Beyond 'Average' Family Life: Atypicality in the Golden Age of the Family

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Abstract

The emergence of increasingly complex patterns of family formation in the post-war period are well-documented. Diverse family structures are not a new feature of family life and, as others have suggested, the extent of change in family structures in recent decades may have been over-emphasised. However, contemporary accounts of family life in the past rely on memory, recollection and incomplete family narratives of the past. While historical accounts of family life do exist it is rare for these to be revisited and a contemporary conceptual lens applied to enhance our understanding of the past.

This paper is based on data gathered in the 1960s which included information on household composition and family formations. In the paper we explore different family formations and structures represented in the 1960s data and the meaning attached to issues around a number of ‘unusual’ family compositions encountered by the researchers at the time. The strength of this historical data is that it allows us to examine family life in the 1960s through data collected contemporaneously. A range of complex family living arrangements including single parent families, headed by either a lone mother or a lone father and step-families were evident. The researchers outlined atypical family formations in some detail suggesting that any exceptions to the normative family structure were worthy of comment and explication. This paper will explore the significance attached to atypical family units by both the respondents and the interviewers and the role of these interrelationships on the transitions made by these young people as they approached adult life.
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Introduction

The emergence of increasingly complex patterns of family formation in the post-war period are well-recognised and evidenced by increasing rates of divorce and separation and a growth in the number of single parent families and step families (Edwards et al., 2003). The rise of 'atypical' family units has led to increased nostalgia for traditional family forms and, for many, a growing sense of regret over the decline of the stable nuclear family unit so archetypal of the 1950s and 1960s. Yet such views are problematic, first, because evidence suggests that diverse family structures are not a new feature of family life and the extent of change in family structures in recent decades may have been over-emphasized (Crow, 2002). As Marsh and Arber (1992:1) have argued ‘each generation imbues family life with myths about the golden era of the past and the breakdown of norms in the present’. Second, how we understand change and transformation in family life is effected by how the problem is researched. For example, contemporary accounts of past family life and formations tend to be based on either large-scale quantitative surveys such as cohort studies (e.g. Ferri and Smith, 2003) or qualitative, retrospective accounts gleaned through memory, recollection and incomplete family narratives of the past (e.g. Smart, 2005). While historical accounts of family life, using data contemporaneous to the time, do exist (Savage 2007; Charles et al., 2008; Goodwin and O’Connor 2009) it remains rare for earlier studies to be revisited and subject to secondary analysis using contemporary conceptual lens. Yet, as Marsh and Arber, (1992:1) suggest, it is ‘important to support statements about change with empirical evidence collected across time rather than with data collected in the present and contrasted with an assumption about the past’. With this in mind, using data from a secondary analysis, and subsequent restudy, of Elias’s Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles (1962-1964), this paper aims to address two questions: i) to what extent were atypical family formations apparent in research data collected in the 1960s?, and ii) how were atypical family structures represented, documented and understood by the research teams? After briefly outlining the study, we document some of the features of ‘typical’ post-war family formations and examine the extent to which the families represented in this data contradicted the idealised picture of family life, including a secondary analysis of interview notes (see, also Goodwin and O’Connor, 2006). We focus in particular on working mothers, step-families and single parent families.

The Study

In 2000 854 complete interview schedules from Elias’s Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles were rediscovered. The interview schedules contained comprehensive data and interviewer notes relating to a sample of individuals born in Leicester between 1943-1947. Follow up interviews were carried out with 100 of the same sample in the early 2000s. Although the main premise of the original research was to examine adjustments to work the project was, in many ways, unusual in that the research design included a significant emphasis on family structures (such as living arrangements parental employment status, age of parents, the number, age and occupations of siblings and details of other household residents (e.g. grandparents), the role of family in job choice as well as interviewer notes that contained a commentary on the interviewees and their families). Yet, the reason for collecting data on family, in what
was ostensibly a school to work study, was based on Elias's view that it is impossible to understand the situation of young people as a specific problem of one only studied young people themselves. Instead, the researchers collected data on the totality of the young person’s life in order to understand the importance of interrelationships and interdependencies between the young people, their families, their experience of work, home life and education (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2009). However, it is important to note that this was not to simply arrive at what Elias refers to as ‘billiard ball causality’ (e.g. where family life X impacts on Y leading to transition outcome Z) but rather to understand ‘wholes’ and how such ‘whole configurations’ change over time.

