

# Rethinking the sociology of the family

Geoff Dench

Has the sociology of the family been led by ideological concerns about the pursuit for gender equality? And is this period coming to an end? This article challenges recent approaches

## Signposts

Geoff Dench provides a robust defence of the 'conventional' family, and in so doing shows how changes may occur in sociological thinking and social policy on a particular topic. His article traces some historical changes in sociological views of the family, showing how conventional family structures came to be seen by many as repressive (particularly to women) and anti-individual. He presents an argument to show that both men and women have suffered from certain views about what families should be like, and suggests that some younger women are reverting to earlier, more 'traditional', views of male and female roles within marriage. His arguments are thorough and well-presented, and could help you gain valuable marks for evaluation in a debate on changes in family roles and structures.

The sociology of the family is poised for a positive new direction after a long period of fruitless theorising. We need to take a long-term view to understand this.

In most societies, most of the time, the family is regarded approvingly as the most fundamental of all social institutions. It is the place where children are reared and socialised, and where they find their starting place in the wider society.

But the family also provides the key framework whereby adult males are given their responsibilities to others, which transform most of them into useful and caring members of the community. However, this very centrality of the family to the question of how to make societies work is also its weakness.

## 'Anti-family' sentiments

Following the Second World War and the decline of European empires, traditional elites in the West came under a lot of pressure from new, 'meritocratic' formations that were hostile to the inheritance of social position. This process was particularly intense in Britain.

Not only was Britain reeling from the loss of empire, but the national postwar

culture combined values (shared with the USA) which stressed personal freedoms and meritocracy, with social democratic traditions (shared with Europe) which offered the welfare state as a collectivist replacement for traditional family supports.

So the 1960s saw a flowering of what we might call 'anti-family' values in Britain, something which also occurred to a lesser extent in other countries. Rising meritocrats identified the conventional family as a source of repressive, anti-individualist sentiments. These critics allied themselves with those young people — especially younger women — who felt that the existing social order was hindering their aspirations.

This period saw the germination of New Labour, as Labour politicians of the time tied the future of the party to the fortunes of the new, educated elite. Key social reforms — on divorce, abortion and the entitlement of women to 'own-right' benefits — paved the way for steering social welfare in directions which assisted female independence. Women, generally, were invited to stop seeing the source of their economic security as lying in the family. They were encouraged instead to turn to paid work, backed by the state.

As happens in periods of social revolution, this was accompanied by a new evaluation of the public realm of politics and paid work. Whereas the interwar women's movement had largely seen men and women as *different*, and pressed for women to have more power so that family life would get greater protection, the postwar movement (second wave feminism) showed rather less interest in family life. It insisted that men and women were essentially the *same*, and that women should therefore play the same roles as men in the emerging meritocracy.

The generation of women who grew up as this view took shape were often hostile



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to conventional family life precisely because it seemed to perpetuate a sexual division of labour based on assumptions of difference.

### Assaults on tradition

During the late 1960s and through the 1970s, more and more sociologists seemed to attack conventional family life. This situation changed actual behaviour and also led to a new social theory in forms that were more acceptable to feminists.

This entailed dismissing any sexual division of labour based on the family as authoritarian, and imposed by 'society' (or men). It emphasised instead a shift to 'diversity', in which people (especially women) were free to choose for themselves how they lived. This shift had two major consequences.

- First, there was a transfer of focus from extended families to nuclear families, comprising parents and dependent children. Young women seemed to resent parents (and, even more, parents-in-law) exercising authority over them. The expansion of public welfare services, plus the growth of public housing, enabled women to avoid dependence on elders. Nuclear-family households also proved convenient benefit

units for the administration of welfare. Sociology adjusted accordingly.

At first this change was more significant for working-class life, where extended family ties had been more important. But as the growing number of women with careers became *mothers*, then grandparents were needed in order to offer family support. As a result, since the 1980s grandparents have been valued as providers of childcare, but only so long as they suppress more *traditional* views.

- Second, men have become increasingly marginalised in family life. If women can have careers and state support when not working, then male partners may be seen as dispensable.

### Family trouble for men

This view of men in the family can have negative consequences. Research I did myself in the 1990s suggested that this experiment in family life was actually more liberating to *men* than it was to women. Many men freed from family responsibilities were much less likely to have jobs or be constructive citizens, while women were over-burdened both at home and at work. But the meritocratic elite who cham-

pioned new family forms did not recognise these implications.

Women with well-paid careers can be independent, for example through buying-in help. Men with interesting and important jobs don't need family responsibilities in order to socialise and motivate them. Damage done by changes of emphasis in social policy in Britain is concentrated instead among 'ordinary' people.

