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Journal of Sociology 2005; 41; 69

DOI: 10.1177/1440783305050964

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The adult children of divorce



Pure relationships and family values?

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Abstract

Giddens and Beck-Gernsheim argue that there has been a shift from stable family formations to relationships that are inherently fragile and temporary. Both propose that intimate relationships in late modernity have been marked by reflexivity and contingency. Although these are not new propositions, little empirical work has been done on the contours of such relationships and the meanings that they have for individuals. This article explores Giddens' and Beck-Gernsheim's contentions through looking at the perceptions of relationships, and the family values, of members of Generation X whose parents divorced and who subsequently grew up in a single-parent, step-, or blended family. In particular it discusses the suggestion that we are moving into an era in which 'the normalisation of fragility' will become central to people's intimate relationships.

Keywords: adult children of divorce, divorce, families, intimacy, reflexivity, relationships

It is irrefutable that intimate relationships in Australia have been changed over the last 40 years. A significant factor in this was the enactment of the Family Law Act in 1976 which heralded in an era of 'no-fault divorce'. The pressure to stay married has gradually disappeared and now marriages are freely terminable for the first time in history (Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1990). Since 1976, the crude divorce rate has fluctuated between 2.4 and 2.9 divorces per 1000 population (ABS, 2002).

Aside from the reporting of the changes, there has been little qualitative research that explores the reasons individuals present for the choices they make in their intimate relationships and the wider implications for these choices for other family members. Judith Wallerstein's longitudinal study of

divorcing families in the US is an exception to this (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980; Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1990; Wallerstein et al., 2000) since she tracks the experience of both the parents and their children, as is the work of Bren Neale (2001) and Carol Smart and Bren Neale (2001) in the UK, whose work concentrates on the perceptions of post-divorce life by young children.

In Australia, those who were children (up to 14 years old) when the Family Law Act came into being have now grown to adulthood. As a group, they were the first generation to witness significant numbers of divorces, they were raised in non-conventional families in large numbers, they appear to be having, or planning to have, far fewer children than previous generations, their rates of marriage are low and they have a high rate of living alone (Amato, 2000; Popenoe, 1994). It can be argued that these are the demographic indicators of a gradual and unstoppable shift in intimate relationships that has marked late modernity (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Gross and Simmons, 2002). Yet behind these indicators lie shifts in the perceptions of the purpose of intimate relationships per se.

This article explores the perceptions of relationships and families held by a group whose experiences make them especially interesting. Born between 1961 (the year the contraceptive pill came on the market in Australia) and 1976 (when the Family Law Act was ushered in) they are members of Generation X (Howe and Strauss, 1991) and matured in a culture where divorce was relatively common, where women had won greater economic independence and nuclear families were shrinking in both size and number. The participants in the study under discussion here had added stresses – because of their own parents' divorce, they grew up in families which fundamentally changed, most commonly from nuclear, to single-parent and then to a blended or step-family. In addition to living in what has been termed a 'post-divorce' culture (Simpson, 1998), their lives have also been shaped by their experiences of parental divorce.

Contingency

In *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992), Anthony Giddens argues that intimate relationships have undergone a fundamental change commensurate with the transition to non-nuclear family formations (Simpson, 1998; Smart and Neale, 1999, 2001). The assumption that marriage meant a life-long commitment, the essence of which was remaining together, even when there was unease, unhappiness or (perhaps more importantly) a more attractive alternative to the marriage, is no longer prevalent.

The economic, social and emotional certainty of marriage has been slowly but irrevocably replaced by what Giddens termed the 'pure relationship' which has contingency and communication at its heart:

It refers to a situation where a social relationship is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it. (1992: 58)

It is a relationship which is perpetually negotiable, which stands aside from inevitability and which, Beck-Gernsheim suggests, frames 'the normalisation of fragility' (2002: 18), where the relationship is consistently seen as 'good until further notice' (Jamieson, 1999: 481). Beck-Gernsheim goes on to argue that this fragility leads to 'risk-diminishing' strategies (2002: 26) such as the aversion to marriage itself, and to having children, because both act as barriers (or, at least, inhibitors) to ending a relationship if the need should arise. For the most part, this need arises via an appealing alternative to the relationship. Giddens points out that:

