

# I

## Global Changes in Marriage, Parenting and Family Life *An Overview*

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### Introduction

We live in a time of unprecedented diversity in household living arrangements, and of extensive social, cultural and economic change, both of which have far-reaching implications for marriage, parenting and family life in the twenty-first century. While families across the globe have always taken a variety of forms, certain functions, such as the nurture of children and care of family members, are universal. The concept of family denotes stability, and most societies have placed a high value on the institution of marriage as providing the best environment in which to bring up children.

Contemporary global variations in partnership formation and decreasing marriage rates have generated concerns that family stability is under threat and family values are in decline. Expressions of a looming crisis in family relationships, however, can be traced through hundreds of years of social history. Such concerns primarily revolve around the weakening of the nuclear family, comprising a married couple and their children, widely regarded as the traditional family structure in Western societies. But this kind of family is by no means a universal phenomenon, nor is it essential for carrying out family functions. As diversity increases, it is vitally important to examine the nature and extent of the changes in marriage, parenting practices and family life taking place across the globe; to understand the impacts of these changes on adults' and children's wellbeing, on communities, and on societies as a whole; and to assess the steps that might need to be taken by governments and others to develop family-friendly policies and support services that can enable families to foster strong, stable, loving environments in which family members can flourish and reach their potential in the modern world.

This book has drawn on the expertise of scholars around the world to consider the challenges and opportunities currently facing families in different societies and to review the evidence about changes in partnership and parenting. In this first chapter, we provide a brief overview of the key changes and set the global context for the more in-depth discussions in subsequent chapters about how these changes are affecting people in different societies at a time when long-established cultural traditions and belief systems are having to accommodate modern conceptions and expectations of intimate couple relationships and varying approaches to child rearing.

In developing this book, we were influenced by evidence that points to the importance of family bonds and strong, stable family relationships for the development and maintenance of strong stable societies. It is clear to us that the quality of the relationships between parents as partners and between parents and their children are critical determinants in enabling us to assess the risk and protective factors in children's lives. An understanding of the interrelationships between these factors and how resilience may be fostered is, we would argue, critical to the development of policies which can support families at times of stress and increased vulnerability to global conditions which might increase risk. Reviewing the wide variety of couple relationships and modern approaches to marriage was the obvious starting point for the book. Love and marriage are symbolic constructions that derive their meaning from the social, cultural and historical contexts in which they are embedded (Albas and Albas, 1989). As McKie and Callan (2012) have pointed out, it is a Western assumption that couple relationships now result exclusively from emotional response and the process of 'falling in love'. Nevertheless, Balfour *et al.* (2012, p. xxix) have argued that, irrespective of family structure, couple relationships shape our world:

... the qualities of our relationships have profound implications from our earliest years, for the emotional, cognitive, and physical development of our children, to our latest years—in old age, affecting the likelihood of hospitalisation, the rate of progression of disease in dementia, and even mortality rates.

## Changes in Marriage and Couple Relationships

While married couples still constitute the main type of adult couple partnerships in most countries, many people enter marriage having experienced earlier sexual relationships and, increasingly, both men and women exercise choice about the kind of partnership they enter into. Although many social commentators believe that marriage provides the most secure foundation for raising children and healthy family life, marriage is a multi-faceted concept. Until well into the seventeenth century in England, for example, love and companionship were secondary considerations in the marriage relationship, which was primarily an economic union, with the choice of marital partner less a matter of mate selection and more a matter of suitable living arrangements having been made. In the twentieth century, increasing emphasis on achieving personal emotional satisfaction and self-fulfilment in marriage began to change people's expectations about the marriage relationship.

In some cultures, couple formation has been orchestrated by families and arranged marriages are still in evidence. Parental control over mate selection is decreasing, however, and there is now a shift towards a more romantic approach to marriage in

countries such as Turkey, Japan (Roopnarine and Gielen, 2005), China (Xiaohu and Whyte, 1998) and India (Leeder, 2004). Increased choice in mate selection is being reflected in increased choice about whether and when to marry. Marriage still carries a distinctive symbolic importance (Cherlin, 2009) and remains an aspiration for many people, including those forming same-sex partnerships. Vigorous campaigning for legal recognition for same-sex marriage has been successful in several countries.

