaisons and marriages contracted with speed, and women invited into a hitherto closed labour market. Finch and Summerfield (1991) present an elegant analysis of how, in the 1950s post war reconstruction, the norms of the nuclear family were re-vitalised with the addition of a new gloss. Public and semi-official writings in the aftermath of the war were concerned about the falling birth rate and the need to replenish the national stock. There were concerns too about the problems of delinquency among 'latch key' kids, whose mothers went out to work; and the rising rate of divorce (which from 1937 to 1950 had risen from 1.6% of marriages to 7.1% (RCMD 1956: 369). The gloss that was designed to overcome these difficulties was the new ideology of the companionate marriage, which marked the beginning of the end of patriarchy. This ideology aimed to restabilise family life by enticing women away from the labour market and back to domesticity. It did so by promising personal fulfilment to women through a more varied role, going beyond being a full time mother and efficient

housekeeper to include exciting sexual partner, empathic companion (rather than slave) to husband and children, and part time earner of 'pin' money (in school hours, at least). Birth control was now available but it was promoted as a means of spacing children, improving maternal health and securing better standards of living, rather than as a means of controlling fertility or enjoying greater sexual freedom. These conventional practices were promoted and reinforced through education programmes in which women were trained for domesticity and the fulfilment of their maternal role, while men were groomed for the world of paid work (Finch and Summerfield 1991).

During the 1950s, then, the norm of the nuclear family, with its structured gender inequalities, continued to have a 'taken for granted' quality and the centrality of marriage to family life remained undisputed. Unmarried mothers were depicted in psycho-sociological literature of the time as 'pathologically disturbed' (Riley 1983: 196) while the vast majority of marriages continued to be sustained without recourse to divorce. Divorce had become more widely available in 1937, when the grounds for divorce were widened, and again in 1949 (Legal Aid and Advice Act) when financial help to obtain a divorce first became available to those on low incomes. But it remained a highly unorthodox and stigmatising process, which barely dented public confidence in the institution of marriage.

The dominant ideology of the cosy nuclear family, now overlaid by notions of a more egalitarian and emotionally fulfilling partnership between men and their wives, was perpetuated and promoted by empirical sociologists who carried out a number of studies of family life in the post war era. Young and Willmott (1957, and Willmott and Young 1960), were notable for painting an optimistic picture of family life in East London, where companionate marriage was said to be a widespread reality. The desirability of this model was taken for granted in their writings. But other empirical evidence of the time offered a conflicting picture. Spousal partnerships were notably absent in the coal mining villages of South Yorkshire, where husbands and wives continued to lead segregated and unequal lives based on the overtly contractual obligations of their marriages (Dennis et al 1956). The reliability of Young and Willmott's empirical evidence has subsequently been questioned (Finch and Summerfield 1991), but their vision of the family based on companionate marriage was certainly influential among policy makers of the time and influenced the next generation of family sociologists (Rosser and Harris 1965).

The ideology of the companionate marriage represented a small but significant shift in thinking about personal relationships. Marriage was no longer seen purely as an institution (a socially sanctioned set of rights and obligations between spouses). It was now increasingly perceived as a personal relationship which offered the potential for fulfilment (Finch and Summerfield 1991). This ideology was thus an early manifestation of a shift in thinking away from the structural or institutional features of domestic life towards a greater recognition of the importance of human agency and a sense of self (Giddens 1992). Indeed, it has been said that the construction of the companionate marriage in the 1950s raised expectations about personal fulfilment and was thus, in itself, a major contributor to marital disillusionment and the rise in the divorce rate in subsequent decades (Clark 1991).

The Reconstituted Family

By the 1970s, familial ideology was undergoing a further transformation wrought by the rapid increase in the incidence of divorce. The Divorce Reform Act (1969) undermined the ideology of

the indissoluble marriage but it opened up the possibility for re-marriage and the re-constitution of families broken by divorce (Thery 1989). Arising out of the strongly gendered practices of parental care and economic support within conventional marriages, it was now presumed that a father would become disengaged from the mother/child unit under a 'clean break' arrangement and both parents would (ideally) seek to form second families. It was presumed that fathers would 'move on', relatively unencumbered by their past commitments, leaving mothers with the potential to remarry and secure a legal sanctioned stepfather for the children (Smart 1984; Smart and Sevenhuijsen 1989). The marital status of the stepfather gave him legitimate claims to his wife's children, which overrode those of the biological father. At the same time the father's financial responsibilities to his first family were not legally enforced (as they now are under the Child Support legislation) but allowed to devolve to the state, so enabling him to remarry and support his second family (Maclean 1994). In practice only a minority of fathers maintained contact with their children from their first marriages.

