

Reformulating Familiar Concerns: Parents in Stepfamilies

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of PhD

The University of Leeds
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September 1999

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

Dedicated to memories

of

my brother, Chris Smith (1953-1998)

and

my mother, Mary Goodacre (1924-1999)

Acknowledgements

To my two supervisors, Professor Carol Smart and Dr Jennifer Mason in the Department of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Leeds, I owe a huge debt of thanks. Throughout my time as a research student - and this included times of some uncertainty - both have been wholly generous in their intellectual and personal support. I would also like to thank Professor Janet Finch, formerly of Lancaster University, for her enthusiasm in encouraging me to undertake research in this area of family life.

I could not have undertaken this study without the help of the parents who agreed to take part, who gave freely of their time and whose insights are primarily behind the ideas in this thesis. To them I owe many thanks.

Many thanks, too, to friends and colleagues Pamela Housden, Deborah and John Sawyer, Pippa Stevens, Bren Neale, Amanda Wade, Helen Willmot and Shelley Budgeon. They have been especially helpful.

Robin Flowerdew has provided much help, encouragement and support. I am grateful for this and for his constant willingness to keep watch with my brother and my mother. Finally, very special thanks to my daughter Sophie for her unending help as the going got tough and to my son Tom for daily reminding me of the realities I study.

Abstract

Stepfamilies are culturally significant in Britain on account of their media and mythical profile. Through increased rates in separation, divorce and repartnering they have also become increasingly socially significant. Yet this significance is only partially reflected in the research literature. Public versions of stepfamily life have tended to construct the ties of stepkinship in terms of fragility and contingency, assuming they cannot be counted upon in ways that arise 'naturally' through ties of blood. By talking directly to parents in stepfamilies this project seeks to understand how they themselves understand these issues. The research question is: how do parents reformulate their family relationships in the light of separation, divorce and repartnering, and what implications does this have for their handling of contact and inheritance? Central to its concerns are parents' understandings of the qualitative differences in their relationships with their biological and stepchildren, and how these differences may be accounted for.

The study used qualitative research methods and was based on semi-structured interviews with thirty parents living in married and cohabiting couple stepfamilies. Respondents were chosen using theoretical sampling methods. The aim was to select a sample with a range of characteristics and experiences which would enable key comparisons to be made about how stepfamily life 'works' under different social conditions. Although interviews focussed specifically on issues of 'contact' and inheritance, respondents were also able to discuss issues of most importance to them.

Analysis showed clearly that ties and solidarities between stepparents and stepchildren can be strong and enduring. Concerns were expressed by almost all stepparents that their stepchildren and biological children should be treated equally – whether this be on a day-to-day basis or in more lasting terms of inheritance. It also emerged that the experience of growing up as a stepchild provided a useful resource for those who, as adults, themselves moved into the role of stepparent.

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Chapter 1

The Social Significance of Stepfamilies

‘Even after I remarried, some people always made us feel we were a *broken* family. Which is amazing, because I don’t feel like that at all...And that bothers me about the divorce. Is that how other people see us? Something broken? A breakdown? But I did kind of think like that until I reached my forties. But how did we come to think of it like that? Part of me understands it and part of me is mystified. We’re just a family’ (Deb Casson, aged forty-eight).

Up until very recently, ‘public stories’ (Jamieson, 1998) or discourses – whether emanating from academic, political, religious or media sources – have tended to construct processes of separation, divorce and repartnering almost entirely in terms of family ‘brokenness’ or ‘breakdown’. Further, as the opening comment to this chapter suggests, the theme of brokenness persists beyond people’s experiences of separation and divorce, moving with them through repartnering into stepfamily life. At this point, notions of ‘brokenness’ intersect with public stories and cultural stereotypes of stepfamilies, in which stepmothers are negatively portrayed as ‘wicked’ or ‘unkind’, stepfathers as ‘abusive’ and their children as the potential victims of that abuse and neglect (Coleman and Ganong, 1987).

Themes of ambivalence and brokenness in relation to stepfamilies also pervade the literature on kinship. This body of literature focuses on issues of solidarity and conflict between people, what it is that binds them, what it is that divides them. Through these bonds people develop attachments, form and sustain commitments (Allan, 1996: 1). Emphasis here has been – and in many respects remains – on the ‘blood’ relationship between parents and their biological children as the ‘natural’, given locus of enduring, morally binding ties and commitments between people. Empirical studies of family

relationships reveal that tensions are most likely to surface around issues of contact (between children and their non-resident biological parents) and inheritance. In these areas of family law, primacy is also assigned to 'blood' ties. From these different perspectives – and as I show further below – not only are stepfamilies viewed as a second-best arrangement through the lens of a deficit model of family (Robinson, 1991) but the ties and solidarities of stepkinship are regarded as 'unnatural', contingent and fragile.

This brings me to the issues with which this thesis is centrally concerned. My research question is: *How do parents in stepfamilies reformulate their family relationships in the light of separation, divorce and repartnering, and what implications does this have for their handling of contact and inheritance?* This question is concerned with ties and solidarities in stepfamilies, specifically those between (step)parents and (step)children. It is concerned with some of the social consequences of parents' reformulated ideas on family relationships, that is, with the demands that can be made and the obligations owed in these relationships.

Demographic trends: divorce and repartnering

Although many of these negative constructions of stepfamily life derive historically from contexts in which stepfamily formation occurs after death rather than divorce, they nicely feed and fuel contemporary debates about trends and changes in family life and relationships and some of the 'risk' factors associated with them (see for example, Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980; Cockett and Tripp, 1994; Utting, 1995). A brief survey of some of these trends reveals that between 1970 and 1996, the number of divorces in England and Wales has more than doubled from 79,000 to 171,000. 'Risk' of the 'breakdown' of remarriages appears to be about double that of first marriages. We do not have access to figures on the number of cohabitation 'breakdowns' (Maclean and Eekelaar, 1997). In 1997, over 150,000 children aged under sixteen had experience of parental divorce (*Social Trends*, 1999). Many people who separate and/or divorce subsequently repartner and in so doing create a 'stepfamily'.

Stepfamilies

In broadest terms a stepfamily may be understood as a same-sex or hetero-sexual couple, one or both of whom is not the biological parent of all or some of the other's biological children. This definition allows flexibility as to whether the couple is married or cohabiting, co-resident or living apart, or whether they are current or former partners. It also leaves open issues of whether a stepfamily is full-time or part-time, a stepfather, stepmother or lone-parent household. However, as I show in Chapter 2, many definitions assume stepfamilies are heterosexual, married couple, co-resident stepfamilies. According to Haskey (1996) 6.8% of all (heterosexual) families with children are stepfamilies (this includes cohabiting and married couple stepfamilies) and 8.2% of all children living in families live in stepfamilies (1996: 11-14).

These figures indicate there are over half a million stepfamilies in Britain with almost one million stepchildren. Furthermore, it has been estimated that one in eight children in Britain will experience life in a stepfamily by the time they reach the age of sixteen (Ferri and Smith, 1998). Although a number of typologies have been devised (Burgoyne and Clark, 1984; Ihinger-Tallman and Pasley, 1987) to try and capture the diversity of stepfamily structures, it is important to remember that subjective definitions can cut right across these classifications. Stepfamilies are complex and diverse, both within and between their different types (Ferri and Smith, 1998). These studies and statistics indicate that stepfamilies are increasingly socially significant.

As a number of writers (Smart and Neale, 1999; Morgan, 1999) insist, the ways in which separation, divorce and repartnering are discursively constituted has a major impact on how we 'read' or interpret trends and statistics which claim to describe or represent relationship change in objective or value-neutral terms. This is evident in how the 'causes' of the above trends have been explained. In broad terms, these are expressed either in terms of individual change or social change.

Stepfamilies and social policy

First, rising divorce rates are regarded as clear evidence of a spiralling individualism (Dench, 1996) and a corresponding moral downturn (Dennis and Erdos, 1993; Morgan, P., 1995; Humphrey, 1996). Although in broad terms this position can be associated with populist ideas and political *rhetoric* (of the 'left' and 'right'), family *policy* and how it is implemented are more contradictory in its aims and outcomes (Fox Harding, 1996; Silva and Smart, 1999).

For example, while changes in divorce law since the 1960s have consistently aimed to strengthen marriage and stabilise families, their effects have been in many respects to normalise divorce. Yet when parents do separate and/or divorce, the requirements of the Children Act 1989 means that the institution of marriage takes a back seat to parenthood and children's interests (Rodger, 1996; Smart and Neale, 1999). These tensions and contradictions are similarly reflected in the government's consultation document *Supporting Families* (1998). While it recognises there 'never was a golden age of the family' (1998: 2) and claims not to be 'pressurising people into one type of relationship or forcing them to stay together' (1998: 3), it also believes that it is marriage which 'provides a strong foundation for stable relationships' and is the 'best basis for raising children' (1998: 30-1). Divorce 'means more family break up and reconstitution' (1998: 31). By strengthening marriage and encouraging people to take a responsible approach towards it, the government aims to protect the interests of children by reducing 'risks' of family 'breakdown' (*Supporting Families*, 1998: 31).

Despite these contradictory elements there is a clear message that family stability, responsibility and children's interests are to be equated with 'never-divorced' married couples. 'Risks' for children are associated with divorce and 'reconstituted' family life. Thus as Silva and Smart (1999: 3) argue, although social policy acknowledges diversity and social change, it strives to hold fast to that model of the family which takes as its benchmark the heterosexual, conjugal, co-resident couple with their biological children (VanEvery, 1991/2; Bourdieu, 1996). It is against this model that stepfamilies are defined.

Variously described as re-ordered, reconstituted, re-formed, blended or bi-nuclear families (Hantrais and Letablier, 1996), they imply the restoration of a previous situation rather than a new group of people in a fundamentally different situation (Ferri and Smith, 1998: 12). Yet a social policy sensitive to the specific needs and circumstances of stepfamilies is conspicuous by its absence (Cretney, 1995). And while the Children Act 1989 does allow stepparents to acquire 'parental responsibility' it also stresses that biological parents cannot be divested, or divest themselves, of that responsibility (De'Ath, 1992a; Ferri and Smith, 1998). There is a consistent lack of clarity about the roles and responsibilities of stepparents, and a corresponding lack of recognition of the contributions they make.