Increasingly, getting married is no longer an expected prerequisite for living together as a couple. In the past, living together as an unmarried couple was socially and culturally prohibited, and it tended to be the last resort for people who were unable to marry for one reason or another. Today, living together in a cohabiting relationship is increasingly common both as a precursor to getting married and as the partnership of choice. As a consequence, increasing numbers of children are born into cohabiting relationships in the USA, the UK and countries in northern Europe, although the stability of these relationships has been questioned. Initial indications are that cohabiting partnerships are less stable and more prone to breakdown, but recent evidence from countries in which cohabitation has become the norm challenges these concerns and raises questions about the extent to which cohabitation increases the risk of relationships breaking down (Reinhold, 2010). Nevertheless, there is a strong pro-marriage movement in some countries, such as the USA, which illustrates a continuing tension between welcoming choice in mate selection and greater diversity in living arrangements on the one hand, and valuing the continuity provided by the institutional structures associated with marriage on the other. The advantages of marriage over cohabitation are now being questioned by research which demonstrates that both marriage and cohabitation increase wellbeing, putting the focus firmly on the quality of relationships rather than on their legal status (Musick and Bumpass, 2012).

Marriage has undergone a process of de-institutionalisation in recent decades, particularly in Western societies. Nevertheless, marriage represents a rite of passage which gives public recognition to statements of commitment between the partners, whereas no such transformative process is associated with cohabitation. Recent research which seeks to understand the nature of commitment suggests that commitment-forming behaviour in relationships is triggered differentially in men and women, resulting in a lack of congruence (Stanley, 2010). This suggests that partners' commitments to each other are not necessarily linked to the status of their relationship, and further research is needed to understand the influences on commitment in all kinds of couple relationships.

Greater choice in personal relationships is reflected in patterns of partnership formation around the world and in the growing number of individuals who choose to remain single, both in the Western world (Wilkes Karraker and Grochowski, 2012) and in Asian and Arab countries. Moreover, polygyny, although not widely practised, is decreasing as societal pressures against men having many wives have increased and the exclusivity of a monogamous relationship has become ever more highly valued.

What, then, are the changes in marriage and couple relationships that we need to understand better in order to promote and foster personal and structural commitment and stable relationships? The changes that are deemed critical to policy formation and the development of supportive interventions are shown in the box below. These are discussed in more detail in Part I of the book.

## Key changes in marriage and couple relationships

We need to understand more about:

1. The impact increasing choice has in:
  - (a) the forming of intimate relationships
  - (b) decisions about whether to marry, when to marry, and choice of marital partner
  - (c) couples' living arrangements (e.g. living apart together)
2. Shifting expectations of couple relationships in respect of:
  - (a) individualism versus connectedness and commitment
  - (b) the intricacies of same-sex partnerships
  - (c) marriage as optional

## Changes in Parenting

Bringing up children has been regarded as one of the most important tasks that adults perform. Marriage has traditionally been the prerequisite for legitimate procreation and child rearing across the globe. Indeed, being married and having children have traditionally brought with them the status of being a family, but shifts in partnership formation have inevitably impacted on the transition to parenthood. One of the key contradictions in family life today relates to the increased freedom of choice in respect of partnership formation on the one hand, and the expectations and constraints associated with being a parent on the other. A very high value is placed on the importance of good parenting and on fathers and mothers being involved in parental activities that support child development, yet parenthood requires no particular form of intimate relationship or family structure.

The increase in cohabitation and the deferment of marriage means that parenting takes place in the context of a multiplicity of family forms, including single-parent families, reconstituted families and same-sex partnerships. There has been a marked increase in same-sex couples forming families and bringing up children—a shift which engenders deep prejudices about the importance of children having both a mother and a father and generates passionate debates about the conditions that foster a positive environment for child rearing. Assertions that the demise of the 'traditional' family has resulted in increases in antisocial behaviour and juvenile offending, drug and alcohol misuse, behavioural disorders in children, rates of teenage pregnancy and education failure are challenged in a report by Goodman and Greaves (2010) that indicates that children's cognitive, social and emotional development does not appear to be affected by the marital status of their parents. This assertion is consistent with research indicating that healthy, well-functioning parental relationships facilitate the wellbeing of and positive outcomes for children. Moreover, parental sexual orientation does not appear to be associated with child adjustment. Until relatively recently, however, it would have been inconceivable that, in an increasing number of countries, same-sex couples could both legitimise their relationship and raise children.

These changes have reopened the debate about child attachment. The psychological literature has moved away from a belief in the exclusiveness of the mother-child

relationship in child development towards the realisation that children form multiple attachments and that fathers as well as mothers play a critical role in child development. The prevailing view has been that children brought up in single-parent families will do less well on a range of outcomes than those living in two-parent households. An informed review of the evidence, however, points to a number of characteristics and factors that negatively impact on the parenting and wellbeing of single parents. Single mothers who are not in a relationship are exposed to a wide variety of risk factors which compromise their parenting ability: they tend to be young, and to have poor education and limited financial resources, and they may live in poor and hostile neighbourhoods, factors which place them at risk of poor mental health and their children at risk of poor outcomes. Moreover, the majority of single-parent families are formed following parental separation and divorce, and this transition in family life exposes children and parents to additional risk factors.

