

Stepfamilies and older people: evaluating the implications of family change for an ageing population

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ABSTRACT

The changing nature of family life has become a major issue in contemporary Britain. Concerns that change will bring moral decline and social fragmentation are countered by a more optimistic view which focuses on a future of more equitable and flexible family ties. Research drawing on area-based data in Luton amongst older, middle-aged and younger people with experience of family change suggests that so far as inter-generational relations, caring, and transfers of family wealth are concerned, traditional attitudes towards blood ties, household independence and care and support survive alongside new step relationships. The research also suggests that although several respondents had more than one generation of experience of family change, the language of step relationships is still one which is not yet completely accepted, or one with which people feel completely at ease.

KEY WORDS – stepfamilies, care, inter-generational relations, money transfers, divorce, grandparenting

Introduction

And it was just that I wanted to drop me stepmum a line to say, you know, if she's ever down, or she wants to come back for a visit or – I believe in keeping the door open ... my stepmother would be about 61, 62, mind you, she dresses very young – and the gentleman friend she's gone off with is only 35. And – good luck to her. If it makes her happy ... But, I'd like to leave it that, if things don't work out ... that she could come back to Luton, and she'd be welcome. My little girl thinks of her as a Nan. And she's never done her any harm ... My husband's quite agreeable. I can write to her, and if she comes to visit me, that's all right. Doesn't get on so well with my Mum (Woman, born 1951, parents separated when she was a year old and both remarried. Both father and stepfather have subsequently died. She has two brothers and eight stepsiblings. Married with four surviving children).

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You can replace a husband but you can't replace a child (Woman born 1926 mother married twice, divorced her own husband and cohabited for two years with partner who died; daughter's marriage unhappy)

Two statistics which occupy centre stage in debates about family and society in Britain today are the ageing of the population and the rate of family change through divorce and separation. By the mid-1990s the proportion of the population over the age of 65 had reached 15.1 per cent, while four in every 10 marriages in England and Wales were expected to end in divorce. (OPCS 1994; Haskey 1996; ONS 1998). The quotations above come from interviewees who were part of a survey carried out in Luton during 1995–6 which investigated the impact of family change on older people¹. They represent some of the hopes and fears which surface in debates about the future of family life at the end of the 20th century.

An ageing population, together with evidence of high rates of divorce, separation and cohabitation, suggests a possibility that the nature of inter-generational relationships within families might show signs of change. There are two alternative views implicit in the quotations with which we began. There is the scenario of post-modern optimism with a shift away from the restrictive confines of normative roles and a move towards more equitable family relationships. Then there is the nightmare scenario which foretells moral decline and social fragmentation where the most vulnerable in society, older people especially, come off worst in an individualistic struggle for survival (Giddens 1991: 176–7). We identified three key issues. These were: the nature of inter-generational ties; the care of frail older people; and inheritance. This agenda was largely set by concern that the 'nightmare scenario' could leave large numbers of older people without contact with grandchildren or family carers and that transfers of resources between family members may change or reflect new loyalties following family reconstitution. Indeed, this is an area which is attracting a great deal of research interest since it links directly to key issues for social policy, namely who will care for whom in old age, and how will such care be paid for? (Brubaker 1990; Finch and Mason 1993; Johnson 1993; Cherlin and Furstenberg 1994; Simpson 1994; Spitze *et al.* 1994; Allen and Perkins 1995; Jones *et al.* 1995; Finch *et al.* 1996; Coleman *et al.* 1997; Luescher and Pillemer 1998).

In carrying out the research we chose a method, the in-depth life history interview, which allowed people to use their own language in describing changes which they had experienced. This meant not only identifying meanings attributed to family over people's lifetime, it also

meant that we were not bound at the outset by any one definition of 'stepfamily'.

In this paper we consider the three issues, the nature of inter-generational ties; the care of frail older people, and inheritance, in the context of a range of relevant literatures, outline the research methods adopted, and go on to describe the data which ensued, ending with a discussion of the findings.

Background literatures

The literatures which concerned us tend to be very much problem-focused: problems such as who will care for older people, the changing quality of inter-generational relationships and definitions of 'step-family' in ongoing research. Despite the fact that over 40 per cent of carers of older people are themselves over 65 (Allen and Perkins 1995: 24) debates about 'who will care' tend to be focused on the changing roles and expectations of younger family members (Finch and Groves 1983; Ungerson 1987; Qureshi and Walker 1989; Dalley 1996). This is now a substantial literature but with a tendency to reflect less on gendered aspects of the care 'burden' and more on the reciprocities of care relationships within family networks (Finch and Mason 1993; Cotterill 1994; McGlone and Cronin 1994; Allen and Perkins 1995; Jerrome 1996*a*; Twigg 1998). As Jerrome (1996*b*) has pointed out, such studies take a narrow view of older people's family roles, emphasising the care relationship at the expense of others which may be as significant, for example continuing parent roles in old age. Studies of the reciprocal roles of older people within family and inter-generational relationships have been far less frequent in Britain than in North America (see, for example, Hagestad 1991; Bengtson and Achenbaum 1993; Bengtson *et al.* 1995; Soldo 1996). In North America interest in grandparenting has sustained itself with a developing interest in changing roles and responsibilities for grandparents during phases of family change (Brubaker 1985; Cherlin and Furstenberg 1986; Johnson 1988; Connidis 1989).