This model of the reconstituted family which, in the context of divorce, replaced the ethos of marriage-for-life, was concerned less with preserving individual marriages than in preserving the institution of marriage itself. It was a pragmatic response to the rapidly growing numbers of individuals who were leaving their marriages without divorcing and forming de facto, non-marital unions. Indeed, one of the driving forces for the promotion of 'no fault' divorce leading up to the passing of the Divorce Reform Act (1969) was the view that individuals who had separated from their spouses should be able to regularise their legal status and be freed to 'retie the knot'. In this way they could avoid having to 'live in sin' outside the honourable estate of matrimony, while their children would benefit from living in a legitimised, stable family based on re-marriage. This meant that unsuccessful marriages (and families) could now simply be replaced by successful ones (Smart 1984). A strong marriage/divorce law thus continued to create a clear division between what were regarded as legitimate (marital) relationships for spouses and children, and illegitimate (non marital) relationships. Fathers might come and go, but the institutional basis for family life, along with conventional moral values which defined marriage and married parenthood as an essential part of the 'good' life, remained intact (Finch and Morgan 1991).

The Biological Family

In the last decades of the 20th century the concept of the re-constituted family after divorce has gradually been eroded in favour of a new ideological construct, that of the enduring, biological family. This family derives its status not from the legitimacy of marriage, but from the preservation of biological ties between parents and their children, whether these are based on marriage, cohabitation or through co-parenting arrangements after divorce. In the latter case the new model has been conceptualised as a 'durability' model of family life (as opposed to the 'substitution' model of the reconstituted family (Thery 1989)). It also resonates with the notion of a 'two earner' model as opposed to a 'marital support' model of family life (Beck 1992) for it seeks to give equal weight to mothers and fathers in their responsibilities for childcare and economic support of the family.

Following divorce, the original family of mother, father and child is no longer to be broken under the 'clean break' philosophy. Nor is it to be replaced by a re-constituted family (although new partners, whether marital or non-marital, might attach themselves, somewhat peripherally, to the original unit (Smart and Neale 1999)). Under the Children Act (1989) parental responsibilities

are retained by both parents rather than 'custody' being awarded to one parent at the point of divorce. The potential for a mother to bring up a child without the involvement of the father, even if she does so within a new marriage or partnership, has a diminished value under this new ideology. Indeed, barring exceptional circumstances, such an arrangement is no longer legally sanctioned (although, of course, it remains a viable option as far as many parents and children are concerned; Neale and Smart 1999; Smart and Neale 1999; Smart, Neale and Wade 2001). Likewise, fathers must retain their financial responsibilities for their first families, even if they have a second family to maintain. Indeed, there are now financial incentives for them to undertake direct childcare, for in doing so they can reduce the amount of their child maintenance payments. The new ideology thus encourages parents to share financial and caring responsibilities for their children through post marital co-parenting arrangements that operate across households (Burgess 1998).

This new model of the biological family has been sanctioned and promoted in a series of legislative changes (the Children Act 1989, the Child Support Acts 1991, 1995, and the Family Law Act 1996). It has also been endorsed in sociological writings (Giddens 1998, critiqued in Sevenhuijsen 1999), in much the same way that the companionate family was promoted in the 1970s. As such it has become a powerful mechanism for the social and economic regulation of post divorce family life. More problematically for some parents and children, the new ethos has also been enforced through the family justice system and the administrative mechanisms of the Child Support Agency (Neale and Smart 1997, Smart and Neale 1997). It seems that if the nuclear family can't remain intact and under one roof (still, of course the preferred option) then it must re-invent itself as a binuclear family spread across two households. Divorce has thus been recast as a stage (albeit a painful one) in the newly extended life course of the indelible biological family.