### The impact of separation and divorce

Up until the twentieth century, divorce was not a feature of daily life. When relationships broke down, economic, social and emotional constraints kept many women locked into unhappy and, often, violent relationships. Divorce was the privilege of the rich, of the clergy, and of men. Those women who did separate and form new partnerships were not able either to divorce or to remarry. Only during the twentieth century did divorce become a real option in most countries. In Catholic countries, the sacramental nature of marriage rendered it indissoluble, though the Roman Catholic Church has always permitted annulments. Nevertheless, only in the twenty-first century has divorce been legalised in Catholic countries such as Chile and Malta.

During the twentieth century, the possibility of legally terminating a marriage brought relief to many intensely unhappy people, particularly those who had been subject to domestic abuse and had been unable to leave the relationship, and the chance to find happiness with another partner and remarry. Nevertheless, the rapid increase in the number of families experiencing separation and divorce, described by some social historians as a ‘gigantic moral, religious and legal revolution’ (Stone, 1977, p. 422), has caused great concern in the last fifty years.

Although more marriages survive than end in divorce, large numbers of children across the globe will experience parental separation, the remarriage or repartnering of their parents, and multiple transitions in family living arrangements. Repeated disruptions increase children’s vulnerability and these children are the most likely to be adversely affected by the break-up of their parents’ relationship. Evidence accumulated from around the world points to the potential negative outcomes for children and their parents. Although no direct causal relationship has been found between parental separation and detrimental outcomes for children, a number of factors contribute towards enhanced risks. These include: economic hardship; continuing parental conflict; multiple transitions and changes in household structures and living arrangements; the loss of parental relationships (most often with fathers); one or both partners being unable to make a satisfactory adaptation to the dissolution of the couple relationship; and failure to keep children informed about what is happening and to hear their voice.

Many of the concerns being expressed about the demise of marriage and family life have focused on the perceived ease with which a divorce can be obtained and the decreasing element of social stigma associated with a failed relationship. Yet research

shows that the decision to end a relationship is rarely taken lightly and that the vast majority of parents think very seriously about the impacts before taking action. Parents face many dilemmas as they weigh up the consequences of separation, and those who stay in unhappy relationships for the sake of their children are acutely aware of the damaging effects of ongoing parental conflict and disharmony (Walker *et al.*, 2004).

Increasingly, the view being taken is that people do not divorce simply as an overt expression of individualistic behaviour or because marriage is not important to them, but because expectations of marriage and intimate couple relationships have become so high that staying in a less than satisfactory relationship is not to be tolerated. It is not surprising, therefore, that people continue to seek a fulfilling partnership and remarry or form a new relationship, often quite quickly. The breakdown rate of second and subsequent marriages remains high, however, and the unresolved emotions carried forward from one relationship to another can seriously undermine attempts to create a more stable relationship second or third time round. This is particularly challenging for parents who have to accommodate child contact arrangements with a former partner while trying to build a new family environment. While some people manage to rebuild shattered lives and to create more stable, healthier family units, others continue to live on the cusp of breakdown, with a range of stressors characterising their daily lives. Parents and children are rarely well-prepared for the enormity of the changes they face when families split up, and one of the most challenging tasks for parents is working out how they will live separately and continue to parent. This is hugely demanding and frequently leads to disputes between parents, and may result in one parent (usually the father) losing contact with their children.

### Making sense of changes in parenting

In seeking to understand contemporary changes in parenting and family life and the implications for policy and practice, it is important to determine what is genuinely different between the situation today and in times past. In the mid-nineteenth century in the UK, for example, just as many marriages ended through death within 15 years as now end in divorce in the same time period. As a result, large numbers of children lost a parent through death by the age of 15, and step-parents were a normal feature of Victorian family life. Then as now, many children were born out of wedlock. Death is final, however, whereas divorce is not. Furthermore, the coexistence in the twenty-first century of so many choices, and of alternative legally acceptable ways of partnering and organising family life, in any one society renders relationships today qualitatively different (Coontz, 2004). The contributors to this book have sought to explore this diversity and address a number of key issues in Part II of the book. These issues are indicated in the box below.

#### Changes in parenting: key issues

1. Raising children in single-parent families.
2. Sexual orientation and parenting.
3. Child development theories and processes.
4. The roles of mothers and fathers.
5. The impact of increasing parental separation and divorce.