At the time we embarked on our research, a similar literature was not evident in the UK where studies of grandparenting tended to focus more on emotional, affective and legal ties with youngest family members (see, for example, Douglas and Lowe 1990; Thompson *et al.* 1990; Bamford 1994). The result was that the grandparental role at times of family break up and reconstitution is seen largely in terms of

servicing other family members during periods of high dependency for young and teenage children. Beyond caring reciprocities there are also the roles which grandparents are seen to play in providing material support, even surrogate parenting, at times of crisis (Finch 1989; Finch and Mason 1993; Finch and Wallis 1994; Dench 1996; Gorrell Barnes *et al.* 1998). Our interest lay in discovering continuing roles for older people beyond caring and grandparenting, in particular their position as parents with a longer time perspective from which to view inter-generational relations. This did not appear to have been included in existing investigations into the lives of older family members. British literature on stepfamilies also demonstrated a certain type of bias in its focus away from the perspectives of older family members. This is a literature that has expanded considerably in the last twenty years (Burgoyne and Clark 1984; Ferri 1984; Gorrell Barnes 1992; Robinson and Smith 1993; Batchelor *et al.* 1994) and has been far more influenced by American research (Pasley and Ihinger-Tallmann 1987; Visher and Visher 1996; Papernow 1993) than by European (Meulders-Klein and Thery 1993). Although some British research has a broad sociological focus (Burgoyne and Clark 1984) the research agenda has focused on three main areas: the 'problems' of stepfamilies (McGoldrick and Carter 1989; Kiernan 1992; Batchelor *et al.* 1994) and exploring the 'spoiled identities' arising from step-relationships particularly the myth of the 'wicked stepmother' (Smith 1990; Burchardt 1990; Gorrell Barnes *et al.* 1998) with a dominant concern arising from clinical studies particularly with respect to children (Ferri 1984; Furstenberg 1987; Amato 1994; Collins 1995); attempts to understand them by exploring how they differ from the 'normal' family, using terms such as reconstituted, reformed, or blended (Robinson 1980); and counting them (Haskey 1994).

There is, as yet, no clear message emerging from stepfamily research. Some studies suggest that stepfamilies are often dysfunctional and a major factor in poor outcomes for family members (Kiernan 1992). Yet there is abundant evidence that stepfamilies can be just as successful as any other type of family (Furstenberg 1987; Gorrell Barnes *et al.* 1998).

A third literature, significant for our study is that which relates to family resources. We were interested to see to what extent family change might impact on attitudes towards the disposal of family assets. Given changes in relation to the funding of care late in life, questions of family money are now increasingly significant within families. Rising levels of owner-occupation particularly among those over 65 years of age, in conjunction with rapid house price inflation during the 1970s and 1980s, has led to a huge interest in housing wealth and housing

inheritance (Hamnett 1995; Forrest and Leather 1998) in the 1990s. Controversy has surrounded the debate about the extent that home ownership and its potential for wealth accumulation and transfer through gifting and bequeathing, has upon patterns of social inequality, and the ability of families to reproduce themselves and maintain or enhance their social position (Saunders 1990; Hamnett *et al.* 1991). While it is true that ‘... probably for the first time “modest income earners” have had an asset to hand onto the next generation on death.’ (Thorns 1994: 473), it is also apparent that housing wealth transfers will result in ‘deeper wealth divisions in the longer term between those who own houses and those who do not’ (Munro 1987). Passing on assets to the next generation also assumes a steady state in the value of property inheritance, and yet there are a number of reasons why this will fluctuate. For example, the property of married couples is commonly passed on between spouses and given a longer life expectancy of women over men, this usually means delays in inter-generational transfer. Also the general vagaries of house price inflation will lead to change (Forrest and Leather 1998), and there are increasing numbers of older people using their capital to pay for residential accommodation in later life as well as a small number extracting equity during life (Hamnett 1995).

The impact of family change on such transfers and on the dynamics of will-making practices is not yet well understood. Finch and Wallis suggest that bequests follow a pattern of transfer from parents to children rather than to grandchildren, and that ‘care bargains’ tend not to influence preferences for ‘fairness’ and ‘equity’ amongst children (1994). More recent research suggests that blood-ties remain the strongest determinant of who will inherit and that step relatives receive a tiny proportion of bequests (Burgoyne and Morrison 1997; Finch *et al.* 1996). Through interviews we were interested to probe further to see what meanings and practices are attached to inheritance in families where there has been divorce and other kinds of change.

