

Families in New Zealand: the Challenge for Policymakers

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Introduction

“Family policy” is a field which presents a set of unique problems. One is the difficulty we have in removing individual experiences (and prejudices) from the discussion about political choices. There is something remarkably odd, indeed ostrich-like, about the debates we have about families, our relationships within them, and where they fit into the broader contexts of communities and cultures. Quite simply, our heads are in the sand about what a family is, and how in New Zealand perceptions have merged and changed in step with other shifts in society.

The agonising over families is not new. It was a Greek philosopher who bemoaned the state of youth in the following terms: “Children nowadays are tyrants. They no longer rise when their parents enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble their food and tyrannise their teachers.”

In 2004, the bemoaning continues. The American sociologist David Popenoe argues for example that through a lack of both social support and individual will, family has reached the ‘end of the line’, after a long decline. Similar views are held in New Zealand. They were advanced for example during a television debate in September which went to air with the subject “The nuclear family is the only family.”

This article sets out to examine the (brief) history of families in the western world in order to provide a perspective on the immediate issues. It will also touch on the emergent diversity of New Zealand families in this 21 century. Finally, it seeks to identify some of the focal issues for constructive debate about policy choices. (This treatment may not do full justice to the interplay of various cultural strands, with *whanau*, *aiga*, and other models becoming not only familiar, but also an integral element in the genealogy of future generations).

Families in change

Why are we in such angst about families? Should we be as deeply concerned as many commentators want us to be? It *is* true that we are in a period of rapid change, but this is not unprecedented – such eras have occurred before. As Anthony Giddens, a British social theorist has argued:

Amongst all the changes that are going on today, none are more important than those happening in our personal lives – in sexuality, relationships, marriage and the family. There is a global revolution going on in how we think of ourselves and how we form ties and connections with others. It is a revolution advancing unevenly in different regions and cultures, with many resistances.

Furthermore, no-one is exempt from family influence. All cultures can identify some grouping of people whose role it is to raise children. As individuals, then, we are naturally, and quite deeply, concerned about the concept since it represents our most intimate relationships.

Again, this may not be unusual. Everywhere, families are hugely diverse in today’s western society. ‘Normal’ families have not disappeared, but other forms now increasingly exist alongside them. This diversity is the cause of a great deal of debate in terms of whether they work or not, whether they should be allowed to exist, and how we might return to the ‘good old days’ of the nuclear family.

At least as significant as diversity is the steady disappearance of models and boundaries for families. These have been provided in the past by cultural norms, social sanctions, and political dictates. One’s social class provided further boundaries (and still does in many cultures), as did gender roles. People knew how women and men should behave, even if they did not like those

restraints. These guidelines are dissolving at varying rates, giving way to choices and options that are increasingly made at individual rather than family group levels. No longer does the youngest son of a catholic family necessarily enter the priesthood; other options are available to him.

Inevitably, the dissipation of external boundaries and constraints has internalised the choices available to families, and to individuals within them. In turn, this has added to the variety and diversity of family structures we see today. In most official usage, the word 'family' now has to be used in the plural. It is notable that when the present Government fulfilled its promise to the political party supporting it (to set up a separate agency concerned with family issues) this body was named the *Families Commission*.

An historical perspective

Families have always changed by being responsive, and adapting, to fluctuating social influences, economic pressures, migration and sometimes conquest. What follows is a brief outline of the way these changes were experienced over the last four centuries by one broad grouping: those societies which formed the Western tradition.

Starting with the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the pattern in Europe was one of household-based economies. In other words the family was an economic unit, with the father identified as the "head of household"/manager. We can think of the trades, crafts and guilds which characterized the pre-industrial era; within the family unit, we then see women and children playing a centuries-old role as economic contributors – a role which was not dissimilar to the situation in many non-European societies.

With the advent of the industrial revolution early in the nineteenth century, "home" and "work" were separated, in a major departure from this long tradition. The role of the previous "head of household" most often became downgraded to that of a mere worker in a much larger economic unit. The home then became important, for all family members, primarily as an emotional refuge and as the focus of family life. But another factor was to emerge as the century drew to a close. This was the introduction of compulsory education at the primary level. As a result, children were to acquire greater (and earlier) independence, leading to greater power as individuals – as reflected in

decisions to move away from "home" to set up their personal (and separate) families.