There are a number of factors that have contributed to the development of this new ideology. The new ethos arose out of concerns over the high divorce rate (now an estimated 25% of marriages Kiernan 1999) which could not be stemmed by appeals to the sanctity of marriage. It was a direct response to the growing numbers of people who parent their children outside or beyond marriage. The high rate of failure of second marriages, combined with the growing numbers of lone mothers who were dependent on state support, was another significant concern. Government strategy in these circumstances has been to push financial responsibilities for first families back onto biological fathers (and, more recently, onto lone mothers themselves, who are being encouraged to extend their caring commitments to include financial provision as well). A further potent factor was the newly perceived threat to the welfare of children whose parents divorce or separate, for they were now said to be in danger of emotional damage if they lost contact with their biological fathers. Legal, political and popular rhetoric now began to assume a virtual underclass of children who were becoming a social liability because of the limitations of lone mothering and the lack of proper fathering (Dennis and Erdos 1993; Morgan 1999, Wallerstein and Kelly 1980; Wallerstein et al 2000).

The new ethos was also bolstered by a fresh articulation of the rights of divorced or separated fathers, who argued that they were just as capable as mothers of looking after the children and should, therefore, have equal rights to them.¹ If fathers could no longer secure their relationship with their children through marriage, they could now do so through indelible, biological parenthood instead. The certainty of paternity has taken on renewed significance. Under the new model the status of fatherhood has been transformed and, in the process, so too has the status of motherhood. The relative merits of mothers and fathers are now open to fresh consideration.

Recent policy reports, for example, gloss over the nature of motherhood but promote specific government measures to revitalise fatherhood. The aim is to 'appeal to a father's sense of pride' and broadcast 'a clear statement that fathers matter' (Burghes et al 1997, Burgess 1998).

The new ethos has therefore had a far reaching impact on perceptions of parenting, particularly that which occurs outside or beyond marriage. The process of legitimising non-marital parenthood began over thirty years ago (Family Law Reform Act, 1969, also 1987), when the labelling of children as illegitimate and their parents as morally reprehensible began to be eroded. It culminated recently in the granting of the status of parental responsibility to all unmarried fathers (as long as their name is on the birth certificate), thereby removing what was seen as legal discrimination against them (Burghes et al 1997). It seems that where mothers, as the day to day carers, were once constructed as vital to their children (under the old ideological models outlined above), it is fathers, as the re-stabilisers and potential carers, who are now seen as vital to their children. Among pressure groups which support fatherhood a reformulated version of father-right is being promoted at a time when this outmoded principle has only just been removed from the statute books (Children Act 1989).

What is the status of marriage under the new ethos? The ideology of the biological family transcends not only household boundaries and conventional divisions of labour but the institution of marriage itself. Since parenthood is increasingly practised outside and beyond marriage, the significance of marriage as an institution for the regulation of parenthood has gradually diminished, along with the significance of the gendered division of labour that supports traditional marriages. What marriage now endorses is a personal commitment between a couple rather than the wider set of socio-economic practices and relationships that have traditionally been associated with it (cf. Thery's concept of 'demarriage' (Thery 1993; Maclean & Eekelaar 1997), Giddens 1992). In uncoupling the legal status of parenthood from the legal status of marriage, parenthood has begun to supersede marriage as the bedrock of the family and as the central mechanism for the legal regulation of family life. If marriage is no longer 'for life' then parenthood (at least, that of a biological variety) has replaced it (Dewar 1992). But this does not mean that marriage has been abandoned, at least not in government policy and rhetoric. It is still being promoted as the most stable institutional framework for the raising of children and the preservation of biological kin ties, although the rhetoric appears to be increasingly at odds with popular attitudes and practices (Ministerial Group on the Family 1998, Harding 2000, Smart 2000).

Seeing 'Family' in a Different Way

The ideological models of marriage, parenthood and family life set out above have been highly influential in public policy terms and in the legal regulation of family life. But they do not necessarily tell us much about the intricacies of personal relationships and family life. The quotation from Janet Finch at the start of this paper reminds us that ideological constructions of this sort have certain limitations. Along with Sevenhuijsen (1998), Finch points to the dangers of positing such models as the basis for developing policy, particularly where they are too rigid to accommodate the diversity and fluidity of family life. These models privilege the static, structural features of family: institutional status (legal marriage or legal/biological parenthood) and organisational structure (bounded nuclear households or cross households). They also privilege the positional status of family members, variously articulated through a discourse of rights, which weighs up the relative merits of mothers and fathers, and/or the discourse of

welfare which dictates that the child's needs must come first. But if models of this sort are no longer sufficient for a proper understanding of family life, how should we think about families? If we are going to discard the nuclear or the biological family what are we going to put in its place? What these models lack, and what recent, qualitative sociological research has sought to contribute, is a focus on the substance of personal relationships and kinship responsibilities. In this enterprise, sociologists have developed a number of key conceptual tools that are set out below.

