

There can be little debate that changes are occurring in contemporary families. But are these a sign of the disintegration of the family, and a symptom of moral collapse? Or do they signal constructive attempts by people to build families that work in the new, complex world in which we live? David de Vaus discusses an interesting new publication that takes up these issues.

New families for changing times
by Pamela Kinnear
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Understanding family change



David de Vaus

The discussion paper by Pamela Kinnear, *New families for changing times*, is a useful and constructive contribution to the debate about contemporary family change. It presents an argument about the nature of changes in contemporary families and contends that these changes are not a sign of the disintegration of the family or a symptom of a moral collapse. Rather, they are constructive attempts by people to build families that work in the new and complex postmodern world in which we live.

"Far from selfishly sacrificing children on the altar of parental sexual and personal gratification as conservative commentators would have it, for the most part, parents and their children are engaged in an intense project of re-inventing family life in a rapidly changing world." (p.55)

The paper is framed within the debate between what Kinnear calls the "conservatives" and the "progressives".

The conservatives (especially the "regressive" conservatives as she calls them) portray contemporary family changes entirely negatively and view family breakdown as a reflection of a moral breakdown in society and the dominance of the corrosive effects of selfish individualism. According to Kinnear, the family policy goal of regressive conservatives is to protect the traditional nuclear family so that the societal disintegration that they see as stemming from the decline of the nuclear family will be halted.

On the other side of the debate are the progressives who dismiss the extent and the implications of changes in family formation and dissolution patterns over the last 25 years.

Although Kinnear acknowledges that the progressives underestimate the dramatic extent of changes and the possible negative effects of some of these changes for children, the tenor of her discussion paper is highly critical of the conservative interpretation of family change. While taking the extent of family change seriously, she is much closer to the position of the progressives in being less inclined to see these changes as a wholly bad thing.

Kinnear acknowledges that there have been major changes in the way people form and live in families. However, unlike the conservatives, who see such changes as symptoms and cause of moral and social decay, she interprets them as adaptive ways in which individuals and families are responding to the massive changes in the wider society. Although she does not say so directly, the implication is that if people were not making these changes in the way they "do family" then families would be under much greater strain and much less able to play the generally positive role they play in the lives of family members.

In providing a basic description of the main changes in family formation, Kinnear points to the increase in divorce rates, the decline in marriage rates, the delays in marriage, the rise in cohabitation, and the decline in fertility to an historical low point. Such trends have led to a greater diversity in household structures. There is a steady increase in the proportion of one-parent families, ex nuptial births, blended families and stepfamilies. De facto relationships have become commonplace, new methods of conception are becoming more available, and same sex relationships are forcing their way onto the agenda for recognition as a new form of family.

There can be little debate that these changes are occurring both in Australia and other western countries. Where commentators differ is how they read these trends. The regressive conservatives read all the changes as a sign of the damaging

effects of selfish individualism and the dominance of the doctrine of self fulfilment, regardless of the cost to others and to relationships and responsibilities to others.

New families for changing times challenges this conservative interpretation of changes in families. The challenge has three main strands.

First, recent family changes must be seen in a much longer-term historical context than the conservatives generally employ. When seen in historical context recent changes are but a continuation of a long-term historical patterns.

Second, changes in contemporary families reflect other profound changes in contemporary society. To expect families to be immune from change when all else is changing is sociologically naïve. To promote unchanging family forms in the context of wider social, economic and cultural change is to undermine the central role of families in helping individuals live and thrive in a rapidly changing and complex world. Families will adapt to the changing world in which family members live. To discourage families changing and adapting in this way is to threaten the critical role that families can play in people's lives.

Third, while the possible impact of divorce on children is cause for concern, the extent to which parents with children separate does not reflect the failure of adults to take seriously their moral responsibility to care for vulnerable children. Kinnear is of the view that parents do not divorce lightly, that the effect of divorce on children is not as great as often represented, and that divorce itself is not the culprit when understanding why children in separated families have lower wellbeing ratings than those from intact families.

The historical argument

Kinnear takes issue with the assumption underlying some of the conservative alarm about contemporary change. The complaint about the direction of current changes assumes a stable past – some sort of golden age when families worked well for the benefit of all. The changes we are now seeing, conservatives argue, represent the destruction of this stable, happy and secure past.

Kinnear points out that this view is historically simplistic, and that the history of the family is a history of change. She provides a summary of the broadly accepted generalisations about the patterns of change in western families over the centuries.

- There has been a growing importance of the nuclear family and the declining role of the wide kinship and community networks.
- There has been the separation of work from home. Industrialisation meant that the family unit ceased to be the unit of economic production. As economic production moved out into the workplace families became a unit of consumption and reproduction. The separation of work

from home eventually led to greater, gender based, role specialisation with husbands and fathers working in the formal economy while mothers and wives became increasingly restricted to the domestic sphere.