A continuing problem for anyone interested in researching the area of family change is definition of terms. Research has been shaped by different definitions of ‘stepfamily’ which make comparisons of outcomes extremely hazardous (Batchelor *et al.* 1994). For example, the Office for National Statistics defines a stepfamily as a married or cohabiting couple with dependent children living in their family, one or more of whom are not the biological children of both the man and the woman (Haskey 1994). However, this definition fails to encompass the household of the absent biological parent, who may also be cohabiting or married, creating another stepfamily household. It

would also include those families where children are the result of fertility treatment which involves the use of donated sperm or eggs. Moreover it excludes families with same sex couples.

A broader definition of a stepfamily is that it is created when a parent takes a new partner, whether through cohabitation or divorce. Some work has been done which supports the need for such a wider definition as many people define themselves as living in a stepfamily even if their dependent children are not resident (Batchelor *et al.* 1994). The term can encompass families where a non-biological parent (usually the man) has been a parent figure for the child since it was a baby, right through to the large number of brief cohabitations which last less than a year (Ermisch and Francesconi 1996). There is, however, little evidence that the term is widely used in society, and plenty of evidence that considerable stigma remains attached to the 'step' stem with respect to any relationship (Ribbens *et al.* 1996). The term disguises enormous diversity (Furstenberg 1987, Batchelor *et al.* 1994) and little is known about the extent to which it has a common meaning across cultures and ethnic groups (Crosbie-Burnett and Lewis 1993, Hylton 1995). Indeed in summing up their recent research Gorrell Barnes and colleagues (1998) argue that they 'would see any attempt to describe stepfamilies as if they were one single discrete and definable family form as highly misleading and limiting' (1998: 271). Our study, which overlapped in time with that of Gorrell Barnes *et al.* (1998), took this conclusion as a starting point. For all the reasons just cited we sought to explore the meanings which people give to 'family change' rather

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The literatures which we have so far explored all presented us with deficiencies when it came to understanding the impact of family change on the lives of older family members. Thus, in a British context, the inter-generational literature of caring tends to assume a rather narrow range of involvements for older family members, while the family change literature tends to exclude the perspectives of the older generations. Similarly, family change appears to be a recent addition to the literature seeking to understand practices determining the transfer of wealth from older family members to other generations. From these literatures it became apparent that understanding family life requires a perspective which takes into consideration the roles and obligations which family members themselves define and operate as significant. However, any understanding of the ways in which reciprocities shift within families undergoing change seemed to us to require an approach which not only takes into consideration the meaning of family for different generations, it also suggests a need to

frame this within a time dimension, enabling a perspective which facilitates a longer view of family events. For all these reasons, we devised a particular set of research strategies to explore shifts in the inter-generational basis of care and the nature of transfers and inheritance in families which have undergone change.

Research methods

We were keen to interview people who had experienced some form of family change; however, we sought not to attract people who might have had a particularly strongly formed point of view or organisational involvement in family 'politics' (Batchelor *et al.* 1994: 10). This was partly because we were aware that the language of family change is as yet unfixed; it also seemed appropriate given that throughout the period of our research 'family breakdown' was constantly in the news as a chosen focus for media attention, judgement and concern. We therefore decided against advertising for volunteers. Instead we constructed a sample for interview from a screening questionnaire delivered on an area basis.

Our aim was to obtain data which would enable us to hear how people talk and make sense of family change. The use of a life history perspective enabled the people interviewed to reflect on their own lives over time and it was clear, as the interviews accumulated, that for many this was a first opportunity to make sense of past experience (Portelli 1981; Denzin 1986; Rosenthal 1993). People were searching for the right words and language to explain family change and decision making relating to partnering. The results are narratives which include moral, as much as social and political explanations for behaviour, and which enable us to see how action recorded in larger data sets is explained and justified at an interpersonal level. Qualitative data of this type may also, as Dench (1996: 2, n 6) suggests, challenge researcher bias by revealing unexpected, even unappealing, beliefs and preferences.

The town chosen for our study, Luton, an average-sized town in the South East of England with a population of 171,671 at the 1991 census, has witnessed economic change within both long and newly established industries (motor industry, millinery, light engineering, chemicals). It is also a town which has experienced population growth through migration, both internal from within the British Isles and externally from the Indian sub-continent and the Caribbean. Our aim was to interview a sample of individuals who had experienced family change

following widowhood, divorce, separation or remarriage within their own families. The sample was to be purposeful (non-probability) whilst at the same time seeking to avoid both systematic bias or being 'eclectic in the extreme' – a problem experienced by earlier researchers into stepfamilies (Burgoyne and Clarke 1984). A more detailed description of the research methodology adopted is included in Bornat *et al.* (1996a).