The twentieth century was to bring more rapid and extensive changes throughout society, as reflected in the words of Giddens quoted above. Progressively, medical and scientific advances brought lower mortality and a greater capacity to control fertility. The family became nuclear and marriage was not entered into solely to produce children. Sociologists chronicle the emergence of 'companionate marriage'.

Alongside these changes, two major wars in Europe were to put a different slant on the role of women, who were often drafted into industry to carry out roles previously held by men. This liberated the males for armed service, but in the peacetime situation it created many problems of readjustment.

Some would argue that this was a major influence on the feminist movement in the last 30-40 years, although there were undoubtedly other key factors. By the year 2000, there were in any event few Western societies where this movement had not brought about an irreversible shift in family patterns. Women were entering the workforce at all levels (and not simply in part-time or flexible hour roles, although these were statistically significant). We see the new dual earner household, with or without children, and also the pattern of "double shifts", with one partner at work when the other is at home, and constant baton-changing between them (especially if child care is involved).

For the male earner, this removed the original rationale for a "family wage" as the measure of adequate income. There was some diminution therefore of his "sole provider" status which had been predominant for over a century. This and other changes have fed into the patterns which are already emerging for the twenty-first century, although any summary must be highly speculative at this early stage.

Already, however, we can see the emergence of high rates of change in the family. There is probably a much greater emphasis on the emotional aspects, bringing sometimes a "negotiated" approach to relationships within the unit. Consequently, children are beginning to enjoy more economic, legal and personal power than in previous centuries. For some ethnic groups, this is unprecedented and will bring quite difficult challenges to traditional notions of seniority and *mana*.

In parallel, the prolongation of life (through medical technology) and continuing developments in fertility control will produce a larger proportion of multigenerational families and a higher incidence of childlessness. Changes in the ages of marriage and childbirth are already becoming familiar, leading to a pattern where the individual is probably spending less time in a family situation. Artificial reproductive techniques can be bracketed with an increase in households with same-sex parents and in the use of surrogacy.

Within a relatively short historical period of about two hundred years, therefore, the family as a social institution will have changed beyond recognition. In New Zealand, this process has coincided with a phase of new settlement from European, Pacific and other sources. The process of adjustment, and the sequence of cultural and genetic cross-fertilization with the indigenous Maori population, will inevitably exert a strong influence on our national view of what makes up a “family”. Policy constructs must in turn reflect the plurality within society, rather than remain based on a “one size fits all” approach.

New Zealand families today

Today, then, it is not surprising to record that a set of fundamental changes is under way in this country. We are all aware of shifts in the dynamics of families, in the choices people have available, and the diversity of family forms and structures now in existence. As noted above, this has emerged from a complex and inter-related set of factors sited in cultures, in communities, and in legislative provisions. But we can also recognize a tendency for the policy debate to reflect strong nostalgia for the nuclear family. Possibly this is part of the delayed response seen in other areas of policy. In New Zealand as elsewhere, social and political interaction is slow to recognise changes and new elements of diversity as they appear. Inevitably, there will be groupings and political platforms which remain in denial and continue to advocate the “freeze-frame” solution.

It is undoubtedly more helpful to the formulation of policy options to see the “nuclear interlude” for what it is, or rather what it has been. The record shows it as a blip in the social evolution of families, especially if we interpret the term “nuclear family” in its strictest sense of heterosexual married parents, with father as the main provider and mother as the homemaker. This is not

the reality for the vast number of people today, and even in the heyday of the nuclear family it was not close to reality for those families who could not afford to have either adult out of the work force.

In order to summarize these trends more vividly, let us turn to the statistical record which sets out the state of families in New Zealand today.

Age at first marriage

- Now 27.7 years for women, 29.5 years for men
- In 1971, it was 20.8 years for women and 23.0 years for men
- Age gap is now 1.8 years; was 2.7 years in mid- sixties

Change in marriage rates

- Current rate is 14.5 per 1000 not-married population
- In 1971 it was 45.5 per 1000 - now less than a third of that rate

Marriage and divorce rates

- Current divorce rate is 13.1 per 1000 marriages (10,491 in 2003)
- Highest rate was in 1982 after the Family Proceedings Act

At what stage do divorces occur?