There is a structural contradiction in the pure relationship, centring upon commitment.... To generate commitment and develop a shared history, an individual must give of herself to the other. That is, she must provide, in word and deed, some kind of guarantees to the other that the relationship can be sustained for an indefinite period. Yet a present-day relationship is not, as marriage once was, a 'natural condition' whose durability can be taken for granted short of certain extreme circumstances.... For a relationship to stand a chance of lasting, commitment is necessary; yet anyone who commits herself without reservations risks great hurt in the future, should the relationship become dissolved. (1992: 137)

Providing the impossible – provisional, yet long-term commitment – is made more complex by what Giddens terms the 'reflexive narrative of the self' (1992: 75). He argues that, with the dissolution of the overarching constraints which maintained and sustained intimate relationships in earlier times, each individual is obliged to set about continuously recreating themselves. This is largely done via the catalyst of successive relationships, each of which, in turn, makes a contribution to the construction of people's narratives of themselves. Giddens' contention is that this is aided by the therapy and counselling industry, amongst other things:

The self today is for everyone a reflexive project – a more or less continuous interrogation of past, present and future. It is a project carried on amid a profusion of reflexive resources: therapy and self-help manuals of all kinds, television programmes and magazine articles. (1992: 30)

There is the sense here of an atomized individual who is untrammelled by any of the structural constraints that dogged previous generations yet is inevitably bound up in negotiations about relationships, lifestyles, desires and needs. Giddens is clearly optimistic about these changes, arguing that they contain the possibility of a great democratization of relationships and, ultimately, the potential for both individual satisfaction and a transformation of the gender order. Others argue that his optimism, whilst attractive, is not necessarily well-placed.

Jamieson's critique of Giddens, for example, focuses on his 'broad-sweep account' (1999: 486), which, she argues, is neither new nor accurate. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative studies, she argues that, in the realm of gender, the power dynamics consistently evident over the past decades continue, and that these act as clear and obvious constraints on both the pure relationship and the narrative of the self. She cites the persistently unequal nature of sexuality, income, the undertaking of domestic work and childcare and the relationships between parents and children as evidence of the intractability of structural constraints. Hers is an attempt to range Giddens' contentions against a body of empirical work, and she argues for a more nuanced account, cognizant of the gender order.

Similarly, Gross and Simmons' article, enticingly named 'Intimacy as a Double-edged Phenomenon? An Empirical Test of Giddens' seeks to test his hypotheses, this time using data from a large US telephone survey and self-administered questionnaire of adults aged 25–74. Here Gross and Simmons report that, indeed, people's intimate relationships are key to their sense of well-being and that the domestic sphere is a crucial determinant of people's wider social engagement:

The finding that one's overall sense of autonomy and political attitudes are connected to involvement in a relationship with pure love characteristics gives specificity to this insight. Moreover, the finding lends credence to Giddens' speculation that it is through the mechanism of intimacy that modernity's potential to remake the social order in a manner compatible with the values of autonomy and equality may, in the final analysis be realised. (2002: 543)

Yet they also found no evidence that, for those in pure relationships, the tension between intimacy and reflexivity generated less happiness than traditional relationships. Nor are they especially concerned about the potential dissolution of their relationship. The data from this project correlate with both these findings.

The above are two rare examples of attempts to explore Giddens' 'broad-sweep account' empirically, and their questions and conclusions diverge. This is not surprising given the difficulty and complexity of attempting to assess the validity of Giddens' contentions about people's intimate lives. Moreover, it may well be that the notion of the pure relationship, at the very least, is so entrenched in our social fabric as to render any 'testing' spurious. The aim of this article is to explore, generally, the contours of the pure relationship and narratives of the self amongst a group for whom these have had more resonance than for the general population – the adult children of divorce who matured in a post-divorce culture.

