

# New families for partners, but traditional families for parents?

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Contemporary understandings of family revolve around the themes of dramatic social change and flux. The ‘social bedrock’ of family, it is assumed, is rapidly shifting, perhaps even collapsing, and is being replaced by looser, and more individualised, arrangements for living, loving and caring. This assumption is often supported by statistical comparisons with some implied ‘golden age’ from the recent past. For example, heterosexual married or cohabiting couples accounted for just 57 % of British households in 2006, a decrease of 13 percentage points since 1971. Conversely, one-person households increased by 10 points from 18 % in 1971 to 28 % in 2006 (Social Trends, 2007). More and more couples cohabit outside marriage (accounting for 25 % of adults under 60 by 2005 – double the 1986 rate) and over four in ten (43 %) births in 2005 were outside marriage - most to cohabiting couples, compared to just 12 % in 1980, (ibid.).

But what do trends like these actually mean for the nature of family life? Do they confirm notions of ‘family breakdown’ resulting in social and moral dislocation? Or do they suggest a continuing commitment to family life, if often expressed in different forms than before, perhaps with increased opportunity for choice, tolerance and family democracy compared to rigid and oppressive families of earlier decades?

One way of approaching this question is to see what the public think. We have recently examined this through the 2006 British Social Attitudes Survey (Duncan and Phillips 2008)<sup>1</sup>. We assessed whether, and how far, the public’s views show that the ‘traditional’ centre of ‘the family’ – the married, co-resident, heterosexual couple – is no longer central, and how

far alternative family models are seen as equally valid. We focused on public attitudes towards four key areas: heterosexual partnering; divorce and separation; non-conventional partnering (living apart together and same sex couples) and solo living; and friendship. Put simply: is marriage seen as the best form of relationship for partnering and parenting, or are other family forms – or indeed relations ‘beyond the family’ - seen as good enough for everyday life? We found that attitudes varied sharply according to whether we were talking about partners and adults or, conversely, parents and children.

### **Partners and adults**

One unequivocal result is a consensus that marriage and unmarried cohabitation are socially similar (two-thirds agreed, with just 19% disagreeing). This certainly marks a major change from the 1950s ‘traditional model’ (although we should remember that this model seemed quite ‘modern’ at the time). And despite pundits and legal convention, around half agreed that unmarried cohabitation shows just as much commitment as marriage. There is also considerable scepticism about weddings as a symbol of life long commitment – only 28 % thought that they are, whereas a majority saw them more as a celebration. A third (34 %) also saw marriage as risky because of the high likelihood of divorce (especially those who are themselves separated or divorced, 47% of whom agree). See Table 1. These results tally with earlier research (see Barlow et al 2005) which suggests that it is personally expressed commitment that is seen as significant by most people, not the public display of commitment as expressed in a marriage and a wedding.

**Table 1. The equivalence of unmarried cohabitation and marriage**

There is little difference socially between being married and living together	%	66	12	19
A wedding is more about a celebration than life long commitment	%	53	16	28
Living with a partner shows just as much commitment as getting married	%	48	13	35
With so many marriages ending in divorce these days, couples who get married take a big risk	%	34	30	36

Base 2775

Source: Duncan and Phillips 2008

What then is the nature of this commitment? Qualitative studies report that by the 1950s the couple (which was assumed to mean marriage) had moved to the centre of many people's social and emotional lives – at least normatively (Lewis, 2001). However, in 2006 most respondents thought that relationships are much stronger if both partners have independence to follow their own careers and friendships (62 % agreed), with just 28 % thinking that social independence for partners puts their

relationship at risk. So, yet again, we see a departure from the 1950s model.

To those taking a 'traditional' view, one that stresses the centrality of the married and co-residential couple, divorce and separation are clearly a family tragedy. Both significantly undermine the idea of marriage as life-long commitment; indeed, those taking the pessimistic position cite divorce and separation rates as evidence of family breakdown. Alternatively, a more optimistic view would see divorce and separation as a necessary, fairly normal, and perhaps even beneficial, part of the life course.