**Post-War Family Life**

Family life during the post-war period is frequently seen as ‘a golden age’ of stability in the family’ (Innes and McKie, 2006:2.4). This so-called golden age is significant to contemporary analyses of historical family forms as not only is the era now held up as an example of a time when family life was characterised by stability but, at the time, it was also used as a way of ensuring that the nuclear family unit was viewed as ‘the bedrock of a stable society and any deviation should be condemned’ (Thane and Evans, 2012:85). The majority of families appeared then, on the surface, to consist of married parents who, together with their children formed the basis of a nuclear family unit. Further to this, it is often assumed that in such family units individuals behaved in ‘traditional’ ways, with the father as the main breadwinner and the mother as the stay at home housewife. Our analysis of the 1960s data does little to contradict these assumptions about the golden age of the nuclear family. Many of the young people interviewed were living in households with both parents present and more often than not with other siblings. However, drilling down further in to the data we find that family formations were not all as straightforward as this and many of these young workers were living in what can be termed ‘atypical’ family units. Indeed, many assumptions about normative family life and traditional gender roles in the 1960s did not necessarily hold true for this group of young people. For example, few of the young people had mothers who were not in employment. A high proportion of the mothers were employed outside the home, and only 20% of mothers were described as housewives. It is striking that the majority of women had specified an economically active role, frequently in the hosiery trade and how their daughters were heavily influenced by the experience of their working mothers (see O'Connor and Goodwin, 2004)

**Absent Parents**

Thane and Evans (2012:84-5) describe this post-war period as being perceived as ‘the golden age of the long, apparently stable, marriage’ regardless of the evidence to the contrary that ‘all too many marriages were broken by the early death of one partner, more often the male, leading to single parenthood and/or new partnerships and complex step families’. Absent fathers and single parent households headed by a mother are a feature of much of the literature on historical family formations (Wynn, 1964; Marsden, 1969). As Young and Wilmott (1957:19) describe ‘the notion still survives that the working class man is a sort of absentee husband, sharing with his wife neither responsibility nor affection…’. This description, based on how family life was in the past, contrasts with their view on the significant changes to family life by the end of the 1950s where the decline in the number of ‘broken homes’ in their study was due to increased life expectancy meaning that ‘both children and parents enjoy greater financial and emotional security’ than in the past (Young and Wilmott 1957:22). However, this was
something of misplaced optimism and, with hindsight, we can see that the number of single parent households was not set increase rather than decline. Such trends are evident in our analyses with the data also revealing some 109 individuals (around 13% of the total sample) living with only one parent. Seventy-two individuals (8% of the total) lived without a resident father and thirty-seven (4%) of the young workers lived in households without a mother. In at least one case a child lived without either parent.

**Fatherless Homes**

Where the father was absent from the family home the explanation most often given by the interviewer was that the father had died. In some interviews this appeared to be simply an assumption – if the father was absent and/or not mentioned in the section on family members then it was often assumed that he had died: ‘Apparently the Father is dead or has gone’ (C118). In some cases this was more explicit and the reasons for the father’s absence was noted in the interview, having been explained by the respondent or the respondent’s mother:

[He] had lost his father in an accident 2 years ago. He came from a very large family, and the situation was not helped by the fact that his father had been killed. His mother worked shifts on the buses, while the children had to look after themselves in the evenings (A326).

Mother, pleasant woman, spoke to me after the interview said husband died 2 1/2 years ago (D216)

There was no father in this family, the mother working full time… (C707)

Although evident in responses, the interviewers generally seemed reluctant to probe themes of separation, abandonment and single parenthood due to embarrassment or discomfort either on their part or perceived discomfort and reticence of the interviewee. Despite increased life expectancy meaning that fewer women became single parents due to bereavement, separations did still occur although divorce rates remained low due to costs and stigmatisation (Thane and Evans 2012:85). It may well be the case that the stigmatisation associated with single motherhood during this period explains why some of the interviewers and respondents were uncomfortable in discussing ‘atypical’ family life:

I discovered from remarks that I heard and from some of respondent’s answers to questions, that her father is now separated from her mother. Her mother, who was present during part of the interview was obviously embarrassed by this topic so I did not pursue questions where this arose’ (D68).

There is no father in this household. The responsibility of bringing up the family who are schoolchildren now plus some at work weighs wholly on his mother. She commented on this when I called at the house on the first occasion, and arranged interview 2. Then respondent said during the interview his father was dead …I had the feeling that there was something that the family didn’t want to talk about connected with the father’s departure, if indeed he was dead. There was no laughter in this house - the children were too subdued (A357).
The way that atypical formations were sometimes described by the parents of respondents has much in common with the findings of Smart (2005) in her interviews with a generation born during a similar time period. She found that the generation explained any non-traditional family structures in a particular way:

‘If there had been an unconventional element in their family of origin, it was explained simply by death, migration or an individual quirk of misfortune or personality…They understood the past to be a time when only (unpredictable) war or death came between families and therefore, for them the 1950s family was indeed the ideal (Smart, 2005:542).