I begin by offering an overview of the project of which the study presented in this article forms a part. I then explore the 'pure relationship', looking at the participants' perceptions of its production. Following this, there is a discussion of the corollary of the pure relationship, that is, the

belief that all relationships are terminable and most commonly will be terminated. Finally, there is a more general account of how the participants envisage the family will change over the next 50 years.

The Generation X project

The data are drawn from the Generation X project which was conducted in 2003; the participants were selected using snowball sampling (see Adriaans, 1992; Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981). This chain-referral method was used because potential participants were defined as 'hard to reach' (Penrod et al., 2003). The study was qualitative and did not seek to be representative but to explore a sensitive social terrain in some detail. Like Arditti 'I proceeded on the assumption that it was worthwhile ... to explore young adults' subjective reality of their past and present experiences' (1999: 110).

The initial respondents were recruited via an acquaintance of the research assistant and, as is standard in snowball sampling, each respondent was asked, in turn, to recommend another. This method produced a relatively loose cohort where each participant knew only one other. Fifteen men and 15 women whose parents had divorced¹ were interviewed, either in their homes or workplaces, using in-depth, semi-structured interviews. They ranged in age from 27 to 41 years and all lived in inner-city or suburban Melbourne. Most had occupations that were either professional or associate professional.²

The youngest age at family breakdown was 2 years, the oldest was 25,³ but the majority of participants were between the ages of 6 and 17. Of the participants, 36 percent were living alone, 18 percent living with a partner only, 21 percent living in nuclear families, 10 per cent in step-families, and 15 percent living in shared houses. Nine of the participants had biological children, although others had had roles as step-parents. Three gay men were interviewed, as were two lesbian women, one bisexual woman, one participant who did not articulate a sexual orientation and 23 heterosexual people.

Many of the interviewees volunteered information about their cultural background when it appeared to them to have had an impact on their own family values and those of their original families. Most were from Anglo-Australian backgrounds but others came from backgrounds that were Afro-Caribbean (English), Dutch, German, Japanese, Filipino, Russian and Turkish.

All were interviewed for between one and two hours. The interview began with their family of origin and the end of this family, explored the subsequent families they had lived in, covered the ways they had lived as adults themselves and finally looked at their projections for their own future lives and for the family as an institution.⁴

The interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and yielded 48 main codes, which were then divided into sub-codes (see Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; Minichiello et al., 1995). These codes were then regrouped into 10 coherent thematic groups; general social issues, economic issues, relationships with parents, the divorce, having children, wider family relationships, transition to adulthood, issues of emotional and mental health, and perspectives on relationships in general. The data for this article are drawn from the latter grouping of codes.

Relationships are about growth

In discussions about relationships which focus on the central issue of their purpose the majority of the participants in the Generation X project argue that they are largely about personal growth. Interestingly, there was no distinction in the numbers of male and female participants who held this view, nor between gay and straight participants – it was a common understanding. It appears that notions of gender roles, duty and obligation have been replaced by notions of self-actualization, of individuals as conscious agents of change, of contingency and individualism. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argue that individualism – characterized by a drive for self-improvement and an overwhelming self-absorption – is a result of the fragmentation of older community and family concerns and obligations. This is borne out in public opinion polls undertaken in the United States, which, almost without exception, show that individuals are seeing decreasing attachment to values such as self-sacrifice, moral obligation and social conformity. In their place, people are increasingly valuing the gaining of physical pleasures, self-expression, sexuality and personal choice (Yankelovich, 1994). Such egotism neatly intersects with the free market, which is anxious to provide the goods and services that facilitate such self-interest – a point not missed by the first participant below.

Benjamin is 41, a journalist, and he lives with his wife and son. His parents separated when he was 17 after many years of maintaining the marriage ‘for the sake of the children’. He points to the wider socio-political forces that generate the relationship styles currently experienced:

I think that it is a product of a number of things including the capitalist society we live in that encourages consumption and self-fulfilment as the ideal goal in life and that highly developed individualism that characterizes the economic structure we live in ... tends to encourage individualism and increasing self-realization through either consumption or very individualized pursuits like the gym and getting fit and yoga.