Sociological analyses of change

A second very different kind of explanation for these trends comes from sociologists who frame them in the context of wider social change, an effect of that change rather than its cause (Giddens, 1991, 1992; Beck, 1992, 1998; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). These writers argue that ascribing blame to the wants and discontents of individuals cannot explain this 'simultaneous mass exodus' from so-called 'traditional' forms of family life (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Beck, 1998). Individualisation is thus better understood as a quest for better if unfamiliar solutions to family life – the negotiated family, the multiple family, new arrangements after divorce, divorce again, new assortments of your, my, our children, our past and present families. These solutions to social change must emerge from individual biographies (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 1-5). From this perspective – and since I commenced this research it is a position from which an increasing number of writers argue (Beck, 1998; Jagger and Wright, 1999; Morgan, 1999; Silva and Smart, 1999) - notions of brokenness and moral decline are inappropriate.

Taking this second explanation and mapping it onto the statistics outlined above suggests interesting and very different ways of seeking to understand or 'read' changes in family life. Although many second marriages or relationships may end in separation or divorce, there are many which do not. As Walker (1992a) argues, research and

statistics which focus on relationship ‘breakdown’ obscure the potential and actual strengths of post-divorce family life. We need to discover what factors enable some parents in stepfamilies to build and create constructive, satisfying and more positive relationships (Walker, 1992a: 28). It is some of these factors which my research explores and seeks to understand.

Structure of the thesis

Chapter 2 examines some of the literature on family and kinship, focusing particularly on studies from the late 1950s to the present day, the period during which demographic changes outlined above have been most marked. It focuses on British and American studies, examining their assumptions and arguments about kinship ties and solidarities and their implications and adequacy for understanding and conceptualising stepkinship.

Chapter 3 addresses issues of methods and methodology. It demonstrates the links between my perspectives on key philosophical questions – ontology, epistemology, reflexivity and ethics – and my research question, design and practice.

Chapter 4 examines the work and ideas of some contemporary writers on morality, moral subjects and moral domains, focusing on the links they make between moral practices and family life. With the help of some illustrative examples from my data, I critically analyse some of their main arguments, drawing out some of the implications of their ideas for understanding moral practices in stepfamilies.

On the basis of data generated through my research, Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 analyse some of the key issues related to my research question. Chapter 5 analyses the processes through which parents in stepfamilies reformulate their family relationships in the light of their experiences of separation, divorce and repartnering. It looks at whom they include or exclude as close family and how they reached these decisions. Specifically, it looks at parents’ understandings of their relationships with their biological and step-children and seeks to trace some of the factors which influence their ideas and feelings about ‘closeness’ and ‘distance’.

In the light of parents' understandings of their reformulated family relationships, Chapter 6 analyses how these may influence their feelings about, and handling of, contact. Chapter 7 moves to matters of inheritance. Commencing with a discussion of English inheritance law and some of its implications for stepfamilies, it goes on to explore parents' handling of inheritance and how this relates to their understandings of their relationships with their biological and step- children. Chapter 8 analyses data generated from those respondents with childhood experiences of stepfamily life, analysing how these experiences inform or influence their role as stepparents and their handling of relationships with their own stepchildren. Finally, in Chapter 9, I draw together some of the key themes which have emerged in earlier chapters.

Chapter 2

Kinship Ties and Solidarities

‘You don’t automatically stay close to blood relatives. I’m *much* closer to my granddaughter than to my son or daughter...And my stepdaughter who’s thirty-odd is *very* close to me. She was actually adopted by my husband and his first wife. She’s closer than my son *or* daughter but not quite as close as my grand-daughter. I’m wondering where to put my daughter on here [visual chart]. She’s more like my daughter-in-law, who I’ve put the same as my son...So it’s blood and marriage. It’s a traditional outlook I’ve got. *But*, having said that, I’ve had so much help from friends that in a way they’re family...Through my experiences, I’ve changed my ideas of what family is. The operation of these people is terribly important isn’t it...So I don’t think of my ex-husband as family any more’ (Meg Chandler, aged sixty-eight, emphasis in original).

Introduction

If the trends outlined in Chapter 1 suggest that contemporary British society is diverse, changing and fragmented, it raises the question of how these features apply to people’s understandings of family, kinship and relatedness (Strathern, 1992a; 1992b). This in turn raises questions about people’s solidarities and commitments - with whom and for how long these can be sustained and reciprocated. For, as I argued in Chapter 1, increased rates in separation, divorce and repartnering are rarely presented solely in statistical or descriptive terms (Smart and Neale, 1999; Morgan, 1999). Rather, they are invariably linked to debates about moral and social ‘decline’ (Cheal, 1991) and to

concerns that loyalties, obligations and responsibilities in families may be divided, weakened or abandoned in the processes of these changes and transitions.

In the light of these academic and political concerns (and in what must necessarily be a selective coverage of relevant material), this chapter reviews some of the research literature on family and kinship, focusing particularly on studies carried out in Britain and America over the past three decades or so, the period during which these demographic changes have been most marked. In addition, it examines the work of a number of contemporary sociologists whose ways of theorising wider social change in late modernity have made important contributions to our understandings of change in intimate and family relationships. Broadly speaking, there is a shift from more rigid, structuralist definitions of kin relationships to more flexible approaches which emphasise the importance of intimacy, individual agency and choice in the creation of family, kin and other personal relationships. In exploring these different approaches, questions will be raised about their implications for understanding stepkinship, and to what extent they are adequate for conceptualising its relationships and solidarities.

Terms of definition

The term 'kinship' as used by the many writers included in this chapter (Schneider, 1968; Firth, *et al*, 1970; Finch, 1989; Weston, 1991; Strathern, 1992a, 1992b; Finch and Mason, 1993; Allan, 1996) has been defined as that area of study broadly concerned with a person's 'family' or 'relatives' and the sets of ties socially recognised to exist between them (Firth *et al*, 1970: 3). If to that extent its meaning is uncontested, what is disputed is the *basis* on which people are 'socially recognised' as relatives or family members, as too, are claims about the quality of relationships which are assumed to follow. While it is now well documented that the term 'family' is problematic (Barrett and McIntosh, 1982; Bernardes, 1985; Cheal, 1991; Weston, 1991; Morgan, 1996), it is retained here and throughout this study for two reasons. First, family and kinship are frequently linked in theoretical debate. Secondly, there is empirical evidence that its flexibility makes it an 'important operational concept' (Firth *et al*, 1970: 91). That actors themselves negotiate the concept (Morgan, 1996) has led a number of researchers

to defend its usage on these grounds (Finch, 1989). It will be shown that in the ways the term 'family' has been subjected to a range of critiques, so too has the term 'kinship' been challenged along broadly similar lines.

Assumptions about the basis of 'stepfamily', its ties and solidarities have not (yet) been challenged to the same extent. Rather, as suggested in Chapter 1, research has focused on their lack of solidarity or the diversity of form stepfamilies take. In the discussion which follows – and in contrast to the broad, inclusive definitions I proposed in Chapter 1 – it will be seen that many writers assume a narrower, more exclusive definition such as that proposed by Ferri and Smith (1998): 'a married or cohabiting couple one or both of whom is not the biological parent of all or some of the other's biological children' (Ferri and Smith, 1998: 10). This usage tends to assume couples are also heterosexual and co-resident.

Earlier approaches to family and kin relationships (1950s – 1970s)

Many of the earlier analyses of kinship carried out in Britain or America in the period under review were conducted by anthropologists, or by sociologists influenced by anthropological concerns. Thus, interest lay not only in determining the existence or otherwise of kinship 'systems' – that is, whether broad patterns of relationship existed between different kin in terms of their behaviour, beliefs, or actual commitments – but also in evaluating the extent and influence of these kinship ties and solidarities. These interests were linked in turn to certain sociological preoccupations of the 1950s, in particular to structural-functionalist debates on family stability and cohesion. If on the one hand, the 1950s – 1970s were regarded as the 'golden age of the nuclear family, concerns existed too about the extent to which Parsons' (1956) 'structurally isolated' nuclear family had replaced the 'extended' family as the dominant form of household. Consonant with these concerns were debates about marriage and the extent to which it was changing from an institution to a relationship, based on equality and 'love' (Finch and Summerfield, 1991; Morgan, 1991).

Although the historical basis of Parsons' claims have since been challenged (Anderson, 1971), and his claims about family harmony criticised (Morgan, 1975; Cheal, 1991), his

ideas have been highly influential. During the 1950s and 1960s a number of kinship studies emerged in Britain (Firth, 1956; Young and Willmott, 1957; Townsend, 1958; Willmott and Young, 1960; Rosser and Harris, 1965; Bell, 1968) with a view to demonstrating that such a broad overview misrepresented social reality, and that wider kinship ties were also important. Implicitly or explicitly, many of these took as 'given' the model of kinship which follows.

David Schneider's (1968) study of American kinship

One of the most widely acknowledged and influential studies to emerge during this period was David Schneider's (1968) model of kinship in twentieth century America. As the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern acknowledges some twenty years later, it is 'both with and against his ideas on kinship' that her own work on late twentieth century English kinship derives (Strathern, 1992a: xviii). Indeed, in the way Schneider's conceptual model has been widely applied to patterns of kinship in Britain and has formed the basis of comparative studies and critical analysis on both sides of the Atlantic, Strathern's comments may be said to reflect the position of many writers and researchers in this field.