Family Relationships:

Claudia (age 12): ... [I]f I didn't love my mum or I didn't love my dad then, by law, they'd be a member of my family but you wouldn't really feel like a family, 'cos I mean, it doesn't matter if you're rich or poor or even if you live on the streets, I mean, as long as you love each other. Of course, you're going to have arguments and stuff, but if you love each other it doesn't matter really, does it, what arrangement you're in? (Neale and Wade 2000)

Claudia, who was moving between two households in a co-parenting arrangement, was interviewed as part of a study of children's experiences of post divorce family life. She drew a distinction between families as institutions rooted in law and ties of blood and families as webs of relationships, ideally based on ties of affection. In her view it is the latter rather than the former which is the essence of family life. Wider kinship networks in Western societies are also being re-conceptualised in this more nuanced way, in terms of relations of care, respect and affection, rather than as naturalistic, bounded entities with a fixed membership and structural form. While such networks are apparently based on simple principles of biological and legal relationships, they have three distinctive features: they are individualised, flexible and have an affective component (Finch 1997, Allan 1996). As Claudia argues, it is the *quality* of personal relationships that creates real bonds between people - the value-laden notions of love, care, respect, emotional communication and commitment. From this perspective 'family' becomes a quality rather than an entity. The structural configuration of a household or a family, including the positional status of family members, thus becomes less of an issue than how relations of care and respect (or, conversely, neglect or oppression) operate within these structures.

Family Practices:

The notion of relationships, taken on its own, is rather imprecise or elusive. However it is possible to ground it in the actualities of every day life by bringing in two further conceptual tools, those of family practices and dynamics. The notion of family practices was developed by David Morgan (1996). The emphasis here is on how people 'do' partnerships, parenthood and kinship. Whether a partnership is based on marriage or cohabitation, whether it is a same sex or heterosexual partnership or whether or not it is a co-residential, co-parenting or co-worker arrangement are not the key issues. Similar considerations apply to relationships between children and their parents or carers. These relationships may be based on blood or social ties and they may or may not involve co-residence. What is important, however, is how these relationships are conducted on a day to day basis and how different practices are managed and supported. By focusing on practices rather than structures a wide variety of personal relationships can come into the picture and assume equal validity. This might include friendships, for example, which are not usually given the same status as kin relationships (Allan 1996), while children become visible, not as the passive recipients of parental care and socialisation, but as moral and social practitioners of family life in their own right. It is the 'doing' of family life that becomes important rather than who is doing what or within what

organisational or institutional framework. Families are what families do (Smart and Silva 1999) and once we begin to think of family life in this way, we can cease to see 'the family' as an institutional 'thing' or entity that assumes more importance than the individuals who embody it. We can then begin to side step the interminable debate about whether this institution is in decline or not.

Family Dynamics:

The second key concept for grounding our understanding of family relationships is a dynamic one. We can't understand how relationships work unless we understand something of how they are forged, sustained or unravelled over time. That means taking into account the fluid and negotiated character of family life and the linked biographies of family members. Once we bring a dynamic dimension into the picture it becomes clear that relationships, commitments and responsibilities are not simply given or accorded as of right but have to be worked at and achieved. They are not fixed by law, duty or status, but have a contingent quality and therefore cannot be taken for granted (Giddens 1992, Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Jamieson 1998; Silva 1999; Smart and Neale 1999).

This dynamic perspective accommodates fluidity and change, not only at discrete turning points such as the point of entry into parenthood or the point of divorce, but as a gradual and ongoing process. This contingency is not new but has, perhaps, become more transparent under the conditions of late modernity (Finch 1997). Nor is this contingency confined to spousal or partner relationships. Even seemingly irrevocable parent/child relationships, those rooted in a combination of ties of blood and legal parenthood, can be fragile (Finch and Mason 1993; Smart and Neale 2000; Smart, Neale and Wade 2001). Thus we need to think not only beyond the 'for life' model of the romantic love complex (for partners or spouses) but also beyond the 'for life' model of biological ties (for parent/child relationships). Regardless, then, of how family members are related to each other, it seems that families are not 'given' but are what family members make (or try to make) of them. This means not only that individual families may be constituted in a rich variety of ways but that each person's construction of their family and kin network is unique to them.