Other participants give an account of their past relationships in terms of a narrative of personal growth, or self-actualization, in which their relationships serve as catalysts for change. But, just as the relationships produced

change, they were also victims of change as the individuals involved moved on. Importantly, however, the ‘failure’ of past relationships was not viewed as a source of regret but as a source of growth.

Here, Alix, 34, who is heterosexual, single, childless and an administrative worker whose parents separated when she was 11, sees her past relationships as part of a trajectory:

I have no regrets as in ‘I should have done this and I wish I did’ but more the ‘If I did go back in time how differently would I do that?’ And then I think I’ve learned and I’ve grown so much through the experiences after that first one that maybe it’s not such a bad thing.

Jackie is 36, single, childless and a social worker. She was 22 when her parents parted, although she speaks of their divorce as having had a profound impact on her adult life. Here she is more specific about the qualities she learned about with a past partner, even though they did not sustain the relationship:

I actually went into that relationship understanding more about commitment. Well, he had a few problems and there was too much of me going into him and not enough of him coming back to me, that’s a way to put it. That’s what happened there. But I don’t have regrets. I think you learn along the way who might be more suited to you.

In the next example, Susan argues that a relationship is produced by the combination of qualities brought to it by each partner. There is a sense of movement but also the sense that an individual is potentially infinite in what they might become with another person. Susan is a university tutor, aged 35, who lives in a blended family with her partner, his son, her daughter and their joint 1-year-old daughter. Her parents separated twice – once in childhood when she was 8 and again, permanently, 10 years ago:

Every relationship is different because of the person that you are with and each person you are with brings out the different dimensions in you but I guess what I’m looking for now, when you asked me before about what I’m looking for in a long-term relationship, I guess it is simplicity as well. I think I’ve matured so much since then [her first marriage] that sometimes I think it was just bad luck that we were together because we were so young.

This notion of personal growth is echoed more clearly in the following, which also introduces the notion that that serial monogamy is the path of such growth, and that relationships evolve at particular times for particular purposes. The first two examples below touch on a sense that early adult relationships have a function in resolving the interviewee’s childhood emotions and experiences.

Cibylle is a 31-year-old chef, who is lesbian and currently single and childless. Her father left when she was 14. She has so far had two long-term relationships:

The second one brought me a lot more maturity. She taught me how to communicate, know my feelings. The first one brought me some independence from my family, helped me find myself away from being the conditioned young adult from school and from the family. It was more of a creative lifestyle.

Trent is a community health worker, 30 years old, gay and partnered. His parents separated relatively recently, when Trent was 22, after a long marriage which was purposely ended by his mother when the youngest child reached adulthood at 18. Here he gives an account of processing what he considered difficult emotions through the use of transforming relationships, and offers a narrative structure to his account, which ends at the point he is at, at the time of the interview:

I had a number of issues that I couldn't handle in my own family experience, that I had to learn through relationships that were quite traumatic. At one stage I did try to kill somebody, not in any kind of accomplished way as you can imagine, but this is the longest [relationship] I've had.... I've always had a theory that you get to a point in your late 20s and the whole world suddenly stops and you are playing this amazing game of musical chairs and you're with the person on the chair when the music stops and that's who you stay with. That sounds kind of tragic but I'm sure it's true!

At the time when I was very emotional, I suppose I was deeply regretful of relationships, but now, being older and with hindsight, I suppose they were all helping me to actually come to the position I'm in now.

It may appear from this that the participants in the study have a strong sense of the pragmatic, of the use-value of relationships and on one level this is strongly supported in the data. Perhaps paradoxically, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and Giddens (1992) argue that the converse of the individualistic narrative approach to relationships is a concomitant strongly felt desire for intimacy and companionship. This appears less paradoxical, of course, when one places such desire in the context of a society obsessed by romantic 'love'. It is just that such love can be experienced anew many times. Furthermore, the desire for love does not sit easily with the increased expectations of relationships that individuals express – expectations that are unlikely to be met over the whole course of a long-term relationship (Wallerstein et al., 2000: 297). Alix's comments sum up the views of many:

I've never actually thought about where love fits in and I've walked out because I know there's more, I know there's a relationship that has a better connection on every level, the mental, the physical, the sexual, the emotional and I thought I had it until a few weeks ago. Well, I was pretty damn close to it. He was ugly, but I could deal with that.