Schneider (1968) argues that the American kinship system is based on two basic principles, blood and marriage, derived respectively from the two major cultural orders in American society, the 'order of nature' and the 'order of law'. Relatives related through blood are termed *consanguinial* kin; those related through marriage are termed *affinal* kin. The 'blood' relationship is formulated in biogenetic terms. That is, the conception of a child occurs during an act of sexual intercourse, at which time each parent provides one half of the child's biogenetic constitution. From this relationship of 'shared substance' follows a shared or common identity. Because blood is a material, biological substance, the blood relationship is culturally defined as 'natural', 'real' and 'true', an objective fact of science and nature. It is believed to be of fundamental and enduring significance and can never be terminated or changed. 'Disowning' or 'disinheriting' a child is the furthest one can go in this direction (Schneider, 1968: 23-

25). As I show in Chapter 7, the primacy accorded to blood ties in English inheritance law reveals similar assumptions about their significance.

In contrast, relationship by marriage has no 'natural' or biogenetic basis and is terminable by death or divorce. Relatives by marriage are bound only by law and a 'code for conduct' – based on affection, concern and care – which is believed to arise 'naturally' among those related by blood. The exception to this is the relationship between husband and wife. Their union – socially legitimated in lawful marriage and expressed through the act of sexual intercourse – is an act of procreation through which the child and the blood relationship is created. For this reason, they are the only relatives in law who are culturally defined as being on a par with the closest blood relatives (Schneider, 1968: 26). Because father, mother and (biological) child are also husband, wife and child, they bring together, it is believed, the two cultural orders of nature and law. This is 'the family' in its essential form, a 'natural' unit formed according to the laws of nature. To be a 'complete' family, father, mother and their biological offspring must also live together.

However, as Schneider goes on to say, since only certain facts of nature or sexual acts are culturally defined as 'natural', moral and legal (1968: 33-40), the link between procreative intercourse and family or kinship is *symbolic*. Sexual intercourse serves as the *symbol* in terms of which members of the family as relatives, and 'the family' as a cultural unit, are defined and differentiated (1968: 33). Its symbolic basis is also evident in the way that (at that time) children conceived 'naturally' outside wedlock are not socially recognised as kin; they are 'illegitimate' (Smart, 1987; Wolfram, 1987). Conversely, adopted children who have no so-called 'natural' connection with their adoptive parents are none the less ascribed the full social and legal rights of kinship. These anomalies indicate that there is no intrinsic or necessary relationship between the symbol (the procreative act) and the object symbolised (kinship).

The guiding principle for the conduct of family relationships is 'love' – symbolised in the conjugal relationship between husband and wife and the blood relationship between parent and child. Together, these two kinds of love symbolise unity, identity and belonging. (The resemblance to Parsonian notions of family harmony and cohesiveness

is striking). In practice, love means loyalty, support, help and so on, summarised by Schneider as 'enduring, diffuse solidarity' (1968: 52). Arising most 'naturally' between parents and their (biological) children, 'enduring, diffuse solidarity' is normatively expected to be present, albeit to a lesser degree, among all kin. From this perspective, a sharp distinction is drawn between friendship and kinship. While both are relationships of diffuse solidarity, only kinship, or more specifically the blood relationship, is defined as enduring. Blood relatives are 'given' at birth and 'for life'; friends are picked or chosen and can, it is claimed, be 'dropped at will and without obligation' (Schneider, 1968: 53-54, 92). Some writers it will be shown (see also Chapter 5 of this study) challenge Schneider's assertions about friendship and include friends as kin at both a conceptual and empirical level.

Schneider and the 'special problems' of divorce and remarriage

Given the tight cultural fit in Schneider's account between kinship and biology, and family and household, it is unsurprising that separation, divorce and remarriage present 'special problems' for his analysis. Since the state of a family's well-being, its integrity and stability, is measured decisively in terms of whether husband, wife and children are living together, where this is not the case, 'the family' is incomplete and 'broken'. The 'broken' status of such families raises questions about the kinship ties of children whose parents have divorced. While some of those Schneider interviewed believed such children had 'no family at all', he suggests it may be 'technically' more accurate to say they have 'two families' (1968: 34).

Another 'problem' for Schneider derives from the wide variation in people's views on kinship ties after divorce. Although none of his informants had themselves been separated or divorced, some insisted that divorce severs ties with former in-laws, while others asserted that it does not. What emerges unequivocally is that 'It all depends on the relationship' (Schneider, 1968: 92). If these relationships continue, it is regarded as voluntary, a matter of mutual consent. Similar findings about former in-laws have emerged in more recent studies (Finch and Mason, 1990a; Stacey, 1991). However, as I argue in Chapters 5 and 6, contact between children and a non-resident parent as well as

social expectations about how post-divorce relationships should be conducted may limit the extent to which they are voluntary or mutually agreed.

Finally, the thorniest ‘problem’ for Schneider is posed by remarriage and the steprelationship. He suggests, as do many writers, that the nature of this ‘problem’ is precisely illustrated in the ‘tragedy’ of the step-child in Western European folklore. The fundamental difficulty is that step-relatives have the role of close relatives without being ‘real’ relatives, that is, blood relatives. Whereas a ‘real’ mother is related to her child both by law and nature, a stepmother is related by law alone (he does not consider same-sex or cohabiting couple stepfamilies). What a stepmother does for her step-child is based on her husband’s claim on her (Schneider, 1968: 26-27). Lacking the ‘natural’ basis for a parent-child relationship, she can feel none of that abiding love and loyalty which arises ‘naturally’ between a mother and her ‘own’ child. Although Schneider focuses exclusively on stepmothers, his argument also applies to stepfathers.

Stepparents thus fail twice. Not only are they unreal, they are also unkind. Lacking the common biogenetic substance which marks the obligatory and permanent condition, the steprelationship is ‘unnatural’, its solidarities contingent. By definition, the solidarities of partnerships sustained neither by nature nor by law – those between cohabiting or same-sex partners – are also inherently fragile, unstable or non-existent. Other studies (see below) present a more varied picture of these relationships, as do my own findings discussed in Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8. It is important to note that Schneider’s analysis – which so clearly subscribes to the ‘deficit model’ of stepfamily life referred to in chapter 1 – is not empirically based. Many of the issues raised in Schneider’s analysis of stepkinship are addressed in my research.

Although the majority of people in Schneider’s study ascribed the ‘blood’ relationship the highest cultural value overall, there were dissenting voices. Anticipating more recent theoretical approaches, some insisted that ‘blood’ ties are not inherently more solid or enduring than those of other relationships. Commitments and solidarities develop, if at all, contextually over time. This suggests that if blood may be understood as *one* symbolic basis for kinship, it is by no means the only one. Choice, shared history and the quality of relationships also emerged as significant. Despite these

'inconsistencies' (of which more may have emerged had the majority of his informants not been white, married couples), Schneider claims that his genealogical model of American kinship remains intact. Within this structuralist framework, contradictions and ambiguities are interpreted as 'variations' within a single system (1968: 113), the 'understandable but perhaps eccentric decisions' of a minority (1968: 70-71). Other writers, for example Yanagisako (1978; 1985) in her studies of Japanese-Americans and Cherlin (1996) in his account of different 'racial' and ethnic groups, show how American kinship varies considerably from group to group.

Rosser and Harris (1965): kinship as a process

As I have suggested above, Schneider's (1968) model of kinship and Parsons' (1956) model of the conjugal family provided the basis and impetus for a number of British studies in the 1950s and 1960s. Rosser and Harris' (1965) study in Swansea sought to establish how far the patterns of kinship found in Young and Willmott's (1957) study in Bethnal Green could be applied to other urban areas. Their findings were broadly similar. That is, while 'close' kin (parents and biological children) were important in people's everyday lives, so too were 'extended' or more distant kin – especially grandparents and grandchildren, but also uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews and cousins. They argued that because the kinship system in Britain does not bear any great structural weight, it is not subject to tight controls or precise sanctions. As a result, a fairly wide margin is allowed for individual variation and preference in kin behaviour (1965: 287-8).

For this reason, 'counting' kin genealogically was deemed largely 'irrelevant' to an understanding of the 'social significance' (Rosser and Harris, 1965: 196-7) of people's family relationships. It was the social significance of relationships which accounted for the diversity and complexity of people's understandings of who counted as family and the kinds of commitments that followed from this. Importantly, this led them to conclude that while kinship is an enduring social entity, it is not static or fixed but subject to variation and change. It is 'essentially a process' (Rosser and Harris, 1965: 200). They noted that departures from the 'normal and universal' patterns of the life

cycle accounted in part for these variations. One way in which the cycle became 'abnormal' was through 'broken homes' produced by separation and divorce. In their study these were very much 'minority instances' (Rosser and Harris, 1965: 166-7). This is in marked contrast to later studies on family and kinship where changing attitudes towards divorce, its easier availability and increased rates from the 1970s onwards, are reflected in the very different amounts of space it secures.

Firth, Hubert and Forge's (1970) study of middle-class kinship

Similar findings regarding flexibility and variation emerged in another important study by Firth, Hubert and Forge (1970). Originally intended as a collaborative study, it was conceived in discussion with Schneider in 1959. Like Rosser and Harris (1965) before them, Firth *et al* (1970) specified that it was the *social significance* of kin relationships with which they were primarily concerned. With this objective in mind, they developed a four-level classification of kin relationships, concisely summarised by Allan (1996) as named, unnamed, effective and intimate kin (1996: 39).

Broadly speaking, the 'intimate' kin category, where contact is 'purposeful, close and frequent' (Firth, Hubert and Forge, 1970: 156) coincides with anthropological definitions of primary kin. This includes all those connected by a single genealogical link – parents, siblings and children – and as some writers (Schneider, 1968; Allan, 1996) argue, partners or spouses. The remaining three categories (named, unnamed, and effective) more or less coincide with 'secondary kin' – all those who do not fall into the primary category – aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents and so on. Generally (although not always), contact with secondary kin is less frequent. As Allan (1996) points out, simple as it is, Firth *et al*'s (1970) classificatory system does manage to convey the social rather than the genealogical basis of people's kin relationships (1996: 31). My own research design incorporates a similar approach, and will be described in Chapter 3.

