

## Exploring variations in men's family roles

Exploratory research by Geoff Dench of Middlesex University and the Institute of Community Studies has been looking at variation in the ideas that people hold about men's family roles and at the links between these roles and men's behaviour, both in families and in wider society. The pattern of responses emerging from an initial survey of just over 200 men and women suggests that key differences in the place given to men may form part of a more general split in 'family cultures' in the UK.

- f** Ideas held by survey respondents about sexual divisions of labour and men's family roles were not free-floating, but closely bound up with other ideas about the nature and value of families in modern society.
- f** Most respondents' views on families tended to collect together into one of two opposed and logically coherent sets of values and opinions. Only a few displayed much mix.
- f** The larger group of respondents, classified for the study as 'traditional', expressed support for families built around conventional marriage and divisions of labour.
- f** A large minority of respondents, classified as 'alternative', diverged from this by emphasising personal choice and people's right to determine their own relationships, free from public regulation.
- f** A key feature of this 'alternative' family culture was the belief that couples should share or negotiate family roles and resist conventional prescriptions - such as that men should be main economic providers.
- f** The strongest support for 'alternative' families was shown by the young and childless respondents, who had fewer social responsibilities to others.
- f** The looser specification of men's family obligations in 'alternative' family culture appeared to be associated with lesser participation by men in family and community life and with greater conflict between men and women.
- f** Non-European cultural communities included in the study together showed *least* overall support for 'alternative' family culture, white British people rather *more*, while those African-Caribbeans born or raised in the UK registered the *most*.

## Background

This research was prompted by the findings of an earlier study by Geoff Dench, focusing on three-generation extended families in London, which revealed much disagreement between respondents over the evaluation of men's family roles and also contained indications that this might be a key to understanding men's family and economic motivations. These findings had made it clear that survey research on family behaviour which ignores moral and subjective aspects of family life might well be failing to understand the roots of important behavioural trends. We have burgeoning datasets describing family behaviour, but are perhaps increasingly unable to grasp the meaning of family life to participants.

The purpose of the present study was to explore ethnographic methods for analysing variations in the ways in which people currently think about family life, and in particular men's place within families, in order to develop more valid measures for use in large-scale quantitative studies and help movement towards fuller interpretations of family behaviour and dynamics.

## Measuring family culture

Particular attention has been given throughout this research to minority groups, because the previous study had suggested that variations in men's family roles, and the motivations arising out of them, might be especially significant where men's employment opportunities and participation in wider public affairs are restricted by discrimination. So initially the research focused mainly on a number of ethnic minorities to see what different features their cultures exhibited in family behaviour and values.

It soon became clear that - although ethnic differences did exist and could be documented - there were much more fundamental divisions in family culture which cut right across ethnic community boundaries. The research focus was adjusted to concentrate on charting this broader divergence in family values and behaviour, and on developing measures of it which could be applied generally in a multi-cultural context.

The main axis of this divergence seemed to turn on the issue of how far families were seen as 'following rules' or allowing for 'personal choice' - with traditional forms of family standing here as symbols of regulation. A survey was carried out to pursue this topic both directly and indirectly, by asking questions about a wide range of family matters and then investigating the logical and statistical

relationships which could be found linking responses on specific issues.

The sort of topics covered included:

- Ideas of the nature and purposes of family life.
- Attitudes towards sexual divisions of labour.
- The nature of partnerships between family networks and state agencies in providing personal services and supports.
- Views on whether moral or impersonal (eg economic) factors have the greater influence in shaping society and family life.

## Two family cultures

The results of this survey suggested that most people subscribed to one of two antithetical but internally coherent sets of views about the family - leading to a working hypothesis that there are currently two broad family cultures operating in British society, one 'traditional' (or 'conventional') and the other 'alternative'.

### ***The 'traditional' family***

Roughly half of the respondents in this pilot analysis were counted as 'traditional' in their orientation. These generally understood family as a network of interpersonal rights and obligations, arising out of birth and marriage and extending across household boundaries. Family ties were seen by them as binding together people of all age and sex categories into groupings whose members feel responsibility to provide reciprocal support for each other. Such interdependence within families was felt to be the moral basis of society.

### ***The 'alternative' family***

About one-third of the respondents rejected all group conventions and insisted that family arrangements were a private matter to be negotiated among the people sharing a household. Many of them regarded traditional families, and especially conventional divisions of domestic labour, as sources of social inequality and injustice. Personal autonomy was considered as being of fundamental value.

### ***A 'mixed' approach***

A small residual group of respondents was counted as 'mixed'. Most of these seemed actually to *live* conventionally and expressed traditional views in detailed discussions about their own lives. However, they identified explicitly with alternative values in their responses to pre-set, standardised questions of the sort used in public opinion polls.

## Distribution of family cultures

This exploratory survey was not large enough (at only 221 respondents) to permit any firm conclusions to be drawn from it. But there are patterns evident in the results which fit very interestingly with the more ethnographic materials collected and which can be used to generate hypotheses for future work.

A key pattern emerging is the association of family culture with age. 'Alternative' responses hostile to regulation were concentrated mainly among people under thirty; 'traditional' views predominated among those over forty-five, and those with a 'mixed' approach were found largely in the intermediate category. Unmarried people, both living alone and cohabiting, were strongly 'alternative', while those who had ever been married, even if now separated or divorced, were definitely 'traditional'.