Sampling was guided by a set of parameters felt to be important to the project. These were based on issues of:

- ordinariness
- older age
- inter-generational focus
- diversity
- opportunity/scheduling

The sample was arrived at through a three-stage process. We chose three socially contrasting wards in Luton by referring to census data which yielded differences in terms of social class and housing tenure. Within these three wards we identified census enumeration districts which had relatively high numbers of older people. We used a postal survey of these areas with a brief screening questionnaire which invited people to identify themselves as having experienced some form of family change, defined in terms of divorce, separation or widowhood. A total of 1796 screening questionnaires were sent out during a 10-month period and 249 were returned completed. This process identified 120 people as potential interviewees. Responses were followed up and, together with contacts resulting from a parallel activity involving talking and listening to community groups of older people, a total of 60 interviews was arranged. A number of these included couples, yielding a final total of 72 people, 28 men and 44 women.

Because we were interested in gaining the views of people from different generations our total of 60 interviewees includes people ranging in age from their early 20s to their late 80s. Our final sample included: eight 'younger' members, that is people under 30 years of age with and without dependent children and with living parents and grandparents; 33 'middle-aged' people between 30 and 59 years of age with and without dependent children and dependent parents; and 31 'older' people over 60 years of age with children and grandchildren but no living parents.

Comparing respondents from the screening questionnaire with census data at ward level, it appears that members of our sample were older and more likely to be women. Levels of divorce and separation are slightly higher than rates for Luton as a whole and given the higher

numbers of older people there is a higher rate of widowhood. In terms of experience of family change, the 72 people interviewed break down into four groups:

- 24 people who had lived in a step-household (nine as a child, seven as the partner of a step-parent, eight as a step-parent).
- 21 people who had experienced the formation of a step-household within their kin group.
- 18 who had experienced the formation of step-relationships (but not step-households) within their kin group.
- nine people who had experience of separation but not re-partnering within their kin group.

Over-sampling amongst the older age groups while at the same time maintaining a spread across the generations was achieved, though the process proved lengthy. Where we were less successful was in finding more than one member of a family to interview. This proved almost impossible and in fact led to only two examples from amongst our final sample. Interestingly enough, this also proved to be a problematic strategy for another of the projects in the 'Household and Population Change' Programme (Phillipson, C. personal communication). Our 'generations' are therefore almost exclusively unrelated. This was a disappointment to us, but on reflection not entirely surprising. Family change is still a difficult topic for people to discuss and in many cases the interviews clearly presented an opportunity for a family member to offload feelings and reflections. In such circumstances it might have been expected that they might act as 'gatekeepers' to other family members and be reluctant to pass on names (Bornat *et al.* 1996a).

The life history interviews were relatively unstructured although the interviewer probed on areas concerning the project topics: inter-generational relationships, caring arrangements and transfers of family resources. All the interviews were transcribed and analysed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Gilgun 1992) which identified underlying themes within the data, as well as a focus which emphasised consideration of the language used in relation to family change.

Findings

In what follows we focus on aspects of our three project topics² but begin with a look at the way our respondents use the term 'step' in their discussion of family life.

The language of step-relationships

The many different definitions of the term ‘stepfamily’ (Haskey 1994; Batchelor *et al.* 1994; Dimmock 1997/8), including those provided by dictionaries, are significant in two ways. First, as we have seen, they vary. Second, the effort which has gone in to these definitions seems, so far, to have had little impact on Luton residents. Only one respondent used the word ‘stepfamily’. Even the use of the ‘step’ stem is infrequent and used with reluctance. Gerald Marsh³ now in his late 70s, married a war widow with a daughter; later they had a son together. He explains:

... I’m a great-grandfather step! But I don’t – the word step doesn’t come into my vocabulary now, so that’s how far removed I am from it. I take it as a natural course, they’re my children, and grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. I take it as a natural course of events.

Many of our respondents talked about step-relationships without reference to the word ‘step’ at all though, as in the quote above, it seems that some people need a word without liking it, even with respect to grandparenting. The incidence of such spoken dilemmas illustrates the great difficulties facing many of the people we interviewed. The lack of a well understood and stigma free language to describe post-divorce, or separated or simply successive, family lives creates many difficulties when giving an account of events. What is clear is that neither the word ‘stepfamily’ nor the use of the step-stem is being embraced by our respondents. There is no clear difference between generations in our sample, and little evidence that younger respondents find it any easier to use the words than older ones. Sian Rakhlla has had two arranged marriages, the first ending in divorce. She and her second husband each brought children to the new marriage:

But we do not like to use the step-parent in our culture. We want to see the family together bonding. Although this step was being used in the beginning, but I’m afraid that was terribly upsetting for myself, and for my son, who hadn’t been brought up to use the step word at all. He was just put into this family, saying: This is your new father. Because he was old enough to understand it ... And he is the man you’ve got to respect. Any problems, you came back to us. That’s the same from my parents. So he never used the step – and he knew that if he did he would get told off very badly. Whereas I’m afraid I was getting that from the girls. It was always the step-mother, or step-brother, or no brother at all. And step-grandparents. But we did have to put a stop to that. That was jolly difficult, I must say.