## Global Changes in Family Life

Family structures and parenting practices are heavily influenced by social, cultural and economic factors, but the global changes explored primarily in Part III of this book are being felt across cultures and boundaries. Increased globalisation and significant demographic and social shifts are also shaping the way we live our lives. An understanding of these is central to the quest for more supportive family environments irrespective of family structures. We have focused our attention on six global issues, indicated in the box below, and we refer briefly here to each in turn.

### Global impacts on partnerships and parenting

1. Changing roles of men and women—combining work and family life.
2. Demographic changes.
3. Wealth inequality and poverty.
4. Migration.
5. Technological advances in communication.
6. Religion and belief systems.

### Changing roles of men and women: combining work and family life

Traditional conceptions of family life have regarded men as breadwinners and women as homemakers and carers. These ascribed roles paint a picture of complementarity within a patriarchal model of family stability. It is doubtful whether this idealised image ever reflected the kind of family life experienced by most people, but it is nevertheless clear that gender roles are being transformed across the globe as women postpone the formation of committed couple relationships to pursue advanced education and meaningful careers. The twentieth century witnessed a feminist movement which campaigned for gender equality at home, in the workplace and in society in general. The achievement of gender equality is a fairly slow process, however, and a disproportionate amount of unpaid work and caring responsibilities continue to be undertaken by women, even when they are in employment outside the home.

In many societies, the pressure on women to contribute to the household income is rising and the number of dual-earner families is increasing. This has significant impacts on childbearing as women delay the transition to parenthood, rendered increasingly possible by effective methods of birth control. The result tends to be smaller families and a tension between undertaking caring responsibilities and engaging in the world of paid work. In the Western world, women's participation in paid work is greater than at any previous period other than during the two World Wars of the twentieth century. The policy in many European countries, for example, of encouraging families to be economically self-sufficient and independent of welfare benefits has shifted social expectations firmly away from gender divisions in employment towards family life characterised by both parents working outside the home. Increasingly, women's earnings have become a necessary part of family income. There is, nevertheless, a distinct gender pay gap in most countries, which reinforces gender discrimination.

The challenge for many women is how to balance work commitments with caring responsibilities towards children and older family members. This can create tensions in the home and have a detrimental impact on couple relationships, particularly when incomes are low and couples are worried about their finances. Single parents are the hardest hit as they have to balance caring responsibilities with being the sole breadwinner. Moreover, many single mothers are likely to be in low-paid jobs, which are frequently precarious. This kind of employment can have a devastating effect on parents' mental and physical health and on their capacity to parent effectively. Many have to make difficult choices about how to prioritise the expectations placed on them and yet fulfil their caring obligations.

While there is global recognition that families are responsible for raising children and offering care and support to older generations, the burden of care still falls on women in most societies, irrespective of family structures. This reality increasingly impacts on the choices women make and on gender equality. Even when a couple has forged an equal partnership and created well-balanced gender roles in the home, the transition to parenthood can easily destabilise the status quo, with serious consequences for relationship stability, particularly during the postnatal period (Borg Xuereb *et al.*, 2012). The gendered allocation of household and caring tasks can be stressful and tiring, leaving little time for couple-focused activities.

### Demographic changes

Global demographic changes are among the most significant in twenty-first-century family life. A decline in fertility rates and an increase in life expectancy are changing the shape of populations in all corners of the globe. As countries move from pre-industrial to industrialised economies there tends to be a transition in birth and death rates from high to low. As choices about family formation increase and women improve their access to education and work opportunities, fertility rates tend to decline. Moreover, there are still parts of the world, such as sub-Saharan Africa, where both infant and maternal mortality rates remain high, reflecting huge global differences in life chances and choices (McKie and Callan, 2012).

The increasing numbers of people who are living longer is one of the greatest demographic challenges for the twenty-first century. There are concerns in Europe about fertility rates being lower than the minimum rate required for generation replacement, and global concerns about how to support an increasingly elderly population. Not all older people are well-off and Eurostat 2012 figures show that 20 per cent of older people in Europe are at risk of poverty and social exclusion (Eurostat, 2012). There are considerable regional disparities: for example, people over sixty-five in Eastern European countries are at a higher risk of poverty than those living in northern Europe. Furthermore, increasing numbers of older people are living alone and are dependent on family support. One of the consequences of family breakdown is that older people may find themselves severed from family support. The more traditional approach to providing intergenerational care is increasingly threatened.

### Wealth inequality and poverty

The changes explored in this book are taking place during a period of severe global recession and fiscal austerity. Recovery from recession is expected to be slow and income inequalities may continue to increase in OECD countries (OECD, 2008).