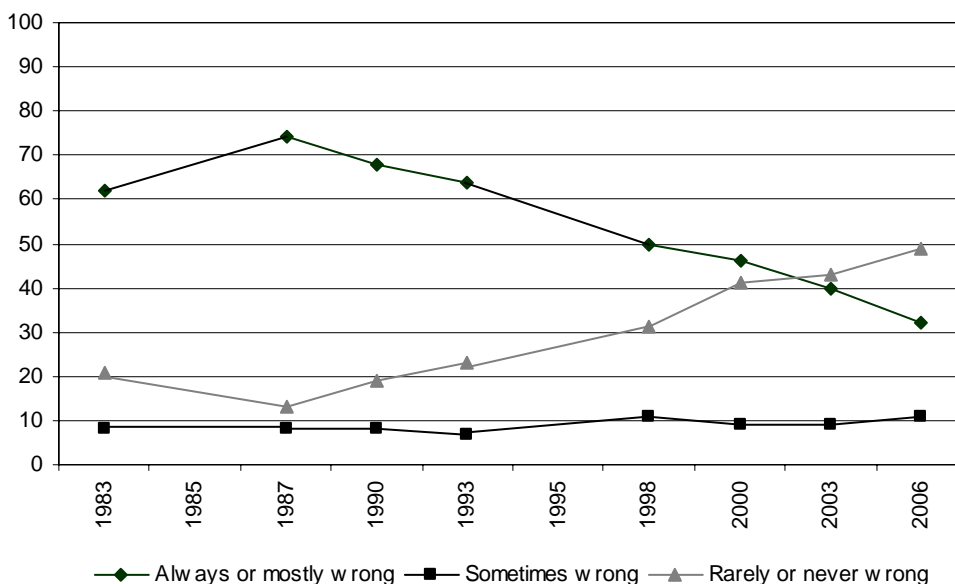
The majority of respondents in the 2006 survey took the optimistic view. We might expect widespread agreement with the proposition that divorce is the only response to violence – only 14 % disagree – but even fewer disagree with the idea that divorce can be a positive step towards a new life (just seven %). Nearly two-thirds agree with this statement. This suggests that, for most, life-long commitment through marriage is not seen as a necessary part of a successful life, a result that undermines the traditional view of marriage.

The centrality of marriage itself has diminished in contemporary Britain, but so far we have assumed that the co-residential partnership (whether married, cohabiting or reconstituted after divorce) remains the normative centre of family life. But is this true? Are partnerships between people who live apart (so called LATs – Living Apart Together), or those between same-sex partners, seen as deviant, peripheral or inferior - as arguably the case in the 1950s and 60s. And what about 'solo living' -

people who live alone? Are they still perceived as stereotypical ‘spinster’ and ‘confirmed bachelor’ – people with a ‘deficit identity’ who have failed at normal life and cannot make lasting relationships. In all three cases the answer seems to be ‘no’; non-conventional’ partnerships or solo living are generally seen as fine for consenting adults.

In the case of LATs a majority in the 2006 survey (54 %) agreed that “a couple do not need to live together to have a strong relationship”, with only 25 % disagreeing. As many as 10% of all adults actually do live apart from their partner, and while some of these relationships will be more akin to ‘dating’, over than half in the 2006 survey appeared to be in relatively stable and significant partnerships. Indeed, other research has found that around 40% of people describe living apart together as their ‘ideal relationship’, compared to over 40 % for exclusive marriage and just under 20 % for unmarried cohabitation (Erens et al., 2003). In this sense, the co-residential couple is no longer particularly central as a social norm.

Only 0.3 % of co-residential couples in Britain defined themselves as same-sex partners in the 2001 census (Duncan and Smith, 2006), although this is likely to be a significant underestimate of the actual number of same-sex partnerships (and many will be LATs). Again, the initial impression is of widespread tolerance. By 2006, only 18 % took the view that homosexual relationships are always wrong, compared to 24 % in 1996. Tolerance declines, however, when we asked about actual sexual relations, rather than relationships in general terms. The results are shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1 Views on sex between same sex adults 1983-2006**

Now a third (32 %) of respondents see sex between adults of the same sex as always or mostly wrong – which must leave some respondents in a ‘Church of England’ position, where homosexuality is all right as long as sex is not involved. This inconsistency suggests a difference between tolerance – something not approved of can be tolerated – and acceptance

– where there is no disapproval. This is perhaps why over a quarter (27 %) disagreed with the view that “civil partners should have the same rights as married couples”. However, the largest proportion (49 %) still thought sex between same-sex adults is rarely or never wrong (showing substantial liberalisation over the last 15 years), and there was a strong consensus that same-sex couples can be as committed as heterosexual couples (63 %), with very few disagreeing (12 %).