Our respondents weren’t just describing their experiences, they were exploring and reflecting as they spoke. In general they did not seem to

want to have their experiences labelled and made subject to generalisations. It may be helpful to have a name or label to attach to relationships, but many people are very cautious about the step word. It seemed as if each was describing what felt to them like an individual and unique experience. Indeed, the relationships and families were highly diverse and this may account, to some extent, for the lack of use of the word stepfamily.

The process of being interviewed and the longer perspective which a life history interview presented, led some of our interviewees to reflect on personal experiences of family change. Several of our older respondents had experienced family change as children in their families of origin, either through the effects of war, natural causes or through separation and occasionally divorce. Discussing issues of family change in a late 20th century context, meant that some could draw on what they felt were positive lessons from these experiences. For others, it was a case of looking back with a little more dispassion as they drew connections between themselves and their parents at similar life stages (Bornat *et al.* 1996*b*).

Inter-generational relationships

The general pattern which emerged from our interviews was that members of families where there has been some process of change expressed intentions and, indeed, described patterns of relationships between the older generations which demonstrated a range of different types of contact. Older people and younger members of such families talked about family ties in ways which were suggestive of emotional involvement and mutual interest and support, but lived out in the expectation that households would be separate and that non-interference was a measure of successful family relationships. This was true even when families lived close by each other. In this they seemed not to differ from a traditional northern European cultural pattern of 'intimacy at a distance' (Rosenmayer and Kockeis 1963), a preferred independence already identified in other studies (Laslett 1983: 92–3; Thompson *et al.* 1990; Arber and Ginn 1991; Allen *et al.* 1992; Allen and Perkins 1995: 30–31; Keeling 1997). Wilma Walden, born in 1908 was the oldest of our interviewees. Divorced during the Second World War she married again and has five children from her two marriages. A daughter and a grand-daughter are also divorced. Asked how things should be between the generations of a family she replied:

The thing is, parents, they should never interfere with the children when they're married. Because they've got their own lives to live, but you're there, when

they want you, you're there, and they're there when we want. Because they've all got their little lives, haven't they? – when they're married. And that's how I like it. I mean. I'm on the phone, I can reach any of them and they'll be up here in a minute if I wanted them. Any of them ...

The inter-generational tie is maintained by the older parents through processes of family change by providing financial and personal support, sometimes by withholding judgement, always by expressing independence yet gratefulness for contact. 'We've been lucky. We've been down there a couple of times. She (daughter who divorced and remarried) was up this last weekend, because of something they wanted to do ... business she'd got' (Man aged 74, married with two daughters and a son). 'I like it, just to know they're there. As I say we only see them once a week, don't we?' (Couple in their 70s, she married twice, to two brothers, two children by first husband, daughter divorced). 'I mean I know that they're all right and that if there's anything to tell me they'll get in touch. And there's no point in being jealous' (Woman in her late 70s, divorced and whose daughter-in-law was murdered by her second husband). These oldest parents are describing a continued link built around compromises as they adjust to new relationships with their children's generation.

We began this article with a quote from one of our 'middle-aged' respondents. The qualified inclusiveness of her language is typical of the children generation. She'll be 'keeping the door open' so long as her husband approves. These new divorce extended families set challenges for couples. Nevertheless, however these new relationships are managed, when family help and support are mentioned it is always in the context of the parents' independence and the children's commitment to the succeeding generation of grandchildren. When there are no grandchildren then the commitment may focus more narrowly on the children's own relationship, with a complex of parents and ex-in-laws preserved in their independent states. Robert Kent, a divorced man, married to a widow, in his late 40s, and with no children from choice, describes maintaining relationships at a distance with three sets of parents, his own, his second wife's ex-mother-in-law and his new mother-in-law. His parents, who live within 30 miles, are in their 80s, his mother has a dementing illness but his father is still active and goes up to London two or three times a week, so 'the greater worry is that if my father becomes disabled, because he's not very steady on his leg. He keeps falling over'. His second wife's ex-mother-in-law lives in one of the Welsh valleys and they '... still see her ... a marvellous woman, completely alone, living in a dreadful village in lovely countryside ... completely alone, completely alone, slight alcoholic.