**Motherless Families**

The incidence of motherless families was far less prevalent in the data, with approximately thirty-seven young people lacking a resident mother. This is a small proportion of the overall sample, accounting for around 4% of the entire group. While there is a considerable literature on fatherless families during the post-war period (Wynn, 1964; Marsden, 1969; Thane and Evans, 2012) accounts of motherless families are few. Nevertheless, these families make for interesting case studies as the interviewers often recognised the devastating impact of this on family life:

Her own mother had died 5 years ago and her father’s young second wife and baby had left home only 4 days prior to the interview, so I found her in what must have been a condition of emotional strain. Unless she was so used to upheavals within the family that this was one of many others. Her dependence on the YEO for guidance suggests that she had never expected much family security. The house had obvious indications of unkemptness, if not poverty, and the father’s habitual clubbing (now accompanied by respondent) emphasises the lack of family fireside life. The stepmother was only 10 years older than respondent (D716).

The first thing to strike me about this boy is his highly complicated home life, his moves from parents to grandparents (their adoption of him and acquisition of step brothers) and then living with each of them in turn on the deaths of the former. And added to this the fact that both step-brothers are publicans, which usually results in disconnected domestic living anyway (C119).

He was rather indifferent & irresponsible for a while after Q43-45 (family composition questions), but gradually thawed out again. Grandma seems to be regarded by family purely as housekeeper and father trying very hard to be both mother and father to children - youngest came in sobbing from play and only father made any attempt to console and find out what was wrong. From everyone’s extreme sensitivity about mother, would seem that her desertion is fairly recent… (A580).

The interviewers provided very detailed comments on the motherless families and it appears that in many cases the lack of mother had increased levels of complexity within families. In the case below, the mother had left the family and other people had moved in to live with the father and other children:
Boy hardly seemed to have any independence of thought. Each time he answered a question he would look to his older brother for approval. The family relationship was most complicated and I thought it not advisable to enquire too deeply into it. This much I gathered. The house belonged to grandmother. The father of the two brothers had either died or disappeared. Mother was definitely alive and had left the house within the last 2 years. Brother was also married and had a 7 year old son but his wife was no longer living with him. Instead there was someone called […] around the house (C690).

Again, it is frustrating here that the interviewer did not go on to ask more questions about the household, the extra member of the household, or the relationship between the mother and her children in the light of her absence. This leads us to question how contemporary researchers would approach such sensitive issues, or indeed, whether an absent parent would be viewed as a sensitive area of questioning. The far-reaching changes to family forms and the ‘more publically acceptable and unprecedented numbers of people living in families with single parents, step-parents and gay parents’ (Thane and Evans, 2012:208) would suggest that interviewers today would be more likely to probe on what were previously seen as too sensitive and private aspects of family life.

**Uncovering Complexity**

Examples of complex family formations such as extended families were evident in a number of households represented in this dataset. There were 42 respondents who co-resided with either one or both grandparents and in three cases respondents lived with grandparents in the absence of their own parents. In at least two further cases the respondent lived with an older brother or sister as head of household, because they had been orphaned at an early age. A search of the dataset reveals only five cases of respondents living in stepfamilies. In each case, however, the make up of the family unit is not highlighted in the main interview schedule and the step-parent is simply listed as the mother or father. The true picture of the family composition in each case is only explained in the interviewer’s notes. This may have been because the families themselves deliberately ‘concealed’ this information due to shame or embarrassment or that the issue simply did not arise of was not relevant to the interview. It may have been, as we have seen above, that the interviewer did not want to be seen to be prying too deeply in to private (and sensitive) issues. In at least one case from our re-interviews forty years later it was revealed that the individual lived with his stepmother. He recalled having a difficult relationship at the time, yet the original interview describes him as living with his mother and father. The only comment of note in his original interview was about the condition of the home:

> This was quite the most squalid home I have been in for years. The whole place was dingy and filthy. I sat in the living room to do the interview, I rather suspect it was the only habitable room downstairs. Respondent’s mother sat watching whatever happened to appear on ITV during the time I was there and the only heating was from a paraffin stove.