As in Firth's (1956) earlier study, what was immediately striking to Firth and his colleagues was how active people's kinship ties were. Of particular importance to all their respondents was the notion of some moral quality or imperative attached to kin

relationships, especially those based on close consanguinity. This translates into two basic principles: personal support is expected to be derived from kin and personal responsibility is expected to be assumed for kin. Related to this was the view that these ties should be marked by continuity. If dropped, they can later be reactivated (Firth *et al*, 1970: 343, 385-7). Here too kinship is not perceived as static or fixed. Again, in common with findings from other studies, people's greatest commitments and obligations emerged in relation to 'primary' kin. Firth *et al* report markedly less ambivalence and ambiguity in people's minds about these and other consanguinial relationships than they do about so-called 'secondary kin' and/or relatives 'in-law'.

Notwithstanding broad agreement about these relationships, some important exceptions emerged. For example, they found that relationships between parents and adult children were not unambiguously 'good' or straightforward. Rather they were qualitatively very different, revealing complex patterns that were not stereotypical. And while strains in these relationships could be endured at a greater intensity and over a longer period, they did, in rare cases, lead to a complete breach (Firth *et al*, 1970: 400-1). Of particular relevance in the context of my own research is their finding that parental divorce was an important factor in bad relations between parents and adult children, especially where contact between them had not been satisfactorily maintained. Tensions in this relationship also affected the amount and quality of contact between stepsiblings, half-siblings and stepparents (Firth *et al*, 1970: 199). I address some of these issues in Chapters 6 and 8.

Firth *et al*'s (1970) findings on stepkinship present a more varied picture of these relationships than Schneider's (1968) account suggests. Like Schneider, they argue that because stepkin are assimilated in position to close consanguinial kin through a legal process rather than a biological one, the step-relationship is 'structurally ambiguous' (1970: 328). In their reference to legal processes, they too are thinking only in terms of heterosexual married couple stepfamilies. Either way, stepchildren in these families have not grown up with their new kin. The structural ambiguity of their situation is further compounded because they do not meet the expectation that family and household coincide (Firth *et al*, 1970: 153).

Yet, despite these ambiguities, Firth *et al* found that conflict was not present or absent in any easily predictable way in these relationships. Ambiguity was most marked around issues of kinship terminology or how steprelatives should be addressed. Although in some cases stepmothers were ‘hated’, in others a stepmother was liked and a new marriage much approved of. What mattered in all cases was the quality of relationship between people (1970: 301, 329, 402). And while they found inheritance caused some ‘bad feeling’ in ‘second’ families – as indeed it did in ‘first’ families – they concluded that second marriages do not automatically complicate things in this area. Again, the quality and history of the relationships involved was an important factor. These issues are explored in Chapter 7 of my study.

For Firth and his colleagues, these variations in kin behaviour indicate that people’s ‘operational categories’ for defining ‘close’ and ‘distant’ kin are more fluid and flexible than structural definitions allow. Kinship ties are ‘permissive’ rather than ‘obligatory’ (Firth *et al*, 1970: 97, 453; see also Firth, 1956: 14). That is, as Allan (1996) expresses it, they were comparatively freely chosen, rather than tightly prescribed by social norms, rules and conventions (1996: 30-1). However, the moral imperative of kinship means that choice is not unlimited. Although no precise rules exist and making moral choices thus presented difficulties for people, in all cases the *history* of a relationship and the amount of personal time expended on it emerged as important factors (Firth *et al*, 1970: 390-6).

On the basis of their findings Firth *et al* (1970) deny that the procreative act alone creates kinship. Because the genetic link starts at birth and lasts through life, the ties and obligations associated with it *assume* a ‘built-in’ or ‘given’ quality which makes them appear unalterable and unlike anything else (1970: 3-11, 154). In fact, as Firth *et al* point out, the morally binding quality of these ties is ‘to some extent acquired through the natal family during childhood’ (1970: 109). In other words, as later perspectives argue, and as I do in later chapters, the moral imperative of kinship is culturally derived, developed and negotiated in and through relationship. It is not, as Schneider (1968) insists, a given quality of kinship which occurs ‘naturally’ at birth, and for life, between those – and only those – who are related through ‘blood’.

Approaches to family and kin relationships (1980s)

Although the biogenetic and marriage relationship remain central to these earlier studies, their explicit focus on the social basis of kinship is important, demonstrating as it does (Allan, 1996) the complexity and moral significance of these ties. Allan (1996) suggests that possibly on account of the success of these earlier works, kinship studies became 'unfashionable' during the 1970s and 1980s. A more convincing explanation of kinship's declining popularity as a research topic lies in what Cheal (1991) refers to as 'a Big Bang' in the sociology of the family during the mid- 1970s. At this point, the image of unity and certainty in so-called 'standard sociological theory' – a unity Cheal considers to be overstated anyway – gave way under the impact of a number of different theoretical approaches, arguably the most conspicuous of which was feminism (Cheal, 1991: 1-9).

What these newer perspectives emphasised, and earlier ones had largely ignored, was that family relationships are also power relationships, in which inequality and conflict can also play a significant role (Morgan, 1975; Barrett and McIntosh, 1982). These ideas appeared to receive additional support from the social and demographic trends outlined in Chapter 1, all of which suggested that the nuclear family was neither universal nor the sole site for close relationships. Studies at this time thus tended to look at marriage or parent child relationships. Some of them looked specifically at stepfamily relationships, exploring these in both their historical and contemporary contexts.

Studies of stepfamily relationships

As argued in Chapter 1, the increasing social significance of stepfamilies is only partially reflected in the research literature. Much of this comes from within the field of psychology where emphasis is placed on the 'problems' of stepfamilies as revealed in the therapeutic context. Comparatively little has been written from a sociological

perspective. Little of this explores solidarities between stepkin; even less considers cohabiting or gay and lesbian stepfamilies.

Early traditions and accounts of stepfamily relationships

Discussions of stepfamily relationships invariably commence with some reference to the 'wicked stepmother' of myth and folklore, and that these myths may negatively shape the expectations and experience of people living in stepfamilies (Maddox, 1975). Stepfamily formation in this early tradition occurs of course following death rather than divorce. Noy (1991) has explored the development of this tradition in some detail. While the Cinderella story can be traced to ninth century China, its sentiments, specifically the concept of the 'wicked stepmother', are to be found in most parts of the modern world, in Asia, Africa, America and Europe. This figure also occupies a position of considerable importance in ancient Roman literature, where she is familiar in those contexts where monogamy and remarriage are normative.

Noy distinguishes two traditions. In the first, this stepmother appears amongst Roman writers as a product both of their general misogynistic tradition and also as the locus for Roman obsessions with property and inheritance. What is feared is the influence of 'stepmotherly blandishments' on a husband's decisions about inheritance (Gaius, *Digest* 5.2.4., in Noy, 1991: 351). In the second tradition, in the folklore of medieval Europe, she emerges as the habitually cruel and jealous stepmother of subsequent European culture. Although in legal texts, there are examples of 'good' stepmothers, what both traditions endorse is the view that hostility is the 'natural' feeling of a stepmother towards her stepchild. Relatedly, while examples of wicked stepfathers occur in both Roman and later literature, no folklore exists (Noy, 1991:349). A cautionary point Burchardt (1990) makes, and one which has relevance more widely, is that legal records are 'a misleading source' for understanding patterns in stepfamily relationships because 'they only concern families so conflictual that they came before the courts' (1990: 240).

Yet, evidence from historical and contemporary sources suggests a more variable picture of these relationships. Thus, while both Houlbrooke (1984) and Collins (1991) find

evidence of conflict in stepfamily households in the early modern period (1500-1800), Collins also reports affectionate relationships. However, since much of this information is recorded in diaries, letters and autobiographies, it is by implication drawn almost entirely from adult stepchildren of the upper middle classes. What emerges is therefore partial and fragmented. Collins concludes that although the absence of data on stepchildren from the labouring classes is a serious bar to drawing further conclusions about steprelationships in this period, the general impression according to these writers is that stepfamilies were not always 'troublesome places'. Rather, as Firth *et al* (1970) also found, 'stepfamily lives were mixed in quality' (Collins, 1991: 343).

Burgoyne and Clark's (1984) study of stepfamily life

Similar variations emerge in Burgoyne and Clark's (1984) major study of stepfamily life in Sheffield. For most people in their study, stepfamily formation followed divorce rather than death. On the basis of interview data with forty remarried couples with dependent children, Burgoyne and Clark developed a typology of stepfamilies in which parents were classified according to goals they held in relation to family life. Although their study does not focus explicitly on kinship, it is implicit in their discussions with people and in their recognition that the process from separation to remarriage entails the renegotiation and redrawing of family boundaries (Burgoyne and Clark, 1984: 70). Thus they do look at conflicts and solidarities in stepfamilies, noting how conflict between stepkin is conventionally regarded as 'both endemic and inevitable' (1984: 14). They argue that marriage breakdown and divorce have become public issues because they appear to threaten cherished moral values and principles – responsibility, stability and commitment – which in the context of family life are identified with a life-long, heterosexual married partnership and the raising of biological, dependent children (Burgoyne and Clark, 1984: 1-4, 202).

They found that one of the key areas of conflict for parents in stepfamilies revolves around the 'structural ambiguities' (see above, Firth *et al*, 1970) of their situation which make it difficult to be rigid or precise about kin boundaries. In particular, contact (then termed 'access') between a child and a non-resident biological parent was perceived as

threatening to the unity of the new family, making it difficult for stepfamilies to 'hide' their step- status (Coleman and Ganong, 1987) and conform to the pattern of the 'unbroken' nuclear family to which many of them aspired (Burgoyne and Clark, 1984: 156-162). Surprisingly then, a study by Furstenberg and Spanier (1984) found that relationships between stepfathers and their stepchildren were not adversely affected by children's contact with their biological fathers.