Wonderfully cheerful under the circumstances...'. His new in-laws each have health problems though, as they're younger than the others, he doesn't describe them as dependent. His wife's mother has recovered from breast cancer and her father has a spinal disorder:

...he doesn't work. So he's a bit of a liability, in terms of well, potential liability. But they're fine you know, and they survive... And not a family problem at the moment. Maybe when they get a little bit older there'll be some worries but certainly not at the moment. And they're just a joy. Nice wonderful rest for us both to go down there (to South Wales).

In analysing our data we found the theory of 'inter-generational' or 'developmental stake' as first developed by Bengtson and Kuypers (1971) useful. Their suggestion that parents' descriptions of their relationships with their children are more positive than those children's accounts of their relationships with their parents seems to fit with our data. Finch and Mason found a similar imbalance with parents' responsibility to help children 'stronger than the reverse' (1993: 168). However, both these approaches locate explanation in what seems to us as calculative, exchange-based behaviour rather than in terms of emotional attachment. Indeed, we have argued elsewhere (Bornat *et al.* 1997) that adult attachment has been underused in explaining parent child relationships in late life.

In so far as grandparental relations are concerned, we found no examples of grandparents left 'mourning' having lost touch with grandchildren following divorce. We did encounter, however, older parents who expressed bereavement following a child's emigration. From their own accounts our respondents were not the 'hidden victims' of divorce (Johnson 1988). In taking a sometimes quite 'moral' attitude to their own children's actions some grandmothers were indeed able to maintain close contact with sons' ex-partners. Jane Minder is 33 and has three children. She is separated from her husband who was judged to be at fault by his mother:

My mother-in-law. Yes, she's brilliant ... she's been more of a Mum to me than my Mum has. She treats me like one of hers. She always has done. And even my ex-husband ... because of the relationship I have with her, he feels he can't talk to her you know. He can't confide in her, because he knows how close we are, and it makes it awkward for him.

In such a situation those most likely to be most at risk are the fathers and indeed those grandfathers who were least in contact were those who had not maintained a relationship with their own children at the time of divorce or separation. This is not to say that all the grandparents and grandchildren included in the families interviewed were experiencing good quality relationships. Rather that the persistence of

such relationships seemed to be a product of gender. That is, ties remained strongest where a grandmother or grandparents as a couple were involved.

Caring relationships

Although independence and mutual respect of each other's lifestyles may be expressed, this preference may be subject to other pressures once circumstances change. When asked what would happen if a parent became ill or needed help, the middle-aged group tended to emphasise the importance of family ties, of the need to be available to help when necessary, even when their parents had been distant or even absent following divorce or separation. However, with few exceptions they also operated a prioritising system which allowed them to put their own or their children's needs first, sometimes redefining 'family' in the process. Jack Albright is a 45-year-old man living with a divorced woman, they are both parents but have no children co-resident:

You have to live your own life. It becomes your responsibility. My Mum and Dad's not my responsibility. But if I can help them and love them and care for them. But I've got a family to look after as well... I'd make the choices which seem appropriate when the time came... I would make the decision. I wouldn't say they can come and stay with me, and then cause the breakdown of our family. Or, if it had to be a hard decision to make, to put them in a home. I could do that. Because I believe sometimes we've got to make hard decisions in life.

Thelma Gordon is in her late 20s. She has cohabited with two successive partners with a child from each relationship and was brought up largely by her grandfather. She outlines her dilemma. She says she would have him to live with her, but: 'Obviously I've got to put my family first, which is an awful thing to happen (though) I would have him here if I could.'

Dennis and Zena Cosh are in their 30s, his parents divorced. This is his second partnership and, by deliberate choice, they have no children of their own. She says: 'I owe it to my parents to look after them because they would look after me... If the worst came to the worst I think we would have to up sticks and go, wouldn't we? ... I would never be able to employ somebody to look after my parents. No way. I couldn't live with that, no.' But then later she goes on to say: 'We have to reconsider. I mean we can't just give up our life.'

Emotional commitment seems to be strong, but emotions may conflict, as may choices about lifestyle and identities. And, of course, these 'middle-aged' and younger generations are developing the

ground for their own inter-generational sake. When Robert Kent came to talk about the decision to care, he described how at a low point he had considered taking demotion to move in with his parents, but now he has a new partner who visits them regularly and: 'I would be abandoning the whole of my career for perhaps two extra years for her (his mother), and who knows whether she is anyway more comfortable, because she's fairly remote from the world now anyway. So I guess, yes it's going to have to be residential care for her.'

Interviews from the parent generation demonstrated a different emphasis when issues of care and contact were raised. Flora Candy, a widow with three surviving children, one of whom has adopted the son of his divorced ex-wife who was murdered by her subsequent partner, rationalises:

I don't worry, I mean, I know that they're all right and that if there's anything to tell me they'll get in touch. And there's no point in being jealous. I mean with three children and three difficult children...