Those participants in the project currently on their own (exactly 50 percent of the sample) expressed a strong interest in finding a partner and, in particular, a partner capable of meeting a range of their needs.

Steve, 31, single, heterosexual and a community health worker, whose parents separated when he was 8 and then permanently when he was 12, had recently left a relationship with a woman who had a young child. Throughout his interview, Steve says how much he enjoys romance:

It's nice to be in love and to share time with someone else and to be able to share an experience and see it from two different people's perspectives.

Yes, I like being in love. Even in the last relationship I enjoyed that, I feel like you grow out of different situations. I think I learned so much out of the situation I've just been in. And there was a few months there where things were kind of comfortable and it was kind of family ...

Louise, a radio dispatcher, was 41 at the time of the interview. Her parents separated when Louise was 12. She has spent most of her adult life single but has had a number of short-term relationships with men. Louise offers perhaps the clearest example of someone who perceives relationships as a lifestyle option. Giddens suggests that 'such choices are not just "external" or marginal aspects of the individual's attitudes, but define who the individual "is". In other words, life-style choices are constitutive of the reflexive narrative of the self' (1992: 75). Louise says:

I wouldn't mind having a partner, but I would want it to be somebody who is similarly independent. At some stage in my life I would like to have a good relationship with someone. It doesn't have to be right now because I'm pretty happy in the things I'm doing at the moment. I'm not sure where they would fit in at this stage of my life but down the track at some stage ... but even if it doesn't happen, that won't bother me either. I just think it would be an experience, something I hadn't experienced before, I suppose. Growing together with someone ... I think I'd like to do that.... If we no longer shared where we're going and what we wanted to do, that to me would be the reason to part ways ... if you diverge too far so what you both want is so different, I couldn't see the point of continuing with it.

All relationships end

The 'point of continuing with it' is the focus of this next section, which looks at perceptions of the durability of relationships.

The data from this study support a sentiment commonly expressed in the literature about the adult children of divorce – their belief that all relationships end eventually (Popenoe, 1994; Rice, 1994; Wallerstein et al., 2000; Webster, 1995). Amato and Keith (1991), Furstenberg and Kiernan (2001) and Wallerstein et al. (2000) found that females tended to be less optimistic than males about the potential longevity of their relationships, and explain this with reference to the common pattern of the father leaving. As one participant in this study said: 'I mean if my Daddy did everyone else is going to.' Yet there were no significant gender or sexual orientation differences in the numbers who held this view in this study, and the vast majority of the

participants held it. It is unclear precisely why. This belief may be the result of the experiences of relationship breakdown that they had as children or as young adults – they witnessed this at a vulnerable age, they have had divorcing role models and yet have commonly seen their parents recover and often have much happier second marriages or relationships. There is no doubt that the participants in this study are not confident about the longevity of relationships, yet they have the sense that ending relationships signals the conclusion of one period of growth and generates the next.

In the following examples, the participants cite their pasts as key influences on their present lack of optimism and confidence in relationships:

I have this little thing in my head that says everyone leaves.... I mean if my Daddy did everyone else is going to. So I think that gives me something like a 75 percent chance that things won't work anyway, apparently. I don't know the stats but I think I've probably had less faith in the institution of marriage or the longevity of relationships be it marriage or a long-term relationship. I don't really see them lasting.... My parents couldn't work it out, their parents couldn't work it out, most people can't work it out so, really, what are my chances? (Alix)

The thing is that I don't look at relationships as a lasting thing. To me, you're with someone while things are OK and if they get to a point where you don't like it anymore, then you leave.... Sometimes I think that it's best that you move on. Sometimes I think relationships get to a point where ... it's no longer enjoyable. (Steve)

Next, Keira and Kelly review their relationship pasts in the light of their parents' divorces – but with empathy. Keira, a nurse who is 32, was just 7 when her parents separated. She is currently married and looks at the relationship with pragmatism, and a sense of resilience should it come to an end. Later in the interview she suggests that this resilience came about from watching her mother raise four children alone:

And I'm married myself now, but I guess I wasn't really big on the idea of marriage because I'd seen it not work and I thought I probably wouldn't marry – I might stay partnered. But my husband now, we do have a pretty good relationship, so we thought we'd give it a go. I feel like I'm going to stay married, and this will last, but in the back of my head, I think I've got defences if it doesn't.