- Age at divorce is rising - now 42.5 years for men, 40.1 years for women (in 1993, the figures were 39.6 for men, 36.8 for women)
- 46% involve children; of those 46.4% are under 10, 56.6% over ten

Cohabitation

- 1 in 4 partnerships were cohabitations in 1996 for those between 15 and 44 years
- More partnerships are cohabitations than marriages for couples under 25

Lone parent families

- 23.6% of children are living in lone parent households
- Rates of increase are slowing

Father-headed lone parent households

- Nearly one in five children in lone- parent households live with their father

Remarriage

- More than one in three marriages involve at least one person who has been married previously
- That number was one in six in 1971

Births in New Zealand

- 54,021 in 2003, 3% lower than 2001
- 17% lower than peak fertility in 1961, despite 86% increase in women of childbearing age

Fertility and age at birth

- Fertility rate is 1.9, lower than 2.1 for replacement
- Is a little higher than Australia, UK, Canada, Denmark and Sweden but the same as France
- Median age for first births is 30.1; over half of children born have a mother over the age of 30.
- In 1971 median age for first births was 24.9

Mothers in the work force

- Only one in three children has a mother who is not in the work force

In 1996:

- 35.5% of mothers of infants
- 51.2% of mothers of 1-4 year olds
- 64% of mothers of 5-9 year olds
- 72.4% of mothers of 10-14 year olds
- 25.6% of children live with parents who are both employed full time

What is important about families?

Families clearly continue to matter, but in rather different ways from the past. The description of 18th century England showed them as primary sites of work and spiritual sustenance. Gender roles and social roles were clear, and were dictated largely by church and state. Young people did not have to work out their identity and morals; all they had to do was to learn what was right and wrong. Today, perhaps the most fundamental and far-reaching change from those times is the flip from external constraints and guidelines, to internal ones.

Families (with few exceptions) no longer provide a work environment, but they are the arbiters and fashioners

of their own microcultures, values, and beliefs. In fact, this imposes an enormous responsibility on families, who are not always up to the task. Parenting, for example, is now a complex psychological task rather than merely a functional one, and there are few guidelines available. The rules our parents followed no longer seem to apply. No-one tells us, either, how to be a stepfamily – even though increasing numbers of people are facing the specific challenges which are posed by this family form. Even being a satisfied and satisfying partner is far less straightforward than it was 50 years ago. The core family roles have been pared down to two, both of which are awesome in the full sense of that word. They are to nurture their young and other dependents; and to provide an exchange of affection and support (both economic and psychological) among their members. How are these functions best fostered? There are three possibilities, each of which would take another article to explore in full. In summary, however:

- One is to minimise stress on families – in particular economic stress and stress at the work/family interface. These are largely policy issues.
- Another is to encourage and support families in using their own resources and strengths to flourish, rather than to focus on their deficits. This is particularly applicable to families that do not conform to the ‘normal’ image, yet who can (and often do) function optimally for all their members
- A third is to enable family members to develop and sustain relationships amongst them that are positive, realistic, and stable. In this time of demand for emotional and psychological satisfaction in family relationships, and of comparative ease of dissolving families, this is particularly crucial.

Inherent in the selection of these three approaches is the notion of respecting all families, in their diversity, and recognizing their vulnerabilities and strengths. We need to know more therefore about what matters and what does not matter in relation to strong families.

What *does not* matter is the sex of parents. All the research thus far on families where parents are the same sex (mostly lesbian partners) indicates that children flourish in such families and that relationships are strong. The children may suffer stigma; they are no more likely to be teased than other children, but if they are picked upon the teasing will focus on the sexual

orientation of their parents. (Stigma, it might be noted, lies outside not inside the family.)

Another factor that does not matter is *legal status*. The fact of being married *in itself* has been shown to confer no particular advantage on parents or their children. We know that marriage is not a guarantee of stability or happiness, and it is becoming apparent from research that for children the legal status of their parents is irrelevant. In the US, some factors associated with cohabitation are important – unmarried parents there are more likely to be poor, and poverty is a known contributor to family dysfunction. (Research in Europe shows that this is not so much the case, for example in the Scandinavian countries, and it may not follow such a clear pattern in New Zealand).