Johnson in her US analysis of inter-generational relations in divorced and reconstituted families argues that there are three types of 'solidarities' following divorce and reorganisation: 'increased emphasis on the solidarity of the generational bond', the development of a separate 'private, bounded, but abbreviated, nuclear family' and 'loose-knit social networks' of 'permissive and flexible individuals' (1993: 36–37). Her types are appropriate in describing situations in which grandparents are relatively active and able to maintain independence if that is their preference. Extending her typologies into later life, it appears that relationships renegotiated at the time of divorce may well determine the nature and quality of family care. Dick Lathwaite is one of our older interviewees who seems to typify Johnson's third type of solidarity. He has been married twice, but both wives have died. His second wife was divorced with children. He has one child from his first marriage and three stepchildren, nine step-grandchildren and two grandchildren:

... my step-daughter. I see her more than all the others put together. And then my stepson, the eldest one. I see him – at least once a month he comes up. But I don't see as much of my daughter as I would like. But, as I say, they're always so busy. Because she's got a full-time job and often works on Saturday as well. So on Sunday she's got all the things to do in the house. So I can't really expect her to come ambling in here just to see me. And she gets on extremely well with my step-daughter as well. And she knows she keeps an eye on me, so. She says, I know [step-daughter]'ll let me know if you're in any trouble.

However, the integrity of such typologies can of course be affected by

sudden crisis, and, they may not extend ‘upwards’ as effectively as ‘downwards’. Josie Rycroft explained how she heard about her father’s accident from her step-sister whom she hadn’t spoken to since their parents’ wedding 20 years earlier. Her step-mother had first phoned her own daughter rather than her husband’s daughter. While her parents had been maintaining an ‘abbreviated nuclear family’ in good times, at a point of crisis generational bonds were revived but sustained separately. What this seems to suggest to us is that however loose-knit the network of the new extended family, the availability of care and support will depend on generational blood ties. To what extent do such ‘blood ties’ then become fixed through monetary links? In our next section we look at the way the distribution of family money is affected by family change.

Money transfers and family change

Earlier, in reviewing the literature, we highlighted work by Finch and Wallis (1994) which suggests that the urge to be seen as a ‘good parent’ tends to outweigh any likelihood that inheritance will be used strategically to maximise its material value in most ‘ordinary families’. Even when one child has provided more care than another this does not increase their chance of inheriting. In fact parents try to be ‘fair’ and deal with children equally. In this sense people are not rational and do not ‘think any less’ of different children, at least when it comes to inheritance.

These points are important for our study of family change. How might the impact of divorce, separation and remarriage affect the process of inheritance? Can the older generation continue to be ‘good parents’? Might some children become more favoured than others because of family reconstitution? Might it be likely that ‘skipping a generation’ may be more common where the middle generation has experienced change? Are reconstituted families more likely to have made a will? Evidence from the Luton interviews suggests that this remains a fraught area.

From our interviews it seems that when it comes to issues of inheritance, people overwhelmingly made recourse to the principle that ‘blood is thicker than water’. This occurred where there was housing wealth to pass on and where possessions were less financially valuable, and was also the case in relationships where bonds between older people and their step-children were strong.

Doreen Cooper spelled out particularly bluntly the difference she feels towards her two ‘blood’ children compared to her husband’s child

(by a former marriage): when it comes to issues of inheritance ‘I think it’s so delicate a subject we hardly mention it. We did think about it at first. But I think you all stick up for your own... I don’t care what anybody says, your own always seem to come first.’

Even though the oldest child in question was only 11 years old, Doreen was concerned about establishing fairness through wills. For her it was fair that they should divide their estate equally between their two shared children since his son would ‘Get everything from his Mum’. In the end they had been unable to discuss the issue further; fairness was too difficult to operate when blood lines crossed. When one party has access to greater wealth as a consequence of being a member of an extended family then fairness conferred through parent status is corrupted in the eyes of other family members. Inequities introduced through re-partnering were also noted by Julie and Alan Biggin who are each divorced with their own adult children. They married when they were both aged 55 and have tried hard to maintain an equal balance of resources so that all their children inherit on an equal basis. But, as she explains: ‘... when older people remarry ... it seems to me that, if you get one family that is more – that is more powerful than the other family, or larger, then that family very often over-rides the other side ... either more members ... or in money terms.’

Ties of affection and a caring debt make no inroads into inheritance practices. Dick Lathwaite is clear that even though it is his step-daughter whom he sees most:

I’ve left everything to my daughter. And then I’ve left her a letter saying I’d like everything to do with the Air Force to go to my grandson – that’s her son – because he’s always been mad on it. I’ve got an old flying jacket upstairs. He can’t wait for me to die so he can have that flying jacket.