Kelly was 10 when her parents separated. Now 40, heterosexual and a high-school teacher, she is pessimistic about the likelihood of sustaining a long-term relationship:

I can remember distinctly the first relationship that I was in, when it broke up thinking now I can understand why my parents broke up, you know that relationships don't last forever and that people change. It's not necessarily a terrible thing but that's the first time I started to have any understanding of what had happened I suppose. Certainly intellectually but emotionally, it's not so easy. There is so much overwhelming evidence that it [marriage] doesn't last. It's hard to believe because I look around and I see very few examples of happy marriages.

Kelly's perception of a dearth of happy marriages leads us away from the participants' own relationship experiences and aspirations to look at their more generalized values and beliefs about the family generally. How do these adult children of divorce imagine they, and others, will be living in the future?

Family values

The nuclear family exists in the public imagination as a set of powerful representations projected from a number of discursive sites such as the media, popular culture, consumerism, political rhetoric and welfare policy and so on. (Chambers, 2001: 172)

Chambers' observations are not new, yet are worth repeating since one of the seminal features of recent times has been the increasing likelihood not only of people leaving nuclear families, but perhaps more importantly, not forming nuclear families at all. Indeed, Wallerstein's interviewees – the children of divorces from 1975 whom she has followed for 25 years – appear to have employed Beck-Gernsheim's risk-diminishing strategies in full: 40 percent have remained single (2000: 289), and 66 percent have remained childless (2000: 67). Her logic suggests that divorce fosters individualism (the protection of assets and the pursuit of pleasure, for example), which in turn cultivates a climate that is conducive to divorce. In terms of the future, she proposes that the nuclear family will become merely a temporary life phase for some, and that other lifestyle choices will exist alongside it (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 40). The data from the Generation X project indicate that Beck-Gernsheim may well be right, given that only 21 percent of the participants were living in nuclear families. Those who were, perhaps unsurprisingly, were more positive about them than the others, who expressed a profound lack of faith in the institution. Yet, even among members of nuclear families, as Mark indicates below, such feelings were not universally held. It is not easy to ascertain whether living in an age of reflexivity generates these feelings, or whether they are the result of participants' (generally unhappy) childhood experiences of such families. Both factors may well play a part.

The nuclear family

None of the participants believed that parents should stay in marriages that made them unhappy for the 'sake of the children', as some of their parents had. Perhaps surprisingly, given the low numbers of parents in the study, all those who were childless wanted children (regardless of their sexual orientation or whether they were in a relationship) and six of the nine parents wanted to have more children. Those who were single said they hadn't yet

found a person to have children with. Those with children cited age as the main reason why they thought they were unlikely to have more.

All had strong feelings about the nuclear family and generally they felt hostility towards it as an institution. For the most part they argued that nuclear families limit those who live within them – especially children. This concurs with the argument that nuclear families, in particular, have a very specific set of gender roles and economic roles, which are continuously enacted. Chambers argues that they are scripted and performed as a spectacle (2001: 27). Indeed, it is the sense of the spectacle that the interviewees in this study were largely averse to – perhaps because they had been witness to events backstage, as it were.

In this first example, Alan who is a gay, 34, partnered and a policy worker, points to the isolation that nuclear families can engender. Alan's childhood had been dominated by his father's alcoholism and he was 18 when his parents finally separated:

I think that the nuclear family model is extremely fucked.... My father's social life was at the pub and it meant there was little social life at home. I think that's probably a more extreme version but the general nuclear family problem, I think, is the child is too influenced by too little.