It is only on the reinterview, some forty years later, that the intricacies of this young worker’s family life at the time of the interview, and during the preceding years, is revealed through a very poignant story of his teenage years:
Me mam died when I were 11 years of age, I'd just gone into the first year at [secondary school] and then me full world fell apart then, I mean I was, like, learning, I was alright, on average, average student … but when my mam died, that were me support. I just had no backup at all. So me dad … he were never there half the time, he were working shifts, this and that, the other, then me dad had me put into… well, a woman and a bloke round the corner looked after me for a bit … just somebody to feed you and take you in. No, it were a very unhappy life, then me dad went back to his first wife. Now, he never married my mam, 'cause he couldn't, he was already married. So when my mam died … he got in touch with his first missus and she came to live with us.

And that's the women that were sat there at that interview, when you [interviewer] said “your mother”, it was actually me step-mother, and we just did not get on.

This quote, taken from the follow up interview some forty years later is telling in the level of detail that is recalled by the interviewee that was not even touched upon in the original interview. The interviewer assumed that the young worker was living with his birth mother and father and that he simply lived in ‘squalid’ conditions. To the secondary analyst the initial account would have been treated at face value and the young worker listed as being part of a nuclear family unit. The story uncovered forty years later is striking it its complexity. The respondent had lost his mother, had spent time living with another family when his own father could not cope, had then moved back to live with his father and step-mother, with whom he had a difficult relationship. The father had married and had children previously and had never married the respondent’s mother as he was already married to another woman. The complexity of this respondent’s family life is astonishing yet the true picture only emerged from a reinterview. This tells us something about the nature of the 1960s interviews, about the limitations of secondary analysis and about the value of qualitative longitudinal research and restudies (where possible).

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that atypical family formations and families that deviated from the norm of the period, a nuclear family headed by two parents with a stay at home mother, were not unusual in this 1960s dataset. We have highlighted extensive evidence of families with working mothers, families without resident fathers, step-families and we have also drawn attention to the existence of motherless households.

However, we have also established that it was often difficult to derive detailed information on complex households from this study. Unusual configurations were rarely explored directly with respondents or family members. The interview schedules sometimes unwittingly ‘disguised’ unconventional structures such as the presence of step-parents. Where we have found this information it has been and gleaned from the interviewer notes which themselves were often based on assumptions and ‘guesses’ about the true nature of the family unit. This limitation of the data is explained to some extent by the interviewers sensitivity to family issues and reluctance to probe on what may be seen as private issues not related to the focus of the interview. This is a consequence of the time period in which the research was carried out, a period when families deviating from the ‘norm’ were likely to feel stigmatized, embarrassed or ashamed of their own situations. In addition, it is also important to remember how research practice has
changed over time. These interviews took place in the early 1960s when, as Oakley (1979:309) has described, interviewers operated in a very different, detached way: ‘Textbooks of sociological methods describe the research interview in mechanical terms as simply an instrument for the production of sociological data’. It is only in the interviewer notes section that the interviewers reflect on the interview process and begin to describe, as asked in the interview schedule, to note any ‘problems connected with work, family and leisure’ encountered or observed during the interview.

Without the value judgements made by the interviewers we would have little to base our current analysis on. We learn almost everything we know about the finer details of respondent’s lives from these notes which appear not to have been edited or censored in any way. Such fieldnotes, where they exist, represent conventions and researcher behaviours which would no longer be acceptable, or even ethical, but were very much a product of the standard practice of the time. Resources of this nature have always been of value to the social historian and are becoming increasingly important in social science as they do, without doubt, provide rich, detailed and contemporaneous descriptions of families and households (Thane and Evans, 2006; Gillies and Edwards, 2012). As we have noted elsewhere (Goodwin and O’Connor, 2009) and as Savage (2005:21) has argued, during the post-war period the role of the social researcher had much in common with the ‘tradition of Victorian social work’ and often the comments made and judgements passed are indicative of this. Thane and Evans (2012), for example, have recorded how some of the lone mothers approached to take part in Marsden’s 1960s study refused to participate, suspecting that the researchers had been sent to ‘snoop’ and may report them to the authorities. This may, of course, also explain why respondents in this study were not always forthcoming about matters relating to the family and household.

The data presented here has enabled us to look back from a privileged position, with hindsight, knowing what was to come and providing an opportunity to locate what we can perhaps see as the beginning of what has come to be viewed as a major shift in family formations since the 1960s. As Smart (2007:16) has argued, ‘the more empirical research there is, especially of the historical variety, the more it seems that the Golden Age of the family is a cultural myth which is used discursively to criticize various aspects of contemporary life’. Few families in our study could be described as either average or typical not least because it is hard to define what such a description meant for the lived reality of these young people. Many of the young workers had family lives where peculiarities, idiosyncracies and imperfections were frequently identified, leading us to question further the notion of the post-war period as the Golden Age of the family.

References