Here we see that a blood daughter would be the ‘natural’ choice. He doesn’t hesitate, it is not a question of one or the other. Rather he demonstrates that sense of control over his own effects, passing responsibility down to his daughter in the form of a letter to carry out his wishes concerning his grandson. He is not going to relinquish this control while he is alive.

Not surprisingly a will might feature as a weapon in families where there is conflict. Lorna Semper described how she had got on better with her father and stepmother than with her mother and that her mother had threatened to cut her out of her will if she ‘... had anything to do with your Dad’. Though she defiantly expressed her contempt for this, she was concerned that there might be ‘a lot of squabbling if anything happens to my Mum because you’ve got two lots, stepbrothers

and that...'. But then, as she pointed out, '...it all depends. If she's wrote a will and she's mother to all of them anyway'. She is anticipating that she can rely on her mother to adopt common practice so that parental fairness will prevail in the final analysis.

Our data suggest that families experiencing reconstitution follow similar rules as intact families. However, splits and re-partnering may serve to make parents emphasise blood lines more prominently when considering their wills; otherwise, if the rules of fairness persist indiscriminately, then children may find their inheritance shared amongst a greater number. Certainly, for our interviews, re-partnering meant that issues of fairness were clearly expressed and indeed 'fairness', 'shared' and 'equally' are words which accompany any discussion of wills and family wealth. David and Vi Crisp are cousins in their late 70s, both widowed with two children each. After they die their house is to be sold and then it will be 'shared fours' for the children. Horace and Bertha Masters are in their 60s. Bertha had the experience of being left out of her mother's will and both are adamant that when it comes to their two children 'Its down the middle' even though they have little contact with their Born Again Christian daughter. Only one of our older interviewees was making plans to favour one child. Mr Boot's son who has a learning disability is to have the proceeds of the house that he and his parents have lived in together. This was partly because his redundancy payment had gone into it, but also because his father recognised that he was likely to need extra support, and that neither of his two daughters was prepared to look after their brother.

Conclusion

Our two opening quotations present something of a contrasting view of the family. We chose them because they represent the two most dominant themes which our study reveals. These are a continuing commitment to the notion of family alongside and indeed intertwined with a commitment to blood ties. Ideas of family and family relationships were clearly adjustable in terms of shifting commitments, endings and beginnings. Families might grow to be more inclusive of step-grandchildren, added in-laws and new step-parents at almost all life stages. At the same time, given certain specific demands, family might be defined in terms of more restrictive blood lines. At times of high dependency, or in expectation of need, then the parent-child

relationship, most usually mother-child rather than couple-child, was identified as the default, the fail-safe. Exercised on a gendered basis such a line might therefore exclude or discourage paternal involvement.

For several of our older interviewees these two familial strategies represented continuity through their own lives. Parents had separated, died, left home or become incapacitated. They were experiencing a second or even third generation of family change. Nevertheless there are changes which families in the late 20th century are managing for the first time. More older people are surviving. Some of our middle-aged respondents mentioned more than two sets of parents or of in-law relationships as a result of re-partnering. Children seem to be more ready to replace partners as relationships break down, with the result that family structure and meaning might be redefined by younger generations. Opportunities for independent living appear to be greater as older members fund their own support through earlier house purchase, occupational pensions and, indeed, through new partnerships.

Commitment to the idea of family as a set of flexible, interconnecting and supportive relationships provides one way to ensure that these more recent changes are coped with, and indeed identified as beneficial by older family members. Maintaining the blood line works in tandem with such principles. At a broad, existential level, this may be a matter of colonising the future (Giddens 1991), a guarantee of immortality and continued identity after death. At a more prosaic level, it means maintaining into late life the parent-child relationship by invoking the emotions, attachments and rewards with which it began at birth. This non-negotiable tie carries with it expectations which cannot easily be shed. At times of crisis and need, it may be summoned up as the key resource, for as one older woman explained: 'We've got nothing else other than our children and they're our jewels. Some are chipped, some are flawed. But they're still our jewels.'

The expectations which underlie such a statement may yet be fully tested as relations with the oldest generation come to compete with the growing complexity of life in families which have undergone change.

NOTES

- ¹ This research was one of seventeen projects funded by the Economic and Social Research Council under their 'Population and Household Change' programme. This had the aim of stimulating research into 'the interrelationships between household living arrangements and broader demographic change in the United Kingdom'. Other funded projects include investigations into lone parenthood, absent fathers, teenage motherhood, migration and gay and lesbian families. A shorter version of this article appears in McRae (ed) (1999).

- 2 We have drawn on these data for a contribution to debates about the feminisation of the family, Bornat *et al.* (1998).
- 3 All interviewees names are pseudonyms.

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