The limitations of the nuclear family are seen by the participants as centred on a notion of dysfunction in that children's development is truncated by a lack of role models. This, of course, becomes a more important consideration when the family breaks down and the relationships with the adults the children had relied on (in both the immediate extended family) become attenuated to varying degrees. Jackie, who is 36 and a social worker, concurs with Alan:

I'd like it to be more extended and people have relationships outside the nuclear family that are significant and can help kids develop. For example, where maybe the nuclear family does break down, kids still have other people to turn to for role models ... really the nuclear family cannot supply everything that one needs to grow because things are too complex, too hard.

Mark is probably one of the more conventional participants in the project in that he lives in a nuclear family with his wife and two children. He is a 38-year-old nurse, who was raised by his maternal grandparents after his parents' divorce when he was 7. Mark is attempting to provide what he calls a 'a stable normal family background' for them, but even he laments the family's limits:

I bemoan the fact that they're not probably going to have as interesting a childhood as I did. It's a remarkably sterile childhood and although it's kind of a sick point of view, I suspect they'll be less interesting people for it because life is not about stability. Life is about change and chaos and dealing with it. Tortured artists didn't grow up in happy households unless they were mentally ill.

Finally, Michael who is 35, a single, heterosexual senior bureaucrat, whose parents divorced when he was 11, argues that the discursive presentation of the nuclear family is erroneous:

I think there's a misconception about nuclear families being happier anyway.... People always look at people in relationships and they're happier, they've got children, and they're often just as unhappy as single people.

The participants were asked both what a preferable family system might be and how they saw the family evolving over the next 50 years. Their responses involve having more people in formal families – which they called extended families.

Extended families

In response to the nuclear family, which the participants find so wanting, they offer two alternatives – both of which involve broadening or loosening the constraints that they believe the nuclear family promulgates. The first of these is the extended family, which they anticipate might offer a wider range of role models for children. Inherent here is the anticipation that families will fracture. Gail, who is 38, bisexual, single and an administrative worker, predicts that members from the wider family will step in when children no longer live with their parents. Interestingly, she takes the breakdown of the stem family as axiomatic:

Well it [the family] certainly won't be nuclear, but for me the concept of family has never been nuclear.... I imagine that there probably will be perhaps less nuclear families and more extended families. One would like to think that extended family in the sense of kids, if their parents separated and if they're not living with either of them, that they have good grandparents they can be with, or an auntie or an uncle.

Similarly, Trent argues that 'aunties' and 'uncles' could parent children, but takes it a step further by suggesting that a structure of family roles is more significant – to a child's welfare and development – than any biological relationship which bonds people for a lifetime. Here Trent echoes Beck-Gernsheim's prediction that the family will become a 'part-time community' which 'will tie many people not for their whole lives but only during certain periods and phases' (2002: 40):

I'm sure biological parents would disagree with me but I think it's about strong role models for young people, and many role models. I don't think you need to have a mother or a father either. I think if you actually provide a framework for a child, it really doesn't matter who the parent is, so long as the framework stands.... I think about extended families I suppose. If you've got a child in an extended family, they should know that they need to accommodate views of different adults. If there are going to be a number of adults then those adults actually have to have a very hierarchical view of who is in charge and who isn't in

charge to a certain degree. It's like having aunts and uncles, I suppose, in the way that a traditional family runs.

'Organic families'

Whilst these models offer role variation within an already structured family, the other model offered is a projection into a future in which the family is not role-bound but flexible, varied and its members are not necessarily biologically related. Beck-Gernsheim calls this the 'post-familial' family, which is one of choice, fluidity, negotiation, individuation and closeness (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). In this project one participant termed it 'an organic family'.

Bruce is 27, heterosexual and single. He is an artist and a teacher. He was 7 when his parents divorced:

I think the family has already changed. My understanding of family as it is now, then we should expect the same changes that we already probably have evidence of. I think there will be a shift away from the biological and away from the nuclear to a more kind of organic view about family, which is actually more about the roles of people who aren't necessarily biological agents in a communal or non-communal context, I think we'll see more of that. I think you'll find what people call family basically represents the closeness of a relationship.