### Victims of revolution

This seemed to be particularly true for certain social and ethnic groups, such as British African-Caribbeans. Advocates of choice in the 1960s were keen to demonstrate the viability of new lifestyles. One focus was the presence in British cities of West Indian migrant women who were combining single motherhood with paid jobs.

Critics of the conventional family used this situation as proof that 'independent women' could survive very well in communities without male providers. This was unfortunate for two reasons:

- It involved very dubious interpretation of available evidence.



Young migrant African-Caribbean women arriving in Britain in the 1950s were distanced from their families, so they needed to take jobs simply to survive

■ It also influenced actual African-Caribbean lifestyles.

Studies in the Caribbean itself, plus the work of Sheila Patterson among immigrants here in the 1950s, indicate that West Indian society actually *valued* traditional families. But poverty meant they often had to compromise in the UK. Young black women in Britain were distanced from their extended families (and commonly from their husbands too) so they needed to take jobs simply to survive.

In short, this move into the workplace was *not* a cultural preference for black women. However, it was convenient for feminists (eagerly followed by many sociologists) to suggest that it *was*. Janet Finch (1989, p. 126) subsequently attacked conventional British social policies as racist, by arguing that

... the model of the family which informs social policy not only is out of line with the reality of many

people's lives, but can also be seen as ethnocentric, since a mother-centred household is a cultural norm for people of Caribbean or African origin, where it can be seen as a sign of strong family life rather than an undesirable modification.

Promoting this sort of view has had devastating effects on the black community in Britain. Younger African-Caribbean people who have grown up here have been taught that single parenting is part of their heritage. The trends I discovered in the 1990s were especially strong in this group, and were accompanied by growing hostility between men and women, and also between the migrant and locally-born generations.

A vulnerable minority, who were eager to please and to integrate into a new society, were pulled into a risky social experiment which weakened its community. And the white majority attributed it all to the culture that migrants had brought with them!

### A return to tradition?

Sociology has been slow to see both the problems caused for 'ordinary' people by libertarian values and also that many are drawing their own conclusions from what is happening around them. Many people are now trying to return to more 'traditional' versions of family life.

An analysis I completed recently of women's changing values in Britain (Dench 2010), indicates that over the last 10 to 15 years younger women who have grown up in a welfare state system dedicated to family diversity are returning to a more positive valuation of sexual interdependence.

It is the 'baby boomer' generation who benefited most from conventional family lives when they were children in the late 1950s. But they discarded this model when becoming parents themselves, and they have been the most enthusiastic about increasing personal lifestyle choice and expanding the role of the state to underwrite this development (see also Dench 2009).

But many younger women are now adopting a modernised version of the sexual division of labour, whereby most prefer to work only part-time after becoming mothers. This is because — as noted by Catherine Hakim, one of the few leading sociologists to bother with what ordinary women say they want — having tried full-time jobs, many consider the time they spend as mothers and housewives to be more rewarding — and more socially valuable.

### The 'worthlessness' of men

These women seem to value sexual interdependence above female economic equality, and they have growing doubts about policies that prioritise female employment while male worklessness soars. Many of the women who are most likely to say today that they are 'happy' have working male partners to take the strain as main family providers.

The least happy are often single mothers, who do not have this support and are dependent instead on the state, which pressures them to pay back its help by taking full-time jobs when their children are deemed old enough to cope.

Current social policy also does seem to aggravate the difficulties of single mothers, by undermining the supply of 'marriageable' men. Public emphasis today is on the



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importance of work for *women*. Many boys seem under-motivated at school and plenty of unskilled, single working-class men — who have no compelling family reasons to take on that menial work which is available to them — are likely to remain workless.

— In short, the male economic contribution to society is being lost. Communities and families that a few generations ago would have valued men as main providers — and thereby made them useful — are now being submerged beneath a tide of antisocial behaviour by young men who no longer feel needed. Policymakers may be blind to this, but ordinary women can see that many men liberated from family responsibilities are reverting towards nature.

### Conclusion: lessons for sociology

British sociology needs to demonstrate a greater readiness to challenge prevailing orthodoxies by looking more critically at

the consequences — especially for poorer, less powerful people — of the state's abandonment of conventional families. Grandparents have been partly rehabilitated in recent years, but it is likely to be some years before male partners too are generally regarded with equivalent approval.

But the shifting values among some younger women indicate that the wheel of change may be turning. The *public* realm does not seem able to function for long without a stable *private* realm producing reliable and happy citizens. We often forget that society is part of nature, and that humans have gone further than other social animals in finding a useful role for adult males. This has been achieved mainly through family life.

In this spirit, finally, it is important that we as sociologists never forget the interests and perceptions of ordinary people. The discipline has a duty not simply to

become the handmaiden of powerful (*or* rising) elites.

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