A third factor that is not important in terms of parenting and good parent-child relationships is *biology*. There is something of a contemporary myth about biological relationships being stronger than social bonds. Studies of families formed by artificial reproductive techniques, and of adoption taking place in infancy, indicate that genetic relatedness is not in itself a predictor of wellbeing in families. In fact, it is estimated that in about 10% of New Zealand families, the father is not the biological parent of his child or children and no-one apart from the mother knows. Children in families formed through artificial reproductive techniques can have five parents at the time of their birth; two social parents, a surrogate mother, and two gamete donors. It is therefore a challenge for family policy to articulate how such families might be helped to arrange their relationships.

Knowledge about genetic origins will of course have its own significance, especially for the young people concerned. Experience in adoptive families (and in those using artificial reproduction) indicates that for many it is very important to know their genetic heritage. Possibly, this will turn out to be important also from the top down. Consider, for example, the parents of gamete donors who have genetic grandchildren and who may at some stage want to know about them (or have the opportunity to find out more). This might especially be the case where there are no other grandchildren in existence.

A fourth factor that is not important is the *structure* of the family unit. Having two parents is not necessarily

'better' than having one, or three for that matter. What does count is the pattern of transactions – of what is going on in a family. We all know two-parent married families where the family dynamics are toxic for both children and adults; we also know single-parent families where children thrive. Structure in itself does not predict optimal family functioning.

What is important to families?

The brief and incomplete answer is *stability*, although by itself it is not sufficient. Successive transitions are demonstrably damaging for children (and adults), yet remaining in a dysfunctional, conflicted home environment is even worse. Stability has to be given a real chance of being established, but this can only happen if individuals make some kind of commitment. Again, we are not talking legal commitments here. Recent work at Victoria University of Wellington indicates that cohabiting parents are just as committed to their relationships as those who are married, and many eschew marriage because of lingering connotations of restraint and/or religion. In the recent debate about the Civil Union Act, it has been stressed that it would offer an alternative kind of commitment that is likely to foster stability in many relationships.

In today's families, commitment calls for negotiation of relationships. It is interesting to see how the sequence between commitment and negotiation has reversed over time. Not so long ago people made a commitment to each other through marriage, and *then* embarked on the day-to-day negotiations that are the bedrocks of a functioning relationship together. Now, it is far more common for the process of day-to-day negotiation to be undertaken *before* a commitment is entered into. Only about 15% of couples now marry without cohabiting first, and they represent a group with particular values and beliefs.

Again, the onus is on individuals to develop functional relationships and to maintain them, rather than to have to accommodate pressure coming from outside. This sets up both vulnerability and opportunity. If the partners fail to establish a stable relationship then the option of leaving is comparatively easy. Conversely, success will set up a relationship that works well for the individuals involved. (In Sweden the median age of first child

birth is lower than the median age of marriage; in other words, most couples will opt to have a child before they marry).

Finally, parenting is a factor that stands out as mattering very much. It is not easy. No longer are parents in an unquestioned position of power and supremacy; children have (and will extend) power in many arenas. They have a large amount of power in decisions that are made about purchasing, for example, from hamburgers to houses. Frequently, they can also appear smarter than the parents – at least in the sense that they know a lot about things, from being ‘cool’ (and avoiding “uncool”) to manipulating microscopic cellphones with their smaller fingers...

None of these elements in the contemporary scene will alter the basics. Children continue to need not only love and support, but also monitoring and guidance. One of the saddest aspects for the practitioner or researcher is to see mothers and fathers who are (almost literally) scared of their children. Sometimes this may come from a sense of guilt about being absent from the family and in the workforce. Often it will lead to a situation in which ‘quality time’ becomes a priority. But it can only be selective, since it inevitably comes at the expense of balanced parenting. We do children no favours if they grow up with a sense of entitlement that is far beyond reality. Children need to know that they are loved to bits, but they also need to have appropriate boundaries.

Postscript

This article is adapted from an address by the author in 2004 to specialists involved in using music as therapy. It is tempting to draw on musical analogies when describing the trends reported here on the shape and place of contemporary family units. There are common features which can be captured in words such as “harmony” and “tonality”. Perhaps the most important is that form of highest musical achievement, where both the individual players are indistinguishable from the group, and where the sound emerging is itself somehow detached from the separate instruments.

The shape of that harmony, however, will inevitably vary amongst family groupings. Just as we respect

diversity in musical forms and harmonies, so might policy in New Zealand focus not on the composition of the group, but on the harmonious interplay of its members.

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