

The modern family - myth and reality

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Defining the family

Is it time to redefine the family? Some commentators certainly think so. There is a great reluctance nowadays, especially amongst politicians and opinion-formers, to depict the family as a married couple with children. It is easy to assume that this unit is no longer the norm, and that families come in so many shapes and sizes that all our traditional assumptions are now redundant. So this seems a good opportunity to examine the facts about family life at the beginning of the 21st century, and consider whether a reassessment is needed.

We all know that over the last thirty years there have indeed been significant statistical changes. In 1971 fewer than 10% of babies in the UK were born outside marriage; now the figure is more than 40%. The percentage of children living in lone parent households has also increased four-fold, and divorce rates have doubled. So it is undoubtedly true that couples nowadays are less likely to stay together, and children are much more likely to have to cope with their parents' separation and divorce, than in the 1970s.

A new era?

But have we really moved into a new era, where family breakdown is so widespread that all we can do is learn to accept its consequences, and try to mitigate the pain and suffering that result? A report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation earlier this year suggested that this might be the case, arguing that "we need to move on from categorising the children of divorced and separated parents as having an experience which is essentially different from that of other children. It is time to recognise that all children can be expected to undergo a number of transitions in their family circumstances." This rather implies that we can't do anything to stem the tide of family breakdown and we should therefore teach all children to expect change and insecurity - surely a counsel of despair.

Another 2004 report, this time from the Gulbenkian Foundation and called 'Rethinking Families,' also emphasises the 'new' shape of family life. Remarking that today's families are "likely to include step-fathers/step-mothers/step-siblings or same-sex parents" the report suggests that the word 'family' should itself be replaced by 'families' as a better way of describing the 'new groupings.'

The present Government appears to share this view. The amount of parliamentary time recently devoted to introducing same-sex Civil Partnerships, and adoption rights for same-sex and cohabiting couples, might lead you to think that these alternatives to the married family have become popular new ways to bring up children. But do the facts bear this out? You might be surprised to learn that the 2001 Census found that same-sex couples constitute less than a third of a percent (0.30) of all UK couple households. Such a tiny percentage would be described by most social scientists as 'statistically insignificant'. Certainly it is impossible to argue that this particular household formation represents a trend to a new way of life.

The strength of marriage

Cohabitation is undoubtedly more widespread among opposite-sex couples but even so, the Census shows us that marriage is in no imminent danger of being replaced by living together. More than 85% of couple households still consist of a married couple, whereas less than 15% are cohabiting. Cohabitation has in many cases become a short-term preliminary to marriage, but rarely constitutes an alternative, and is at present in no danger of supplanting it.

Politicians would do well to get a grip on these facts, rather than succumb to the myth that policies to support marriage would be unpopular with voters. In particular, legislation in response to pressure from minority groups should not become an excuse for redefining the nature of family life. Instead, government should focus on policies to strengthen the family, in order to reduce the incidence of breakdown and protect children from insecurity and loss. Since lone parenthood and fragile cohabitation are most prevalent in our poorest communities,

reforming the welfare system to remove inbuilt disincentives to marriage would be a good place to start.