Importantly, Burgoyne and Clark recognise that although levels of conflict and co-operation between ex-partners are to some extent a matter of personal history and preference, these relationships are also affected by public expectations and beliefs about appropriate post-divorce behaviour. At the time they were writing, notions of a 'clean break' after divorce tended to discourage ex-partners from sustaining amicable relations with each other (Burgoyne and Clark, 1984: 124, 134). None the less, a study by Ahrons and Wallisch (1987) found that a number of former partners maintained some form of relationship with each other. As Robinson (1991) points out, legal processes can further polarise ex-partners with the result that non-resident parents, usually fathers, become increasingly marginal in the lives of their biological children (see also Lund, 1987; Walker, 1992). Respondents in Burgoyne and Clark's study said this was less likely to occur where maintenance payments were still being made (1984: 140). This raises important questions about the relationship between maintenance payments and contact and their long-term impact on kinship ties and solidarities between children and non-resident parents.

More recent changes in family and divorce law, *viz.* the Children Act (1989), the Child Support Act (1991) and the Family Law Act (1996) are designed to encourage co-parenting between biological parents and a continuing responsibility for their children (Smart and Neale, 1999). Grandparents too have a limited role, showing that in this area of family law as in inheritance law, 'blood' ties tend still to be accorded primacy. By contrast, as Burgoyne and Clark found, the role of stepparents remains ambiguous and ill-defined (see also De'Ath, 1992; Robinson and Smith, 1993). As Cherlin argues, the meaning of kinship in stepfamilies is unclear because remarriage is an 'incomplete institution' without clear rules or guidelines (1996: 380-8). Evidence from my research and from studies more widely (Stacey, 1991; Smart and Neale, 1999) indicates that a

range of post-divorce relationships are important for promoting children's wellbeing and interests.

In Burgoyne and Clark's study, issues around kinship also arose (again implicitly) in the context of parents' decisions about whether or not to have '*our own child*' (1984: 157, emphasis in original). Burgoyne and Clark argue that while both 'blood' and social parenthood are seen as desirable and useful activities, only biological parenthood with its mingling of two genetic inheritances is believed to reproduce something of oneself and create a unique product of a particular relationship. Given the connection between these beliefs and ideas about what is 'natural' in family life, it appears that parents' decisions to have a child were in part informed by this kind of kinship thinking. However, where Burgoyne and Clark found strong ties between stepparents and stepchildren, there was no suggestion that these were contingent, less morally binding or inherently fragile.

More recent accounts of stepfamily relationships

Variability is the recurring theme too in more recent studies of steprelationships. For example, Burchardt (1990) analyses material from life story interviews carried out in the 1970s with adult stepchildren brought up in Edwardian England. She reports a wide diversity in the quality of relationships with stepparents as does Gorrell-Barnes (1992) in her study of young adults who grew up in stepfamilies during the 1960s and 1970s. Ferri and Smith (1998) report that one of the most positive findings in their study on stepparenting is the quality of relationships between stepfathers and stepchildren.

Exceptionally, Stacey's (1991) study among working-class Californian families does look explicitly at stepkinship. Stacey argues that in the way people draw on a range of relatives including 'ex'-partners and 'ex'-parents in-law, they turn divorce from a kinship rupture into a kinship resource, creating complex 'divorce-extended' families through which these resources can be mobilised (1991: 16). Furstenberg (1987) describes such families as 'new-extended'. Stacey's analysis better captures the dynamic, vibrant possibilities of stepkinship. By contrast, Cherlin's (1996) concept of

'remarriage chains' (1996: 387) whereby parents and children are linked across households is limited in its kinship reach, fixed and burdensome in the image it conveys. These findings suggest, as other writers (Finch, 1989; Allan, 1996) point out, that increased levels of separation, divorce and repartnering raise interesting questions about kinship. Yet, this is an area which remains largely unexplored. Some of these questions are addressed in my research.

Later approaches to family and kin relationships (1990s)

It is clear from the discussion so far that people's understandings of family and kin relationships are rarely straightforward, but are fluid, complex and contradictory. Although these aspects of kinship become prominent and conceptually more sophisticated from the late 1980s onwards, the importance of these earlier studies should not be underestimated. Following Strathern (1992b), new ideas about kinship can only be thought through old ideas. It will be seen in the following section that many who take issue with notions of a 'natural' or 'given' basis of kinship (howsoever that is defined) rely on these earlier ideas as their intellectual 'kickstart' or point of departure.

Kinship assisted: the 'new reproductive technologies'

Much debated in the late 1980s and early 1990s were the implications for kinship of the so-called 'new reproductive technologies' (NRTs). Debate focused on how far these technologies were beneficial to individuals and society, and what limits should be put on 'interfering' with 'nature'. As Strathern (1992a) argues, the certainties of Schneider's (1968) premises, namely that the procreative act not only creates new human beings but also kin relations and life-long ties and obligations, can no longer be identified with such transparency. Although what is 'natural' may be valued, what constitutes 'natural' has lost its obviousness in a world where couples can seek assistance to beget children without sexual intercourse (Strathern, 1992a: 43). While Parliamentary debates surrounding the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill enacted in 1990 were most concerned with the rights and status of embryos and were strikingly *non-relational* in

character (Franklin, 1993: 106), it was the impact of NRTs on the relational dimension of people's lives which emerged as the primary concern in empirical studies on this topic at that time.

In Edwards' (1993) study in the north-west of England, the implications for kin relationships of different NRTs (including gamete donation by third parties and women bringing to term children formed in part or whole from the genetic material of others), were explored in some detail. Although none of those interviewed had any personal experience of these procedures, Edwards found that the idea of unknown genetic origins prompted people to think about kinship. Extrapolating from their own experiences of family relationships, Edwards' respondents could visualise the social consequences of NRTs for a wide range of kin relationships, not just for parents and children, but for those between affines, across generations and so on. In doing this, people frequently made analogies with the kinds of 'problems' that arise in what they termed 'complex' family relationships, such as those involving divorce or adoption.

One of the major difficulties for people was trying to determine who had the strongest claim as the 'real' parent. As Strathern (1992) argues, our mode of kin reckoning is preoccupied with distinctions between 'real' and 'fictional' relatives. We value what is 'real', what is 'seen' and what is 'natural', and in relation to procreation we assume an equation exists between them (1992: 52-3). By implication, there is the anxiety that we may take as 'real' someone who is not. In both Edwards' (1993) study and a related one by Hirsch (1993), analogies were sometimes made between the competing claims of genetic and birth mothers in surrogacy, and those of biological parents and step- or adoptive parents. Opinions differed as to who had stronger claims as 'real' parents. Some stepparents Edwards (1993: 50) interviewed claimed that despite not being genetically or 'fully related' to their children and grandchildren, they regarded them as 'very close' and were concerned to treat them 'as if' they were 'true' relatives. It will be seen that parents in my study voice similar concerns.

A related concern was the potential disruption to a family unit posed by donating or surrogate parents. People predicted they might 'interfere' in the child's upbringing, thereby creating tensions or causing conflict (Edwards, 1993: 55, 63). By analogy, as I

show in Chapter 6, such intrusions are routinely faced by parents in stepfamilies where contact between a child and a non-resident biological parent does indeed have the potential for disruption. Theoretically, in same-sex stepfamilies disruption of this kind may issue from two sources: from a donating or surrogate parent and from a non-resident social parent. This points to a further complication in stepkinship. Strathern states that in kinship idiom, children are future to their parents' past (1992a: 55). While children conceived through NRTs do not contradict this characteristic way of thinking, stepchildren do. They enter their new family situations bringing a history of another family with them. In this sense they are past to their (step-)parents' future. As I argue in my concluding chapter, in reversing these processes of partner formation and the arrival of children, parents in stepfamilies must learn 'at a run' another kinship script or idiom.

In these studies people are making explicit certain values about kinship: the importance of genetic inheritance for knowing one's roots, the individuality of persons, and the desire to reproduce oneself and one's partner (Strathern, 1992a). Certainly parents in Burgoyne and Clark's (1984) study appear to have been informed by this kind of kinship thinking when making decisions to 'have a child together'. Arguably, in their discussions on NRTs people were also making explicit other values: the importance of shared history and the view that children should be treated equally. In other words, a recurring theme throughout the kinship literature is the implicit tension between a 'biological or natural' connection with children and a 'social' connection. It emerges too among parents in my study. It also surfaces in the literature discussed in the following section.

Families of choice: gay and lesbian kinship

One of the most important challenges to Schneider's (1968) procreative model of kinship comes from writers in the field of gay and lesbian kinship. In *Families We Choose* (1991) Kath Weston explores the meaning of kinship for lesbian and gay people living in the Bay Area of San Francisco. She contends that only gradually have scholars recognised that not all cultures privilege biology as a self-evident 'natural fact', the

defining feature of kinship. As Schneider (1968, 1984) emphasises, this cultural variation means the biological basis of kinship is symbolic. As such, argues Weston, biology is no less a symbol than choice or creation. Culturally, none of these symbols is inherently more 'real' or valid than the other (1991: 33-5).

However, because heterosexual intercourse is isolated as a *core* symbol (Schneider, 1968) in American culture, and is *believed* to bring people into enduring association through the creation of kinship ties, gay and lesbian people have been defined as a nonprocreative species, 'exiles from kinship', set apart from the rest of humanity (Weston, 1991: 23). As the gay and lesbian movement gathered momentum in the 1970s, concerns were voiced that biological connection might not be enough to make kinship endure through the risky process of 'coming out' to biological kin. Through the fear and sometimes the experience of being rejected or disowned, lesbians and gay men were forced to question assumptions that biogenetic connection in itself confers kinship and that the permanence and unconditional love attributed to those ties cannot be sundered (Weston, 1991: 73-5). For different reasons, as I show in my study, processes of separation, divorce and repartnering can also make people question these assumptions.

If, as Weston puts it 'blood could prove thinner than water', then the kinship potential of other sorts of social ties – of friendship or social parenthood, or a committed gay partnership – could be explored and choices made accordingly (1991: xv). Choice became an organising principle for kinship. If dominant cultural representations asserted that straight is to gay as family is to no family, gay people began to contend that straight is to gay as 'blood' family is to 'chosen' families (Weston, 1991: 29). At the same time, some of those Weston interviewed disputed the validity of chosen families, especially where notions of kinship were tied up with a sense of 'racial' or ethnic identity. Others, notably African-Americans, argued that black communities had never held to a strictly biogenetic interpretation of kinship, a finding endorsed in other studies of black American kinship (Stack, 1974; Schneider and Smith, 1978).