Moral Reasoning: The Proper Thing To Do:

Morals are inherently problematic. It is part of their nature
(Douglas 1971 quoted in Finch 1989)

As an integral part of understanding the dynamics and practices of family relationships sociologists have set out to explore the moral reasoning which underpins people's negotiations and decision making, to understand how they determine the 'proper thing to do' under a variety of social and economic circumstances. In the process, 'morals' have replaced 'norms' as the family sociologists' prime analytical tool. Norms are generally defined as rules of conduct and thus imply something fixed and static with little room for doubt. Morals, on the other hand, invite reflection - there is always room for debate over the right course of action. The whole point about moral principles is that it must be possible for a person to take several different courses of action. The idea that people recognise fixed obligations and duties to kin and then simply carry them out is far too simplistic. As Finch and Mason observe, 'people do not carry around with them stable sets of values and meanings about obligations to kin, but construct them when they have to out of the various materials available' (1991: 343). Moral reasoning is inherently

relational, in that it entails weighing up the circumstances and needs of others as well as and in relation to the self. Consensus is more likely to be reached over the principles to be taken into account in reaching decisions than over what people should actually do.

These ideas about 'the proper thing to do' were first developed by Finch (1989) and Finch and Mason (1993) in their study of how adult kin negotiate their responsibilities for older family members. They discovered that the material support offered to kin was variable, but that this variability could not be explained adequately in terms of structural factors, such as class background, occupation or gender. Instead, responsibilities and commitments to kin developed (or waned) over time, through interactions between the individuals involved:

“It is a two- (or more) way process of negotiation in which people are giving and receiving, balancing out one kind of assistance for another ... responsibilities are thus created rather than flowing automatically from specific relationships” (*Finch and Mason 1993: 167*).

These notions of family practices, moral reasoning and negotiated relationships have since been applied to the study of post-divorce parenthood and childhood (Smart and Neale 1999; Smart et al 2001). Previous research in this field has been dominated by a social problems framework which has meant that divorce has been interpreted in dysfunctional terms as decline, disorder and a descent into uncaringness and immorality. This recent research, however, has found that divorce represents an entry into a new moral order where ethics are not abandoned but are painstakingly reworked in a variety of ways. Parents and children in these two studies had recourse to several forms of moral reasoning in explaining their diverse family arrangements. The ethics of justice, care and respect were articulated in a variety of ways. Fathers were more inclined to speak in terms of their individual rights (their status as fathers, their rights to their children, to equality with the mother and so on). Children, on the other hand, more readily focused on the relational notion of equity and thus spoke in terms of fairness, care and respect for others. The ethics of care and respect were of key importance to family members and were articulated most clearly by the children and mothers in the study. These ethical principles define moral situations not in terms of right or wrong, nor by universal standards of objectivity, but in terms of the interdependence and value of relationships, the avoidance of harm and the preservation of the dignity and worth of others. They are, therefore, an important counterbalance to the dominant discourses of child welfare and the ethic of justice. This grass roots moral reasoning is currently little understood and hence glossed over in policy debates and in the legal regulation of family life. Consequently, an incongruity is evident between the kinds of solutions parents and children might arrive at for themselves in negotiating family change, and the kinds of solutions imposed in a legal or policy forum. It is only by uncovering the forms of moral reasoning used by family members that we can reach a greater understanding of 'what matters' to people and this is an important precursor to understanding what does or does not work for them (Mason 2000; Williams 2000).