- There has been the increasing duration of marriages as life expectancy increased.
- There have been changing conceptions of the appropriate foundations of marriage – from an institution founded on familial and economic obligations to one based on romantic love, companionship, affection and sexual satisfaction.
- There has been a greater child centredness of families.
- There has been an increasing privatisation of families and the separation of the private family sphere from the wider public sphere. Rather than being an integrating force, families became “a haven in a heartless world” – an “emotional refuge in the cold and competitive society” (Lasch 1986: 43).
- There has been declining family size and fertility that can be dated to the late 19th century.



In sum, Kinnear argues that the recent changes in family formation patterns are not especially new – they are part of longer-term trends and patterns. The reason some of the recent changes appear so dramatic is that they are contrasted with the atypical era following World War II when fertility rates and marriage rates were especially high. She argues that using this comparison point rather than longer-term historical patterns has caused the conservatives to get the more recent changes out of perspective.

Idealisation of families

According to Kinnear, the view that contemporary family trends reflect a form of moral bankruptcy tends to idealise the way in which families have functioned in the past. While contemporary families have their failings, and new family forms have their shortcomings, Kinnear says that the image of the happy families of the 1950s and 1960s is a myth, and points to the “dark side” of many families where women were oppressed and children maltreated.

This dark side, which contains a seam of violence and abuse, continues in today's families. Kinnear argues that the alarm about instability of families and the breakdown of marriages and families privileges the importance of family stability (families staying together) at the expense of the damage that is perpetrated in some families as the price of stability.

The sociological argument – postmodernism and all that

Families are part of a wider society. The way families function will partly reflect the nature of the wider society. But the way the wider society functions will reflect the workings of families. According to Kinnear, the conservatives argue that family breakdown is due to the moral

breakdown in the wider society and the rise of selfish individualism. Because families play such an important role the only hope for society is to protect families from the undermining influences of the wider society. As the family is protected and survives so will the wider society eventually benefit.

While she accepts the role of wider society in shaping families and the role of families in shaping the wider society, Kinnear argues that the conservative picture of selfish individualism and family disintegration is a misreading of what is really happening. Her picture of contemporary society is heavily influenced by the position of sociologists such as Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman.

These sociologists paint a picture of contemporary, post-modern society as one in which the nature of social changes is such that a diversity of family forms is both inevitable and desirable. Rather than regarding family changes as dysfunctional and negative, this view regards the changes as adaptive and as potentially positive.

Essentially the argument of these sociologists is that we are experiencing a radical economic and cultural transformation. According to Kinnear, the global dominance of market capitalism has been accompanied by the dominance “of neo-liberal economics, free trade globalisation of economic and cultural activity and the progressive deregulation of institutional structures . . . decollectivisation and the rise of individual enterprise bargaining, workplace flexibility, downsizing, labour market casualisation, the rise of the portfolio career . . .” (p. 22).

In western societies the politics of the individual prevails over the politics of the collective as epitomised in Thatcher’s pronouncement that there is “no such thing as society” (Kinnear 2002: 22). According to these social theorists modern people must be self-reliant and invent their own world and their own pathways through it. Post modernity is a time when the old institutional givens of life have broken down. Rather than living according to the life script provided by the social categories to which we belong (gender, class, ethnic group, religious group) we must work out and negotiate our own biographies.

This process of losing the certainties that were derived from the old categories and collectivities to which we belonged and having to invent our own pathways is called *individualisation* which, as Kinnear emphasises, is very different from the selfish individualism to which the conservative critics draw attention.

This transformation from living in a society where our moralities, behaviour and pathways were more or less given can be extraordinarily difficult for the individuals involved. Indeed Beck refers to being “damned to individualisation” (Beck 1998: 33). Working out these new ways of living is risky business and is accompanied by the danger of new ways not working. As people must take more and more responsibility for their own fate, the downside is that failure increasingly results in “personal guilt, conflicts and neuroses” (Beck 1998: 35).

However, the process of individualisation should not simply be seen as a negative phenomenon. As Kinnear argues: “As with most social and cultural transformations, the process of *disembedding* older ways of life is fraught with uncertainty and the benefits are mixed. But while the *disembedding* of industrial society continues, at the same

time it gives way to the process of *re-embedding* new ways of life” (p. 24) in which individuals “cobble together their biographies for themselves” (Beck 1998: 33).

The question for contemporary adults is “How shall I live” (Giddens, 1991: 14). As far as family formation is concerned this means that individuals will have to develop their own answers. The way we “do marriage” will change as we progressively move to designer marriages and families away from the one size fits all model.

Kinnear’s argument is that we must interpret family changes in this light – as attempts by modern people to construct family forms that work for them. This is not a matter of people being selfish individualists who do not care about the consequences of their actions for others. Rather, contemporary family changes are part of a work in progress as individuals try to reinvent families now that the givens of how to “do family” have evaporated. She argues (p. 26) that “rather than [the resulting] family change being a sign of moral decline, family relationships become the site where new debates about morality and ethics are played out”.

According to Kinnear, rather than reflecting an abandonment of morality the process of reinventing or re-embedding values and behaviours requires a new level of moral reflection that simply accepting the givens of did not require.

Impact of family changes on children

The negative impact of divorce on children has been the cause of widespread concern. This impact has been an important part of the charge that divorce and other family changes reflect immoral, selfish individualism. The charge is that while parents pursue their own happiness, fulfilment and gratification in new relationships their children suffer.