Cibylle concurs with this and offers a view of her life 20 years from now which is family-free and ideal:

Ideally, I'd love to be on a huge block of land, very romantic, where the mountains come down and the ocean and have really close friends who live on the same block of land but we don't live in the same houses but have our own little dwelling that we've built ... kind of communal. Living close by and sustain your lifestyle on the land.... Look, I'm a lesbian and that whole concept of a nuclear family doesn't relate to me even on a textbook level.

Zenzi offers perhaps a more pragmatic vision of the future. At 31, she is a research officer who lives with her partner and their son. She has begun to observe her peers' relationships end and, interestingly, links parenting with two households and a mix of household members. Her account suggests that she has observed these emerging patterns already:

A lot of people I know are actually having children, obviously there's the two parents and the child is going between each of their parents and there's only one child, so I can imagine families that are actually blended where everyone is living together but maybe not with both their parents but kinds of mixes. I think there'll be quite a lot more of that. I'm just aware, if I go through my female friends who have chosen to leave someone, I can't imagine it'll be the last relationship, or the last child, that they'll have.

She is, of course, most likely to be right.

Conclusion

I began by claiming that it was possible to account for the changes in family formations Australia has witnessed since the enactment of the Family Law Act of 1976 by examining the ways in which adult children of divorce perceive the nature and purpose of intimate relationships. The adult children of divorce from Generation X were selected for this because they grew up in an era where the pressure to stay married had almost disappeared and because they appear to be avoiding the traditional markers of adulthood – long-term relationships and children. The participants in the Generation X project under discussion here were all raised in more than one family – and some, because their parents shared their care and remarried – lived in a number of families simultaneously (see Amato and DeBoer, 2001; Teachman, 2002; Webster, 1995). As a consequence of this it was argued that they, more than any other Generation X cohort, have the potential for what Giddens (1992) has called the ‘pure relationship’, by which he means an active, contingent, terminable relationship in which mutual pleasure is paramount.

The study under discussion is small, and the results not easily utilized to examine systematic differences in the population. Yet the findings fully support Giddens’ contention. Only 10 percent of the participants currently live in nuclear families but, perhaps more importantly, they are overwhelmingly engaged in what Beck-Gernsheim terms a ‘do-it-yourself biography’ (2002: 41). They have replaced what, in the past, may have been seen as determined identities with a sense of themselves as in a perpetual process of change and development. Personal growth is perceived as being produced by the formation and termination of intimate relationships and, as such, relationship endings are seen as generative.

They also have a strong aversion to the nuclear family as an institution, viewing it as flawed and limited in its potential to meet the needs of children, in particular. They propose that families in the future will be determined less by biology and formal structures, and more by the quality of the relationships of those who consider themselves part of a family, albeit a temporary one.

While it must be acknowledged that the participants in this study probably offer a more distilled version of the zeitgeist around contemporary relationships because of their experiences of family fragmentation, it is inevitable that the numbers of those with precisely these experiences will grow. This is a result of demographic changes and, equally importantly, because people’s views about intimacy have shifted.

The implications of these changes have been foreshadowed by the participants themselves – both in the ways they live currently and the ways they predict they will live in the future – which is largely outside the nuclear family, and in relatively loose formations. Such a shift will have

monumental implications for public policy, and for the law in particular, as the social bonds between individuals become just as significant as the biological. These inexorable changes will pose great challenges to our public institutions over the next few years; it will be interesting to see how they respond.

Notes

This is a longer version of a paper delivered at the TASA conference held at the University of New England in Armidale, NSW, 4–6 December 2003. The author wishes to thank Victoria University for providing the funding for the Generation X project, Nicola Thomson, who provided such excellent research assistance, and the participants who gave their time and insights so generously.

- 1 The sample included two men who had lost a parent through death, but they have been excluded for this article.
- 2 I have used the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ABS, 1996) to categorize their occupations in this way.
- 3 In this case the parents had separated and reunited a number of times.
- 4 Clearly, such a method is embedded within the narrative of the self, which Giddens expounds on, where the individual gives a continuing analytical account of their past, present and their future. This was not an aim of the project, but may be considered as a limitation insofar as it may have induced such a narrative account.

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