As Weston rightly argues, what these different accounts describe is a sense of enduring solidarity arising from shared history and material or emotional support, which *some*

people symbolised by a blood connection. What chosen families challenge is not the concept of procreation *per se*, but the belief that it alone constitutes kinship (1991: 34-6). While these insights are central to conceptualising the solidarities of stepkinship, the notion of choice is less salient. In choosing a partner who has been separated or divorced, there may be little or no choice about taking on her or his children too. Similarly, when relationships between same-sex partners end and one partner is the biological parent of their child, then they too face some of the kinship dilemmas posed within a heterosexual context, including contact with a non-resident parent. Maintaining the principle of choice may be more difficult in these circumstances. As yet we know virtually nothing about gay and lesbian step-families or to what extent there are overlaps and distinctions in their experience of these transitions and those in heterosexual stepfamilies (although see Dunne, 1997).

In the concept of 'families we choose' with its emphasis on individual agency in the creation of kinship, gay and lesbian families are not just 'variations' within a 'single system'; they represent a more comprehensive attack on Schneider's (1968) model of kinship. In displacing rather than disallowing biogenetic symbolism, and releasing themselves 'from any sort of procreative imperative' (Weston, 1991: 210), lesbians and gay men began to re-negotiate the meaning and practice of kinship. It is to the concept of negotiation I now turn.

Negotiated kinship

Implicit in much of the research literature reviewed so far is a line of argument which does not become explicit until it is systematically explored and developed in the work of Finch and Mason (Finch, 1989; Finch and Mason, 1993). Their interests lie in analysing the processes through which kinship solidarities are created and sustained.

On the basis of existing research evidence, Finch (1989) analyses the obligations and flows of support – material, emotional and practical – which exist between different sets of kin. Although she found, as the discussion in this chapter strongly suggests, that ties between parents and children were often characterised by a stronger sense of obligation

than those between other primary or 'secondary' kin (Finch, 1989: 36-37), they were subject to wide variations at both an individual and collective level. At the collective level, gender (Land and Rose, 1985; Qureshi and Simon, 1987), ethnicity and religious affiliation (Anthias and Yuval-Davies, 1983; Brah 1986) are key factors in accounting for these variations. The recognition of cultural diversity in particular had largely been ignored in earlier studies of kinship in Britain.

For example, Finch (1989) argues that although in white British culture a 'sense of responsibility' (Graham, 1985) permeates the approach of many women to family relationships, in the case of people of Asian origin living in Britain, the main supportive bond often – although not always – existed between parents and sons. Similar findings emerge, again with variation and diversity, in Roger Ballard's (1994) collection of essays *Desh Pardesh: The South Asian Presence in Britain*. By highlighting the ways in which gendered, moral practices in families are culturally derived, the way is left open for accounts which emphasise diversity and difference. For example, my research examines how men from white British cultures may also feel a sense of responsibility in the context of their (step-)family relationships.

Notwithstanding these variations, Finch (1989) identifies certain common themes in research findings. Following Firth *et al* (1970), she argues that the distinctive feature of kin relationships, both in how they are conceptualised and practised, appears to be their moral quality. Importantly, this moral quality or sense of obligation is not fixed or static, based on rules and genealogical position. Rather it is fluid, related to the history and quality of a particular kin relationship. In the process of sustaining solidarities there is, then, another key element which Finch (1989) describes as the 'negotiated element' of kinship (1989: 236). This concept is fully developed in Finch and Mason's (1993) collaborative study *Negotiating Family Responsibilities*.

Based on both a large-scale structured survey and in-depth interviews with a smaller number of respondents, this work examines the nature of kin responsibilities. It sets out to discover whether any normative agreement exists on kinship morality, that is, who should do what in given situations. In particular, Finch and Mason are interested in distinctions between what people *say* should be done and what is done in *practice*.

While they found substantial agreement on almost half of the kinship issues covered in their survey, they report little agreement about kinship rules or 'norms' among those interviewed. Thus, although there was consensus that somebody should do something in a given situation, there was little agreement on *who* should do it or *what* should be done.

On the basis of these findings, Finch and Mason argue that kinship responsibilities cannot simply be understood as rule-following on the basis of genealogical position, gender, generation and so on (see also Finch and Mason, 1991). What takes place is a complex process of negotiation which can be categorised, although in no watertight way, as open discussions, clear intentions or non-decisions (1993: 64-74). In each category, negotiations may be implicit, explicit, or both. Through the negotiation of responsibilities, commitments develop over time (1993: 93). Drawing on Becker's (1960) insights, Finch and Mason argue that in taking on certain responsibilities to family members, people make investments or 'side bets' in their family relationships. Through this process of side-betting, moral and material 'valuables' (Becker, 1960) are created over time which contribute to a person's moral identity. In this way, moral reputations are also 'negotiated' between family members (Finch and Mason, 1993: 158-9). These valuables may be lost if people withdraw from relationships or fail to continue along a committed path.

Finch and Mason's concept of negotiated commitments implies purposive action, agency, and the creation of something with lasting consequences (1993: 93-4). In this it has wide application. For example, Weeks, Donovan and Heaphy (1999) show how responsibilities and commitments are gradually negotiated over time in gay and lesbian families too. These ideas are also explored in my study of post-divorce relationships (see also Finch and Mason 1990) and stepkinship. In these contexts, partners may indeed be perceived to have withdrawn from a committed path and may have to engage in complex (re)negotiations of their moral reputations with 'former' and 'new' family members, including their biological and step-children.

Intimacy and kin relationships

One of the striking features of the studies examined so far is that although kin relationships include the most intimate and important relationships of many people's daily lives, intimacy itself is not considered. Recent writers do talk about intimacy, arguing that the search for intimacy as an idealised version of personal life has gained ground previously occupied by an idealised version of 'the family' (Jamieson, 1998: 2-3). By linking the concept of 'disclosing intimacy' (Jamieson, 1998) to the trends outlined in Chapter 1 and analysing these within the context of wider social change, these writers make further important contributions to our understandings of the shifting and fluid patterns of people's family and kin relationships.

Pure relationships

One of the most influential contemporary writers in this respect is Anthony Giddens (1991; 1992) who argues that the domain of intimacy is a key exemplification of wider social change. According to Giddens, modern institutions and modes of behaviour differ from all preceding ones to the extent they undercut traditional habits and customs. Social institutions and social relations, including those of the family, have been lifted out or 'disembedded' from their local contexts and recombined across time and space (1991: 2-17). These disembedding mechanisms have given rise to what Giddens terms the 'institutional reflexivity' of modernity – a process through which many aspects of social activity are susceptible to continuous revision in the light of new information or knowledge. This revised knowledge routinely enters and becomes a constitutive element in the organisation and practices of modern institutions - including those of marriage, family and intimacy – providing an impetus for transformation and change (Giddens, 1991: 16-20; 1992: 28).

In the context of this 'post-traditional' order, the self too is subject to constant exploration and revision. Unlike the situation in traditional cultures where personal identity was clearly marked out in known 'rites of passage', the self in late modernity has become a 'reflexive project'. The construction of self-identity consists in sustaining a coherent yet continuously revised biographical narrative which forms a trajectory from

past to future (1991: 75). What is peculiarly difficult about this project is that as tradition loses its hold, it must be accomplished amid pervasive doubt and diversity of choice. Inevitably, it entails a balance between opportunity and risk, especially in the realm of personal relationships which have become 'mobile, unsettled and open' (Giddens, 1991: 6). Sexuality, once bound to procreation, kinship and generation is also mobile or 'plastic', freed from these constraints and obligations (Giddens, 1992: 27). Because external criteria for close personal ties have been 'dissolved', relationships tend increasingly to approximate to the 'pure relationship':

'...where a social relationship is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it' (Giddens, 1992: 58).

Although romantic love was the precursor to the pure relationship, in many ways it stands in tension to the reflexive project of the self and the love component of the pure relationship, namely 'confluent love' (1992: 46-60). Whereas romantic love assumes a *joint* long-term trajectory and a mutual narrative biography, confluent love is 'active, contingent love, and therefore jars with the 'for-ever', 'one-and-only' qualities of the romantic love complex' (1992: 61). Importantly, Giddens insists that today's separating and divorcing society is an effect of the emergence of confluent love rather than its cause (1992:61). Pure relationships are inherently unstable. They presume intimacy, commitment, mutual trust and a shared history, yet are required to be free-floating, subject to constant (re)negotiation, scrutiny and self-exploration. Because they assume equality and reciprocity, they appear not only in heterosexual marriage, but also in cohabiting, same-sex relationships and friendships.

While Giddens' ideas are suggestive for understanding fluidity in some aspects of adult relationships, he ignores the difficulties – emotional, practical and financial – entailed in relationship change, especially when children are involved. In particular, as Smart and Neale (1999) object, he underplays not only how differences of class, gender, 'race', ethnicity and age affect people's level of access to 'life-style' choices, but also how

these factors will affect the choices they wish to make. Jamieson (1998) rejects the idea that 'disclosing intimacy' is sought in all relationships to the exclusion of other forms of intimacy – unconditional love, support, obligation and care – particularly where children are concerned. Children do not figure in Giddens' schema. Yet, as Smart (1997) and Smart and Neale (1999) insist, children actively participate in family relationships and are certainly given a higher priority in their parents' relationships than Giddens' concept of 'inertial drag' implies (1992: 88). My study shows that the role of children in these transitions can be significant.