While acknowledging that the weight of the evidence indicates that there is a consistent statistical association between family separation and child wellbeing, Kinnear questions what this evidence *means*.

She argues two main points. The first is that although the differences in wellbeing of children from separated and intact families clearly exist these differences are not all that substantial.

Second, separation cannot be held solely or largely responsible for the differences between children from separated and intact families. Instead, Kinnear attributes the differences to factors that tend to be associated with separation (conflict, poverty etc.). It is these things that account for the poorer outcomes among children in separated families. That is, it is not the family structure itself that produces the poorer outcomes but other factors associated with these family structures that create the difficulties for children. Accordingly, the focus of concern should be less on the family arrangements in which children live and more on the quality of the relationships within all family arrangements. Conflict within either couple families, lone-parent families or blended families is bad for children. Policy interventions should be more concerned with helping people in all family forms to deal with the ways of managing conflict and less on a single-minded preoccupation with the type of family in which children live.

Kinnear concludes her argument about family change by urging us to look to the positive and not just the negatives of family changes. While there are downsides to contemporary family changes, it is not an option to revert to the

atypical family arrangements and patterns of the 1950s. She argues keeping dysfunctional families together just for the sake of the children is not a constructive approach.

Kinnear concludes by arguing that:

"Families are changing, but they are doing so for reasons far more complex than a decline in moral values and the rise of selfish individualism. Modern parents face a complex world with competing pressures, unique risks and fewer collective guidelines about how to live their lives and about what constitutes moral action. But far from selfishly sacrificing children on the altar of parental sexual and personal gratification as conservative commentators would have it, for the most part, parents and their children are engaged in an intense project of re-inventing family life in a rapidly changing world." (p.55)

Understanding family change

I have outlined Kinnear's argument at length because it is a constructive attempt to understand the nature of contemporary family change. Her interpretation of these changes has much to commend it. The emphasis on longer-term patterns of family change is a welcome antidote to the common tendency to view current changes either within the very limited timespan in which we have lived or against an imaginary golden age that existed either in our childhood or in some more distant past. Changes must be placed in a proper context in order to understand what they mean. A longer-term historical context is vital to this fuller understanding.

Another important strength of Kinnear's account is the attempt to place contemporary changes within a broader sociological context. She has chosen to emphasise the interpretation of modern society that stresses the dis-embedding from the certainties of the past and the givens of gender, class and ethnicity. She emphasises how family changes will inevitably reflect the wider social, economic and cultural changes that have emerged in recent years.

It is important when trying to understand family change or develop family policy that we have a firm understanding that families cannot be and should not be insulated from broader social changes. We will not develop better or stronger families by cocooning them from the pressures and demands of the wider society. To do so will simply create a chasm between the private and public lives of individuals and threaten to make families less adapted to and relevant to the rest of people's lives.

There is room however, to question the extent to which this interpretation of modern society is correct. Certainly one can go too far in claiming that we have been dis-embedded from the constraints of class, gender and ethnicity. While we may have more room for movement in the categories or collectivities to which we belong, most of us nevertheless are constrained within these categories and identities. Many givens remain, and structures still constrain.

While Kinnear is more optimistic than the conservatives about the implications of family changes, she is not naïve. She does not pretend that the road ahead is smooth or that all attempts to develop new ways of living in families will be successful. Nor does she pretend that it is easy. What she does do is to urge that we try to adopt a positive and constructive approach. Changes have taken place and will continue to do so. Rather than simply resisting family changes in the hope that we can reconstruct families of the past, a more constructive approach is to support people in families as they seek to live in an everchanging and complex world. Not only does this mean supporting a diverse range of family forms; it also means adopting a positive mindset whereby the pluses and not just the minuses of these new ways of "doing family" are tested.

Having said that, I feel that on occasions Kinnear may err a little on the side of optimism. While she rightly challenges simplistic explanations of family change that do not go beyond notions of selfish individualism, my own opinion (and that is all it can be) is that she is too ready to dismiss this dimension of behaviour both within and outside of families. The consumer society in which we live promotes an individualistic orientation which can readily lead to selfish individualism. While we should avoid attributing all changes as the negative outcomes of the moral failure of selfish individualism, nor should we be blind to role of such factors in family changes.

Nor should we over-rate the capacity of individuals to construct successful new ways of forming and living in families. While I agree with Kinnear that many family changes can be the result of well motivated, positive moral decisions, it is another thing for these choices to result in successful family outcomes.

My reservations about the capacity of many people to manage and to reinvent new and successful family arrangements do not lead me to say that we must return to a "tried and true model".

Rather, it means that the direction of policy should be to support a diverse range of family arrangements. Regardless of what any of us might think are desirable family arrangements, the fact remains that diversity will develop. That is the nature of contemporary society. The goal of policy should be to ensure that people are supported, as far as is possible via policy interventions, to manage in a diverse range of families: to make the best of a diverse situation.

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David de Vaus is an Associate Professor in Sociology at La Trobe University, Melbourne, and Senior Research Advisor at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