Interpretations of Social Change

The conceptual tools reviewed above have allowed for more nuanced and sophisticated ways of researching personal relationships and a new sense of realism to enter into debates about family life. I now want to return to the broad question posed at the start of this paper. How are we to view the diversity and fluidity of contemporary patterns of partnering, parenting and kinship? Should we view these transformations with optimism or, at least, accept the reality of them and

attempt to work with them, or should we view them as a cause for concern? Perhaps more to the point, is this a valid question for sociological enquiry when our purpose is supposedly to describe and explain rather than evaluate what we observe? Currently there is little consensus on how to interpret or respond to the rapid social changes that we are witnessing.² Undoubtedly, the diversity and fluidity of family life has generated unprecedented levels of anxiety in public and political debate. Each manifestation of change generates a succession of moral panics over the alleged demise of 'traditional' family values and the rise of what is seen as rampant, selfish individualism. Divorce is perceived as the threshold of broken homes, damaged children, delinquency, unemployment, disaffected fathers, and a burden on the public purse. In short these changes are seen to represent a disintegration of the moral fabric of society, as people are presumed to have lost sight of what is right and wrong. The kind of nuanced sociological analysis presented above has been condemned because it is seen to perpetuate and sanction this moral disintegration. It has been described as 'a sustained onslaught on the institution of the family' (Morgan, P 1999: V111). Recovery, according to Morgan (1998) can only be brought about by a new celebration of marriage, a re-assertion of patriarchy and a concerted effort to 'stop describing social changes as though they were inevitable' (1998: 82). This kind of moral absolutism is not confined to New Right politicians or the Daily Mail (see for example, 2.12.99). The cultural campaign for a re-assertion of traditional 'family values' has been waged most vociferously by social scientists in the UK and the US, albeit largely by those operating outside the academy (e.g., Dennis and Erdos 1993, Morgan 1998, 1999, also Popenoe 1988, Wallerstein et al 2000 and the reviews in Stacey 1996 and 1999). It would be tempting to dismiss this campaign as wishful thinking, but it has been highly influential. Attempts by progressive policy makers to accommodate family changes have been tempered at every turn by conservative drives to recapture an idealised 'nuclear' version of family life where time stands still and traditional values are re-vitalised (Smart 1997; Jagger and Wright 1999).

This pessimistic vision has, of course, been widely challenged and a variety of counter arguments put forward. There is the obvious problem that only a minority of contemporary families conforms to the nuclear norm. Drawing a distinction between 'normal' family practices and deviations from the norm, when 'the normal' has become a minority lifestyle choice, part of a complex and shifting variety of forms, seems unjustified. As we have seen, change, fluidity, process and transformation are empirical realities to be grasped. They are so integral to contemporary analysis and explanation that to seek to make crude evaluations over whether change is 'good' or 'bad' seems to be a misguided enterprise. A second problem concerns the presumption that turning back the clock and regenerating the nuclear family will somehow produce happy and well adjusted family members - this again, is not borne out by the empirical evidence. Families based on marriage and biological parenthood appear to be no more or less supportive of their family members than those based on divorce or other new family forms. People may live happily or unhappily in a variety of family forms. We have to reconsider what we mean by 'normal' family life, and it seems that we can no longer cling to the nuclear stereotype as if it is going to provide all the answers. It is not necessarily the panacea that it has been made out to be.

Perhaps of even greater significance in challenging the moral absolutists is the recent insight that diverse patterns of domesticity and family life are not the product of moral decline. The loss of certainties associated with late modernity has generated a great deal of anxiety. There are fears, in particular, that what is perceived as the 'ethically incompetent' ordinary person will fall into a moral abyss unless he or she can follow a strong set of moral rules imposed from the 'top down'. But a more nuanced understanding of moral reasoning indicates that it is the very uncertainty of

late modernity that makes us fully moral and responsible actors (Bauman 1995: Finch 1989: Smart and Neale 1997). We now have the analytical tools to understand the values and commitments of grassroots morality, and to chart the often painful processes by which ordinary people decide on what matters and what is the proper thing to do in particular circumstances. Returning once again to Janet Finch's comments at the start of this paper, it would thus seem to be inappropriate for policies to start 'laying down the law' to people about the structural shaping of their family lives. Our empirical evidence shows that people do not necessarily aspire to a normative structure for their families but seek to formulate good enough solutions that fit their own particular circumstances. Family life is, and perhaps always has been characterised by a range of forms and to impose one form alone is a somewhat misguided task. Cultivating a degree of realism about those two constants of family life, change and diversity, is a challenge that policy makers can ill afford to ignore. Recognition of this might allow for more flexible and supportive modes of state provision for families and, in the process, the discovery of new ways of valuing families in all their variety.