Being responsible for children was linked with traditional responses; detailed interviews suggested that the experience of managing families is a powerful factor leading to the abandonment of alternative views. More women than men supported personal choice, but not by a large margin. When women are sorted according to the economic relations of the households they live in, the greatest support for 'alternative' family lifestyles was found among those women working full-time whose partners were also working full-time, *rather* than among women living independently or bringing up families without the help of a male partner.

## Men's place in the family

The two cultures differ markedly in relation to men's role. 'Traditional' culture is explicitly patriarchal and ties men's opportunities and status in the wider community to their performance of family duties. 'Alternative' culture does not *exclude* men from family roles, and in fact most of its advocates regarded men's participation as extremely important. It does, however, specify that these roles are optional, and subject to negotiation between partners rather than decreed by convention and external opinion.

These contrasting sets of views were associated with respondents' recorded lifestyles and behaviour in ways which suggest some extremely interesting hypotheses for further study. It seems possible that the emphasis on personal choice may lead to men, but *not* women, reducing their commitment to family work. Amongst those who took the 'alternative' view:

- more adult men lived alone;
- men and women expressed more negative opinions of each other;

- men were more likely to be unemployed and to have a sense that they were not needed by society.

## Multi-cultural variation

About half of the survey respondents were drawn from the African-Caribbean, Bangladeshi, Somali and West African communities. Their responses in this preliminary enquiry suggest that these groups come to Britain with greater attachment to traditional family cultures than that of white British people. However, those group members born here seemed to have a broadly similar distribution of views to the local white population.

An apparent exception to this were those members of the African-Caribbean community born here, who showed *stronger* attachment to alternative family culture than white British respondents. Detailed case studies and discussion groups involving African-Caribbeans of all generations indicate that, if this pattern is representative of the wider community, it seems likely to spring more out of the circumstances of their lives in Britain and the influence of British culture, than from that group's own Caribbean traditions.

There is an extensive debate on family matters underway within the African-Caribbean community in this country, mainly between generations, which mirrors in many details the divergence postulated here between 'traditional' and 'alternative' values. These provisional findings give a strong indication that several features of African-Caribbean life in the UK, which are commonly regarded as distinctive to that group, may be better understood as expressions of general tendencies inherent within alternative family culture, and which have developed further or faster among them as a result of the nature of their position in British society.

## Conclusions

### **Outcomes of personal choice**

The results of this pilot study suggest a number of hypotheses in relation to current changes in British society. If 'alternative family culture' in the form sketched out in this research does turn out to be a valid analytic construct, then by virtue of the apparently lesser capacity of deregulated family life to elicit male participation and commitment it may well also prove to be playing a part in a number of linked contemporary social trends, including:

- more men feeling marginal to society as a whole and requiring community support and control;
- the growing educational problems of boys;
- narrower family support networks for mothers and children;

- more women themselves reliant on state support and their own paid employment;
- greater stress in women's lives as a result of unshared responsibilities at home and work.

Several respondents who expressed 'alternative' views, and certainly most of those who fell into the 'mixed' group, were actually living much of their lives in a 'traditional' manner, based on interdependence around a sexual division of labour. The main difference was that they presented themselves as doing it 'because it suits us', or 'because he can earn more than I do', or even 'because he refuses to do that', rather than because it was traditional.

#### **Revaluing conventional marriage**

A good number of informants and survey respondents showed a very lively interest in the relationship between social policy and family culture, and an awareness of the variations which exist in the latter. Social research and policy debates may be lagging behind and consequently impeding developments in public opinion in this area - and a key implication of this pilot project is that these underlying issues are well understood by many people in the general population and so do need much more *explicit* attention than they have received. In particular, support for conventional marriage is likely to prove both much stronger in the community, and more firmly grounded in considered analysis and coherent values, than recent researchers have assumed.

#### **About this study**

Materials were collected from early 1994 to early Autumn 1995, mainly in the East London area, through the Institute of Community Studies, using a variety of ethnographic and survey methods. Informants were identified partly by random selection and partly via community associations (with some snowballing). In addition to several dozen detailed case studies and group discussions, a survey using semi-structured interviews - with a mixture of pre-set and open-ended questions - was carried out with a total of 221 respondents.

#### **Further information**

A more detailed report, **The place of men in changing family cultures** by Geoff Dench, is available at £9,50 from Geoff Dench, Institute of Community Studies, 18 Victoria Park Square, London E2 9PF (or by e-mail: geoff@commstud.demon.co.uk). A more general discussion by Geoff Dench of gender relations and the place of men in society, written during the course of this study and strongly influenced by data collected in it, has recently been published by Transaction Publishers as **Transforming Men**, price £13.95.

#### **Related Findings**

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- 44** Lone parenthood and family disruption (Jan 94)
- 45** Children living in re-ordered families (Feb 94)
- 69** Developing work and family services in the workplace (Jan 95)
- 70** Family support for young people setting up home (Jan 95)
- 80** Social backgrounds and post-birth experiences of young parents (Jul 95)
- 84** Single lone mothers (Oct 95)
- 91** A survey of group-based parenting programmes (Jan 96)
- 95** The relationship between family life and young people's lifestyles (Apr 96)
- 98** Young people's transition to adulthood (Jun 96)

The following *Summary* is also relevant:

- 4** Family and parenthood: supporting families, preventing breakdown (Feb 95)

For further information on these and other *Findings*, contact Sally Corrie, Publications Officer, on 01904 629241.



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