Giddens does consider children in his ideas about kinship. He argues that because kinship in late modernity is permeated to some extent by the pure relationship, it can no longer be viewed as a set of rights and obligations naturally 'given' by biology and marriage. Although relationships between parents and young children as well as those between more extended kin may 'remain substantially tied to external criteria' (Giddens, 1991: 97) things have changed. Whereas trust in kin relations was often taken for granted, trust now has to be earned and negotiated as in sexual relationships. Drawing on Finch's (1989) concept of 'negotiated commitment', Giddens applies it to relationships between stepparents and stepchildren. While negotiating diverse kin ties may be arduous and risky, it does offer opportunities for novel, democratic and fulfilling social relations (Giddens, 1991: 13; 1992: 196). These ideas form the basis of critical analysis in later chapters of this study.

Reflexive social ties

Two other key writers on contemporary social change are Beck (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995). In contrast to Giddens, they do make family relationships, including those with children, central to their analysis, although less satisfactorily, they exclude same-sex relationships. Beck's (1992) modernisation thesis paints a darker picture of scientific and industrial development – one in which we, and generations to come, face risks and hazards on a scale previously unknown. Since we cannot negate or wholly avert these risks, societies can only evolve if we become radical and reflexive. Reflexive modernity requires a change in the relationship between social structures and

social agents. Given that when modernisation reaches a certain level, agents tend to become more individualised, that is, less constrained by structures, they are able to engage in the reflexive monitoring or shaping of the modernisation process (Lash and Wynne, 1992, in Beck, 1992: 2-3).

Beck argues that reflexive modernisation proceeds right into the sphere of family and intimate relations. The individualisation of social agents forces men and women to make decisions and choices about their sexual preference, whom and whether they shall marry, whether they shall have children and so on. This cannot be done without discussing work, mobility, politics and economics (Beck, 1992: 103). In short, as Giddens (1992) also argues, they must reflexively construct their own identities and biographies. In contrast to Giddens, Beck is pessimistic that this can be achieved within the context of intimate and harmonious relationships. Unlike in feudal societies where unequal status was ascribed to men and women at birth, the principles of modernity, specifically individualisation, have led women and men to expect equality. However, because the inequality of men and women in labour markets and the home is fundamental to the development and success of industrial society, the rhetoric of equality does not match the reality (Beck, 1992: 105-8).

This 'historically created mixture of new consciousness and old conditions' (Beck, 1992: 103) is potentially explosive, resulting in conflicts and collisions of interests between men and women which Beck and Beck-Gernsheim describe as 'the quite normal chaos of love' (1995: 2). Like Giddens, the important theoretical link they make – and it is one in which they diverge from many other writers – is that although these clashes appear as direct clashes between individuals, it is neither individuals nor 'the family' who are the *cause* of these institutionalised conflicts. Rather, families provide the *setting* in which these conflicts are played out. By releasing people from traditional ties and social relationships and making this area of their lives reflexive and political, not only are men and women freed from constraints and obligations, they are severed too from sources of security and support. Thus, although these conflicts may result in flight from family and relationship, the isolation which ensues drives people back into relationship in a search for closeness and bonding (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995: 22-4, 46).

Increasingly, men and women will integrate into their biographies a variety of familial and non-familial forms of living: single life, cohabitation in and outside of marriage, various parenthoods over one or two divorces, splitting up, coming back together again, and living alone again (Beck, 1992: 119; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 142-50). But these biographical phases are not discrete. For example, divorced people, linked to each other through their children, a long common biography and the problems of continuing material support, share what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim describe as a 'post-marital marriage' (1995: 147). In all these changes the only durable and permanent tie is with children at least while they are young. 'Parents come and go, but the child remains' (1995: 37). They remain less for fathers who are often faced with a diminished or lost relationship with their children after divorce.

If Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's portrayal of intimate relationships in late modernity is accurate, then their notion of risk, like Giddens', is salient. Trying to build kinship solidarities amidst the chaos, flight and searching they define as 'normal' appears a hugely risky business. It is curious, given their emphasis on multiplicity and diversity in family life, that they remain preoccupied with the contingencies of heterosexual marital relationships and the biological idiom of procreative kinship. In this, their approach is less successful than Giddens' in theorising fluidity and intimacy. Other writers (Stacey, 1991; Robinson, 1991; Smart and Neale, 1999) argue post-divorce kinship includes a range of people - (step-)grandparents, 'ex'-partners, 'ex' in-laws, 'new' in-laws and so on.

Making connections: David Morgan (1996)

Arguably, the single most striking feature of the literature on family and kinship is the complexity and diversity of these relationships, both in how they are conceptualised and realised. In a variety of cultural, historical and geographical contexts, people re-work or create anew the ways in which they think about and 'do' kinship. Always, this is done within a range of constraints and possibilities – material, practical and emotional – in which the balance between them shifts over time. Such issues are central to David Morgan's (1996) work *Family Connections* where he draws attention to the various

ways family and domestic life are implicated in areas of sociology traditionally kept separate. Developing his earlier arguments (Morgan, 1975; 1985) on the 'theoretical locations' of family relationships – positioned for example between the individual and the structural or the individual and history (1996: 154) – Morgan examines the connections between key themes in family studies and those in other areas of contemporary sociology, including class, gender, care, time and space. A number of these themes are directly relevant to my research with stepfamilies.

In looking at the tradition of family studies, Morgan argues that many large-scale studies, in their preoccupation with broad-based inequalities of class or gender, emphasise the impact on families of wide structures and systems. In focusing on what families share they hugely underplay the *diversity* of family forms and relationships. To understand diversity we need accounts which are historically informed, which explore the 'interplays between macro and micro levels' and allow for the possibility of change through human agency (1996: 7-8). By implication, Morgan is arguing for additional smaller-scale studies of families of which my own is one. (I return to this point in my discussion of methodology in Chapter 3). Morgan's dual emphasis on diversity and agency is key to understanding processes in all families. Evidence from my study suggests this is especially so in stepfamilies where relationships are not only diverse but complex. The management of diversity and complexity implies a greater role for agency than many analyses allow.

In considering feminist contributions to family studies, Morgan argues that many of them, in their emphasis on divisions in families, fail to recognise that family relationships are also about 'unities, alliances and co-operation' (1996: 9). As I argue in Chapter 1 and here, this failure is particularly evident in studies of stepfamilies. A second point Morgan makes is that family relationships include men. Yet feminist analyses tend to make gender synonymous with women, especially in relation to caring and responsibility. While not denying that women generally take on the burden of the mental, physical and emotional tasks associated with 'caring' in families, it is important to document cases which diverge from this pattern. As stated above, although such differences have been explored *between* cultures in Britain (see Finch (1989) above), we need also to take account of variations *within* cultures. As I argue in Chapter 3 in my

discussion of methodology, this becomes especially pressing in the context of stepfamilies where myths and stereotypes of 'abusing stepfathers' may carelessly be mapped onto analyses of power, care and responsibility.

Another key connection Morgan makes – and one in which he specifically mentions 'reconstituted' families – is that between family processes and time and space (1996: 137). That to date such analyses have been slow to appear indicates how family studies have been relegated to the periphery in these theoretical debates. In the ways families 'are constituted and reconstituted' through 'multiplicities of times and spaces' their relationships are not fixed but fluid (Morgan, 1996: 140). Closely linked to the concept of space are Morgan's concepts of 'family body' and 'bodily density', both important for understanding the ways in which domestic spaces and boundaries are renegotiated and redefined in stepfamilies. Although I do not focus explicitly on dimensions of time and space in my own study, they are clearly implicated in the processes through which family relationships are reordered following separation, divorce, repartnering or death. This emerges in Chapters 5 and 6.

On account of the diversity, fluidity and flexibility of family life, Morgan's preferred term for what he has been describing is 'family practices'. This term recognises the continuing significance of family life in the lives of individuals at the same time as acknowledging the diversity of how that life is constituted. It therefore has meaning for both actors and observers. Practices can be active, routine, fluid or flexible and in this sense capture the 'shifting patterns of relationships' (Morgan, 1996: 187). Most importantly, the term is capable of holding those aspects of family life which have an emotional, moral and even negative significance for people (Morgan, 1996: 186-193). And though, for reasons I discuss in Chapter 3, the word 'family' is retained in many contexts in my own study, the term 'family practices' is frequently utilised for the reasons outlined above.

Conclusion

Although more recent analyses have seized the initiative offered by demographic change to foreground the fluidity and diversity of kinship ties, and draw attention to other organising principles for kinship, the blood relationship retains a fundamental significance throughout. As Strathern (1993: 15-6) observes, whether emphasised, ignored or bypassed, the 'blood tie' remains 'a grounding point' in people's understandings of kinship. Notwithstanding this, as Meg Chandler's opening comments to this chapter illustrate, a 'traditional outlook' on kinship is a slippery concept to grasp. If biology represents one symbolic basis for kinship, this discussion shows that people invoke other symbols too – choice, necessity, friendship and shared history – and that these can equally well form the basis of a solidarity that endures. Although for many, the ties between parents and their (biological) children continue to be regarded as 'primary', the changes outlined in Chapter 1 do raise questions about the ties and solidarities of stepkinship, and how far they may assume an equal or comparable significance in the lives of some.

Chapter 3

The Research Process

‘Stop me if this isn’t relevant...but I don’t think you’ll understand unless you know the background....’ (George Gallagher, aged sixty-eight).

Introduction: aims of the study

Chapters 1 and 2 examined the different ways in which stepfamily life is constituted and represented. This was done by looking at some of its demographic characteristics, its representations in ‘public stories’ (Jamieson, 1998) and discourses, and how it features in empirical and theoretical research literature. It was argued that very few of these sources focus explicitly on kinship in stepfamilies, specifically on the building of ties and solidarities between stepparents and stepchildren. Where they do, there is often an assumption that stepties are comparatively weak or fragile, secondary or peripheral to the stronger ‘natural’ ties of ‘blood’. These observations brought me to the main focus of my own research topic: *how do parents in stepfamilies reformulate their family relationships in the light of separation, divorce and repartnering, and what are the implications of this for their handling of contact and inheritance?*

As Graham (1997) argues, *one* of the purposes of any piece of research work is to find some ‘answers’ to a set of research questions or to what Mason (1996) calls an ‘intellectual puzzle’. It is the aim of this chapter to set out – and justify – the ways in which I designed a study that would not only translate my research question into a coherent research practice but would also help me to find some ‘answers’ to this question. As the opening comment to this chapter suggests, these tasks entail working out what is relevant and trying to find a methodological balance between whose

definition of relevance – respondents’, mine or the requirements of doing a PhD – prevails. In order to do this I consider first my position in relation to some key philosophical issues related to research. I then relate these to the logic of my research design and practice.