Appendix

In thinking about the different ways in which commentators and policy makers analyse and respond to family change I have set out here what I understand to be the key features of two powerful and influential normative frameworks, those of Libertarianism and Communitarianism. The extent to which these two frameworks are contradictory or irreconcilable is a matter for debate (Smart 2000, Deacon 2000, Deacon and Mann 1999) , although the intellectual underpinnings for new labour policies on families appear to be derived from a combination of these frameworks (Duncan 2000). I am using here a highly simplified, schematic version of the ideas discussed in Deacon (2000), also Duncan (2000) and attempting to explore how the alternative modes of thinking about family developed in this paper might fit in with or diverge from these two frameworks. The highly tentative ideas presented here are pointers for discussion on the underlying principles that feed into and influence policy developments.

The Libertarian position is focused on the relationship between the individual and the state. It presumes that people are driven by a-moral self-interest - the rationality mistake in new labour thinking (Duncan 2000) - and that we are in a political realm founded on the phenomenon of individualisation (the assertion of personal choice, independence and self-determination). Diverse forms of family practice are seen as inevitable and are not condemned in this framework but behaviour must be influenced through a system of contracts, incentives and sanctions. State welfare is about enforcing legal and social obligations by building such incentives into the system.

Libertarianism (Murray & post traditional sociologists)

1. Orientation: relationship between individual and state
2. People driven by a-moral self interest [rational economic man]
3. Politics of choice, independence, self-determination.
4. Diverse forms of practice inevitable: non-judgmental approach
5. Practices controlled via contracts, rights, incentives, sanctions.
6. State Welfare: mechanism to enforce legal/social obligations.

Communitarianism [*Etzioni, Wilson*]

1. Orientation: relationship between individual and community

2. People (should be) driven by moral consensus, shared values
3. Politics of commitment, duty [based on notions of common good]
4. Diverse forms of practice deplorable: judgmental approach
5. Practices moulded via 'top down' collective moral prescriptions
6. State welfare: mechanism for moral regeneration

A 'Relational' approach

1. Orientation: relationships between individuals (in micro networks)
2. People driven by moral reasoning about 'self' in relation to others.
3. Politics of negotiated commitments, responsibilities and choices
4. Diverse forms of practice inevitable: non-judgmental approach
5. Practices generated through 'bottom up' relational morality
6. State welfare: mechanism for flexible, responsive support

The Communitarian position in contrast, is concerned with the relationship between the individual and the community. It presumes that people have an inherent moral sense and that they are, or at least should be driven by shared values. This is a politics based on commitment and duty in which behavioural conformity is seen as highly desirable and diversity is deplored. Practices and behaviour within this framework are to be moulded by 'top down' collective moral prescriptions, such that state welfare becomes a mechanism for moral regeneration. This seems to be the 'morality' mistake in new labour thinking identified by Duncan (2000).

In developing policies for families, new labour appears to have combined the most negative aspects of these two frameworks, for there is a libertarian assumption that people are inherently individualist in their behaviour but a communitarian requirement that they behave in uniform fashion. The welfare response is to combine 'carrots and sticks' forms of persuasion with top down, moral prescriptions on how to live the 'good' life.

A 'relational' way of interpreting and responding to family change seeks to understand family practices through an exploration of how individuals relate to each other in their own personal networks. Drawing on the more positive aspects of the other two frameworks, this approach accords with communitarian ideas in that it presumes that people make decisions in relation to others and with regard to moral precepts. It does not presume, however that there is only one correct way to act, or, at least, only at the level of the most generalised principles of conduct (do no harm, respect others). Nor does it presume that people will always behave well; some moral precepts are productive of oppressive, neglectful or uncaring practices. This framework allows for a politics of negotiation between self-interest and the interests of others. The resulting diversity of practices is seen as inevitable (as in libertarianism) but it is not presumed to arise out of a lack of moral reasoning. State welfare in such a system is best concerned with flexible support for families and responsiveness to diverse needs and claims.

Unlike Libertarianism and Communitarianism, a relational approach is not a normative model in that it does not suggest what people should do, nor does it formulate 'top down' prescriptive policies. It does, however, have explanatory power in that it may increase understanding of why people think and act in the way they do. It may therefore offer a more realistic foundation upon which to develop welfare policies.

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