Cherlin (2010) has argued that the income gap is causing a marriage gap, whereby poorer people are least likely to get married and most likely to get divorced.

Since the 1980s, average family incomes have increased across OECD countries but in many countries child poverty rates have also increased, although there are considerable variations between countries. Poverty in childhood is known to have a damaging effect on children's development and wellbeing, and to contribute to a range of problems for children and for their mothers, particularly in respect of health. Unemployment is the single biggest risk factor for poverty and, across the OECD, being unemployed as a single parent can almost triple the risk of poverty. Poverty falls disproportionately on women, resulting from a combination of unpaid and paid work, limited access to well-paid jobs, the gender pay gap, and limited choices because of caring responsibilities.

There are still parts of the world where poverty is extreme, presenting a continuing global challenge. The World Bank (2012) has estimated that 1.29 billion people were living in absolute poverty in 2008. The highest incidence of absolute poverty is in sub-Saharan Africa, India and China. Although both India and China are increasing their rate of economic growth, poverty and its impacts on families will continue to be a significant concern.

## Migration

Migration has long been an important response to the impact of poverty: families have migrated to other countries in the hope of finding employment and a better quality of life. This has resulted in huge cultural diversity within the populations of many Western countries and in growing numbers of cross-cultural households. Immigration flows have a range of impacts on family life and on partnership formation and parenting. Hochschild (2003) noted that at the millennium, about half of the world's 120 million legal and illegal (irregular)<sup>1</sup> immigrants were female, indicating a new trend in migration patterns and increasing numbers of children being left behind in the care of extended family members. Migration is set to continue, and the number of cross-cultural marriages is expected to increase. The demographic characteristics of migrants are increasingly varied: whereas in the past many migrants were poor, greater numbers of migrants now are well-educated, highly qualified and taking advantage of the opportunities open to them in both developed and developing countries. Nevertheless, the world economic recession has highlighted tensions in migration policies.

## Technological advances in communication

The most significant global change impinging on partnerships, parenting and family life today is, arguably, the rapid development of electronic communications, and in particular the Internet. Children in many countries are growing up with a remarkable capacity to use digital technology in all aspects of their lives, and this will undoubtedly change work patterns and the ways in which people communicate. It is possible, for

<sup>1</sup> Diverse terminology is used in respect of migrants with irregular or unauthorised status. The term 'illegal' immigration is typically used in the US context. See <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/tcmirregular-migration.pdf> [Accessed 31.1.2013.]

example, for partners to live far apart and communicate daily, offering increased autonomy within an intimate relationship.

Social networking is a central part of many young people's daily lives, and is already changing concepts of identity and the ways relationships are forged. Social networking sites, email, texting, Facebook and Twitter increase the opportunities for people to develop large global networks well beyond family and local community boundaries. Daily life will increasingly be affected by the technological advances of the last twenty years, and advances continue at an extraordinary rate. The implications of these opportunities and their impacts are only just now being explored, and it will be essential, in the years to come, for policymakers and practitioners to understand them fully.

### Religion and belief systems

Religion and belief systems have long provided the context for marriage, parenting and family life. Religious beliefs have strongly influenced debates about cohabitation, divorce, civil partnerships and same-sex relationships, and assisted reproduction. The global changes in family life continue to be influenced by a range of belief systems. The challenge facing governments is how to embrace new conditions which enhance economic development, increase mobility and open new opportunities without colliding with beliefs and cultural norms which favour more traditional approaches to family life. Partnerships and parenting are shaped by a wide range of factors and, in the twenty-first century, the boundaries of what is socially acceptable are being challenged as never before. As expectations change, the values of commitment and connectedness within families are being confronted. Adaptations are inevitable as new norms emerge and social institutions take account of world economic, social, technological and political systems. Yet, there is strong evidence that reciprocity, support and companionship continue to be hallmarks of family life, even in countries in which personal relationships are increasingly individualistic (Smart, 2007).

### Looking Ahead

Partnerships and parenting practices in the twenty-first century are influenced by social, cultural and economic changes on a global scale. There is no doubt that stable, supportive families are important to growth and development, rendering it essential to understand the pressures, opportunities and challenges families face. Collaboration and cooperation among policymakers and practitioners at a local, national and international level should inform the kind of investment that needs to be made to support families and embrace diversity. The role of the state in supporting families is explored in Part IV.

In the chapters which follow, leading scholars examine the key changes of relevance to families and governments today in order to ensure a greater understanding of the ways in which family-friendly policies and interventions can be promoted and a constructive balance between continuity and change can be maintained. We hope that the policy and practice recommendations at the end of each chapter will, as well as being informative, inspire debate and innovative thinking.

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