Similarly, there is little support for the ‘deficit identity’ image of solo living; 69 % agreed that it is not necessary to have a partner to live a happy and fulfilled life and similarly 60% rejected the idea that people who choose to live alone are not good at relationships (with only 10% agreeing). Indeed, as many as 61% thought that single women “definitely” or “probably” should be allowed to use donor sperm in order to become pregnant – at least if she is financially self supported (compared to 90% who thought that heterosexual couples should be allowed such treatment).

In this section we have seen that unmarried cohabitation is generally taken as equivalent to marriage, divorce is seen as fairly normal, and that different forms of ‘non-conventional’ relationships, whether ‘living together apart’, same-sex, or solo living, seem fine for consenting adults. There is of course a more conservative minority group on almost every issue (particularly concentrated among the older and more religious, while younger professional women are particularly ‘non-traditional’). However, for the majority, the heterosexual, married, co-residential couple is no longer particularly central as a social norm. As far as adults

are concerned that is, for when it comes to children and parenting the picture becomes more traditional.

## **Parents and Children**

At the end of the last section we saw that 61 % of respondents in the 2006 survey thought that single women “definitely” or “probably” should be allowed to use donor sperm in order to become pregnant. But just 44% considered that there is nothing wrong with a single women who lives alone having a child if she wants one, and only 42% thought that single parenting is as good as two parents together. This contradiction symbolises what happens to public opinion as soon as children are mentioned directly. Perhaps the first question appeals to feelings about the importance of private choice and freedom for individual adults, which are less influential when faced with perceived moral absolutes of actual parenting. And parenting is situated at the heart of ideas about ‘family’. Indeed, only 20% of respondents saw the couple relationship as stronger than that between parent and child.

This ‘traditional centre’ permeates most of our findings. So while half to a third of respondents thought unmarried cohabitation is more or less equivalent to marriage, only 40% disagreed that married couples make better parents than unmarried couples (although only 28% agreed). Similarly, while large majorities saw divorce as unexceptional, as many as 30% thought that divorce should be made harder for parents with children under 16, with only 45% disagreeing. At the same time, however, the overwhelming majority – 78% - agreed that it was not

divorce in itself that harms children, but parental conflict. Fully 78 % also agreed that a family with a step-parent 'definitely' or 'probably' could bring up children just as well as two biological parents. In this respect, our respondents confronted some recent media comment and political shibboleths about the harm caused by divorce in itself. Rather, they appear to see children's welfare as being most affected by the process of 'doing' family (that is, what actually happens in parenting). Dysfunctional families are seen as the problem, not the actual separation.

Approval dives when we turn to parenting 'beyond the family'. As we have seen solo parenting gained low approval ratings, and the same went for gay and lesbian parents. Indeed the larger proportions, around two in five, saw same-sex couples as less adequate parents than heterosexual couples (see Table 2). Indicatively, disapproval was little more for gay men than for lesbians, indicating that it is sexuality, not gender, that is causing a problem for many respondents.

**Table 2. The capability of gay men and lesbians couple as parents**

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		Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree
A lesbian couple are				
just as capable of	%	36	21	38
being good parents as				
a man and a woman				
A gay male couple are				
just as capable of	%	31	20	42
being good parents as				
a man and a woman				

Base = 2775

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Source: Duncan and Phillips 2008

### **Conclusions**

The centrality of the formally married couple has diminished, and a majority see unmarried cohabitation as more or less equal to marriage in everyday life. Most think partners should have social independence, divorce is usually seen as a normal part of the life course – even beneficial in some instances, and step-parenting is viewed as a good enough alternative to a child being brought up by both his or her biological parents. Living ‘beyond’ the family, as a LAT (living apart together), in a same sex partnership or simply on your own were seen as

fine my most. We have found, therefore, that public attitudes do not conform to normative expectations of the ‘traditional’ family model of the mid twentieth century – at least for adults.

For while less fixed and less definite family arrangements found widespread acceptance when it came to adults as individuals, this was less likely to be the case when adults were portrayed as parents. Where children are involved, it seems that ‘non-individualist’ moral absolutes or imperatives are still pervasive. This can also have ‘non-traditional’ outcomes (for example large majorities believe divorce is better than conflict in families, and approve of step-parenting). Overall, however, the ‘morally absolute’ position held about children reinforced more traditional ideas of ‘family’

## **Notes**

1. The BSA annual sample comprises around 3,300 interviews with adults (aged 18 plus) across Britain. A full interview involves a face-to-face interview and a short self-completion supplement.

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### **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for providing funding that allowed us to include questions on the 'New Family' in the 2006 *British Social Attitudes* survey, grant number RES-000-23-1329.

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