

# New Families for Changing Times

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Ultimately all social change involves moral doubt and moral reassessment. ... Only by examining and taking stock of what is can we hope to affect what will be. This is our chance to invent and thus to humanize the future.

Suzanne Keller 1986

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## Summary

Throughout the Western world, the changing nature of families has led to a highly charged debate. Conservatives view family change as a wholly negative phenomenon and attribute 'family breakdown' to a wider decline in moral values and the unhealthy dominance of selfish individualism over more traditional values of responsibility and obligation. They believe that the primary objective of social policy should be to protect the traditional nuclear family from the forces of change.

By contrast, social progressives reject the notion of family breakdown and argue that we must accept the transition to a new diversity of family forms. They regard the idea of family as an evolving social construct that both transforms and is transformed by wider social changes.

While conservative accounts of family change tend to be simplistic and unhelpful, progressive accounts tend to be dismissive of the extent and implications of the far-reaching changes to family formation in recent decades. People marry later, many choose simply to cohabit, around one third of marriages end in divorce, and single-parent, step and blended families are part of everyday life. Each of these affects the wellbeing of family members, often in complex ways.

On the other hand, it is important not to overstate the changes. The nuclear family remains the model to which most people aspire and the dominant form in practice, with nearly three-quarters of families with children in Australia having both natural parents living together.

### **Rethinking family change**

When commentators talk about how families have changed they usually compare family structures now to those of the 1950s and 1960s. But using the post-war period as a benchmark gives a misleading picture, as the nature, structure and functions of families have undergone sharp changes since the Industrial Revolution, and at any point there has been a multiplicity of family forms.

Western families have always been characterised by diversity, although it is generally agreed that the direction of change has been consistent with the growth of democratic political institutions, capitalist economic relations and cultural secularisation. To illustrate, a century ago in Australia only around 41 per cent of marriages remained intact after 30 years, compared to 53 per cent today. At around the same time, falling family size sparked public panic over the 'decline of the family' and the 'selfishness' of women who were failing their duty to procreate.

The high rates of marriage and fertility after the Second World War were historically anomalous, yet this moment in history was enough for the modern idea of the ideal nuclear family to take root, an ideal soon shattered by the social and cultural revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s. Not only was the ideal rendered obsolete, but the image of the happy nuclear family frequently masked a dark side of oppression, inequality and violence.

It is futile to imagine that the nature and structure of the family can be quarantined from the rapid and far-reaching social changes of the last decades of the twentieth



century. Western societies in the period of late modernity are characterised by an emphasis on personal growth and self-identity, itself a product in part of neo-liberal economic policies. It was, after all, Margaret Thatcher who declared that there is no such thing as society. While conservatives understand this process as one of the growth of selfish individualism, it is more accurately understood as a process of individualisation, one in which the social categories of the past (gender, class, race and so on) no longer serve as the framework for individual behaviour or cultural beliefs.

In the age of individualisation, previous modes of behaviour and expectations have been disembedded from society, and we are now in the process of re-embedding new ways of life in which individuals must invent and live according to their own biographies. With respect to family change, the problem with ‘conservative wailers’ (as Ulrich Beck calls them) is that they see only the process of disembedding without paying heed to the process of re-embedding.

In this transition, relationships, including marriage, must be reinvented too. The downside of the ‘pure relationship’, freed from convention, is some instability as partners continuously re-evaluate their relationship. They ask whether it fits with their own life project to realise self-identity. Under these conditions of late modernity, it is no surprise that the institution of marriage has been affected. Smart and Neale (1999) argue that, rather than this process being a sign of moral decline, family relationships have become the site where debates about new moralities are played out. Moral dilemmas that have for too long been obscured by a set of rules governing marriage are now being exposed and debated.

### **Children and separation**

These moral dilemmas are most apparent when families with children separate. The extensive research broadly concludes that, compared with children from intact families, children from separated families perform worse on a range of indicators of wellbeing and development, although, taken as a whole, the extent of the difference is not large.

These studies are usually interpreted to mean that separation causes the problems, but in fact this is not necessarily the case. In their exhaustive review, Pryor and Rodgers (2001) conclude that the problems are due not to separation itself but to a complex interplay of factors before, during and after separation. Separation can be beneficial for children where the family is one of high conflict, especially if violence is present. Studies also show that the effects of separation can be ameliorated if the situation is explained to children. A number of factors after separation can heavily influence the wellbeing of children, including continuing contact with both parents, continuing conflict between parents, reduced income, moving house and repartnering.

Large numbers of children from separated families appear to escape any long-term harmful consequences, although the pervasive public debate about ‘family breakdown’ leaves many expecting some disaster to befall them later in life.

While the process of separation can contribute to negative outcomes for some children, too much emphasis on harm can encourage simplistic answers to the ‘problem of divorce’. The strengths of new family arrangements are overlooked and

there is inadequate understanding of, and support for, the re-embedding of new values and norms by which to conduct family relationships.

It is clear that, irrespective of how families are changing, families still matter intensely to people. Despite claims that relationships have become 'disposable', adults whose marriages break down describe the experience as the most traumatic of their lives. Most parents who separate deeply desire that their children be protected from harm. In the words of one relationship counsellor:

In my twelve years of counselling separating couples, I have only known of one person that I could honestly say was not trying hard enough.

### **Families are what families do**

In the new way of thinking families are what families do. Rather than trying to ensure that family structure adheres to a preconceived ideal in the hope of greater 'stability', it is better to support all types of families in fulfilling parental functions competently, resolving disputes constructively and ensuring economic viability and community attachment. Rather than insisting that parents stay together for the sake of the children, it would be more useful to encourage parents to attempt to resolve conflict in constructive ways for the sake of the children, preferably within the marriage but, if that is not possible, outside of it.

Instead of accusing parents who separate of abandoning their moral responsibilities, it is much more useful to focus on how adults are negotiating and developing moral criteria on which to act and build relationships. In this respect, we are seeing a transition from an ethic of justice, which centres on rights and duties and thus fault-finding and blame, to an ethic of care, which focuses on responsibilities and relationships in which caring is a moral activity rather than a set of principles.

Studies by Smart and Neale (1999) have found that relinquishing an ethic of justice in favour of an ethic of care is a vital factor in establishing and sustaining successful post-separation arrangements. The key skill in making this difficult adjustment is the ability of parents to self-reflect. In other words, creating positive family environments after separation depends largely on the ability of family members to be moral actors and in particular to understand the distinct roles and needs of their children. Children too are fully capable of adopting an ethic of care and becoming moral philosophers adept at understanding and negotiating the complexities of modern family life.

Far from sacrificing their children in pursuit of their own sexual and personal gratification, for the most part parents are engaged in an intense and difficult project of re-inventing family life in a rapidly changing world. The functions of caring, companionship and nurturing that families have always fulfilled are not being abandoned in 'new families' but continue to be provided within new structures in new forms of relationships consistent with the times.