

National Relationship Conference, February 2007

The Continuing centrality of the Extended Family

This session was led by Geoff Dench, senior research fellow at The Young Foundation, and before that Professor of Sociology and Social Policy (and head of department) at Middlesex University. His books have explored many aspects of family relationships, especially grand-parenting, as well as on race and community relations.

Over the last few decades the state has taken over the lives of young people more and more and in society young people have been encouraged to see themselves as the experts and older people as being past it. This has been harmful to the way young people prepare for parenting. Grandparents are natural "advisers" to the young. Youngsters are free to choose whether they listen. This listening process is being inhibited by the messages from society.

Young men are not being encouraged to take responsibility for families and young women are not being encouraged to help "frogs" become "princes". They are becoming choosy and don't think there are any men out there who are worth it. Grandparents in the past encouraged them to see that there were perfectly good partners out there who they could build a good marriage with. Grandparents and the extended family have the opportunity to mediate identity and expectations between the generations.

He commented that the impact of the work of Brook in the 70's was to change attitudes to suggest that the state now had the prerogative for young people and began to persuade young people that parents were not necessarily their best advisers. It was suggested that this had led directly to the present problem we have with teenage pregnancies.

Single motherhood pre marriage is the result of weakening of the extended family. In addition a durable marriage system may not be tenable without an extended family in place, ie, a network of people who share a concern for you. Children of single parent often have no contact with the paternal family or even the maternal family, single mothers can become sovereign in the situation.

Social workers used to emphasise that conflict in the family was bad. In fact being in touch with kin can outweigh the damage of conflict. It will prevent and slow the progress of children towards homelessness. Conflict over children can be a sign of concern even if parties don't agree about issues.

A follow on study to Peter Willmott and Michael Young's, 'Family and Kinship in East London' of 40 years ago was carried out by Michael Young and new colleagues Kate Gavron and Geoff Dench to explore life in the east End of London today. The New East End: Kinship, Race and Conflict is published by the Young Foundation.

The new East End (of London) housing policy has not been helpful but where the extended family is present the latter is still a positive influence. The strongest marriages are seen where there is a healthy mother-in-law to daughter-in-law bond. In working class families, the extended family has a stabilizing effect on marriages.

Legislation over the past few years has been key in damaging extended family. For example, the 1989 Children Act removed the automatic right of access for the extended family. A mother can refuse access to the extended family should she wish and they have to battle through the courts to get access, with the associated distress on the children. Many grandparents aren't willing to put their grandchildren through this and so lose touch.

Extended families need a voice. Many of the female voices in this arena since the 70s have been professional voices, not those of wives and mothers. The working class in particular is much more aware of the value of extended family but they don't have a voice. There is a role for professionals but there is also a role for the family. Social workers have been missing a trick here, they could begin to speak out for extended families and develop expertise.

Child poverty has been defined too narrowly. Contact with extended family generates social capital and should be taken into account.

In summary he stated that people (and certainly policy-makers) tend to assume that the extended family is on its way out: but closer examination of how current society operates show that it is still very central to how most people live and that family life - and indeed successful parenting relationships - depends very heavily on its support.

Extended families are scenes of mutual support between young and old, and it is important to revive awareness of extended families in order to break out of several current policy dilemmas.

Extended families were the basis of traditional community life. Older people tend to understand the importance of extended families more than younger as they can look back to times when they were given more official support, and were able to work more effectively on behalf of their various members.