Reflections on some valued positions

It is paradoxical perhaps in a sociological climate which emphasises fluidity and diversity, multiple realities and shifting values, that it has become axiomatic for researchers to ‘position’ themselves or state where they ‘stand’ in relation to key philosophical questions related to the research process – ontology, epistemology and ethics. Terms such as ‘position’ or ‘stand’ conjure images of researchers ‘at the helm’ who have competently steered a course through philosophical obstacles and are now enjoying ‘plain sailing’. For myself, coming to grips (and grief) with ‘relevant’ literature across a range of competing philosophical positions continues to be daunting.

As a number of writers in this field point out (presumably in relation to other people’s work), not only is this body of literature vast, it is often inaccessible, conceptually and theoretically opaque, and internally inconsistent. There are notable exceptions to this (see especially Mason, 1996; Crang, 1997; Graham, 1997). Notwithstanding these difficulties, it is evident and now well documented that research practices cannot be divorced from questions of philosophy (Sayer, 1992; Stanley and Wise, 1993; Mason, 1996; Graham, 1997). Methodological choices – choices about what is being studied and how it is being studied – are fundamentally about philosophical choices. What follows is a broad outline of my perspectives on these philosophical issues and the broad implications these have for my research design.

Ontology and epistemology

Ontology: the nature of social reality

One of the fundamentally important issues about which researchers must decide is their ontological position or perspective, that is, what they believe or think is the nature of the social reality or social world they wish to investigate (Blaikie, 1993; Stanley and Wise, 1993; Mason, 1996). In common with philosophical approaches which are fully or partly constructivist in their ontological assumptions – Interpretivism, Critical Theory, Structuration Theory and Feminism – I hold the view that social reality is produced and reproduced by social actors, that it is a ‘preinterpreted, intersubjective world of cultural objects, meanings and social institutions’ (Blaikie, 1993: 203; see also Graham, 1997). This is neither to assert nor deny that a ‘real’ world exists independently of our mental constructions. It is to claim that it can only be known and understood interpretively (Mason, 1996: 140). The social world does not exist as a set of social facts, an objective reality that can be directly observed.

Although it may be somewhat artificial to dissect social reality into various ‘ontological components’ (Mason, 1996: 12), it is a useful exercise for determining what aspects of social reality I regard as fundamental to my own project. In my study of how parents in stepfamilies reformulate their family relationships, some of the key ‘components’ I wish to explore include social processes, social practices, social relationships, experiences, understandings, interpretations, meanings, negotiations and beliefs. As Blaikie (1993) observes, it follows from the logic of taking this kind of ontological perspective that in any social situation there may be not one but multiple realities.

Epistemology: gaining knowledge about social reality

My ontological position has logical implications for my epistemological position, that is, for my claims about what constitutes knowledge. I believe that what we know is based on how we understand and interpret social reality. I believe that evidence for, and knowledge about, the social realities on which my research question focuses is generated primarily (although not entirely) through interactions between interviewer and interviewees. It is parents’ interpretations and understandings (what some would

describe as ‘lay’ accounts) and *my interpretations of those accounts* from which knowledge and explanations are generated. This suggests that knowledge about those social realities can only be achieved through some form of ‘immersion’ in that part of the social world of which they are part (Blaikie, 1993: 203).

My research question focuses on detailed issues of process and meaning. To get at such processes, I need to talk directly and in detail to parents about their own experiences and understandings of the issues involved. Qualitative researching, or more specifically, *qualitative interviewing*, with its emphasis on methods of data generation which are flexible and sensitive to the social context in which they are produced (Bryman, 1988; Marshall and Rossman, 1995), and which aim to produce rich, contextual and detailed data (Mason, 1996) is best suited to generating the kind of ‘inside’ or in-depth knowledge I am seeking (Geertz, 1973; Ely, Anzul, Friedman *et al*, 1991; Maynard and Purvis, 1994). As Morgan (1996) argues (see Chapter 2), rigidly standardised or structured large-scale surveys removed from the social context being studied are unlikely to generate these kinds of in-depth data.

At the same time, because I believe that the production and reproduction of social reality occurs within wider social conditions of which social actors may not be fully or even partially aware (Blaikie, 1993: 203), these accounts are not the sole source for generating explanations. As I describe more fully below in my discussion of analysis, I also develop other concepts or conceptual categories to organise data (Blaikie, 1993: 193), using social science interpretations as well as those from other disciplines to amplify and move towards a fuller, rounder social explanation (Mason, 1996; Graham, 1997). Given that I had engaged in ‘reading around’ my topic prior to data generation, it is clear that I did not approach the research process in some kind of ‘theoretical vacuum’ (Mason, 1996: 141-2). In addition, as I argue below, the specificities of my own experience prior to and during the research process have a number of implications in this respect.

For these reasons (and this follows from the logic of my constructivist ontology), I believe that howsoever data generation proceeds – whether through in-depth ‘immersion’ in the context under study or through the medium of a large-scale survey,

the interpretation which ensues and the knowledge it generates is socially produced and socially situated (Weedon, 1987; Hekman, 1990, 1995; Stanley and Wise, 1993). In other words, interpretations and knowledge are context- and person-dependent, based on the specific standpoint of researchers and – in the case of qualitative research – on their interactions with interviewees. It is on this account that Skeggs (1994) defines epistemology as the ‘relationship of the knower to the known’ (1994: 77). In making these claims, these epistemological positions have proved especially provocative.

As Code (1993) argues, as soon as we take seriously a view that knowledge is a *construct* produced by cognitive agents within social practices, and acknowledge the variability of agents and practices across social groups (1993: 15), we run into trouble with the dominant epistemologies of modernity which continue to inform natural sciences and also some social sciences. These epistemologies with their Enlightenment legacy and later infusion with positivist and empiricist principles have been defined around Cartesian ideals of pure objectivity and value-neutrality – and hence, as Code points out, around ideals of political innocence (1993:16). Through the autonomous exercise of reason, these cognitive agents or knowers are capable of transcending particularity and contingency (Benhabib, 1992; Hekman, 1995) and achieving in Nagel’s (1986) famous words ‘a view from nowhere’. These ideas presume a universal, homogeneous and essential ‘human nature’ which allows knowers to be interchangeable.

While critics of this modernist epistemological discourse are perhaps most readily associated with feminist, postmodernist and poststructuralist writers, some of the key issues they raise can, as Stanley and Wise (1993) point out, be traced through earlier interpretivist literature. In different ways with different emphases these approaches argue that knowledge is situated, contextual, historically and geographically specific. Research produces knowledge that is always a ‘view from somewhere’ (Code, 1993: 39). The two charges most frequently and vehemently levelled against these claims are that such research is not objective and the knowledge or ‘truth’ it produces is relative. I return to these criticisms below. In the following section I outline what I believe are key aspects of the ‘view from somewhere’ which I embody and how these may relate to, or influence, the research process and the knowledge or explanations I produce.

Reflexivity

Closely related to my epistemological position are issues around reflexivity. Mason (1996) argues that while there are many versions of what qualitative research can be, there are certain key features which she regards as fundamental to any version. Specifically, these include critical self-scrutiny or active *reflexivity* by the researcher. This means constantly taking stock of one's actions and role in the research process and subjecting these to scrutiny in the same way as the rest of their 'data'. This is based on the belief that a researcher cannot be objective or detached in the knowledge she generates. In addition qualitative research should always be conducted as an ethical practice (Mason, 1996: 5-6; see also Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). In many respects these two aspects of the research process are inextricably linked (Stanley and Wise, 1993; Maynard, 1994). Although critical self-scrutiny informs all contexts of the research process (see below), there is one important sense in which I think active reflexivity or the monitoring of my role in this process has to be undertaken at a sharper, more constant level.

Some links between intellectual and personal biography

In David Clark's (1991) foreword to a collection of essays dedicated to the memory of Jacqueline Burgoyne, he talks about her life as a researcher in the field of stepfamily life. Of particular interest in the present context is her description of her 'vehement' resistance for many years to any suggestion that her own experiences of family life had any connection with her long standing research interest in stepfamilies. She admits that only gradually did she come to recognise that her own experience as a stepchild provided the impetus, albeit an unconscious one, for 'an intense and abiding curiosity about the way people inhabit their home and domestic lives' (Burgoyne, 1987, unfinished manuscript in Clark, 1991: xii).

Although, in contrast to Burgoyne's experience, my own intellectual journey started late and has taken me less far, there is no doubt that my choice of research topic was to some extent biographically induced. Specifically, my experience from my mid-teens onwards of being 'stepdaughter' to one stepmother and two stepfathers, and 'foster daughter' to

an ‘othermother’ (Hill Collins, 1990), predisposed me to critical analysis – then and now – of the social realities I am currently investigating. The importance of researcher reflexivity became even more acute when my own experience of relationship change – divorce, repartnering and movement into stepfamily life – occurred during the research process. This meant grappling not only with the ‘intellectual puzzle’ (Mason, 1996) posed by my research topic, but also with its various other dimensions – emotional, practical and financial – the very issues with which parents I interviewed wrestled too.

These aspects of my personal biography have obviously influenced and had an impact on various phases and aspects of the research process. For reasons I outline below, this is something I regard as both enabling and disabling. What I have tried to retain (and this is central to my ontological belief in the multilayered nature of social reality) is the view that there is no single experience or version of relationship change or stepfamily life which can be said to encapsulate, or be representative of, the whole of that reality. From this perspective, notions of epistemic privilege – that my experiences of the ‘oppressions’ of stepfamily life automatically grant me insider knowledge on the experiences of *all* stepfamilies – are rejected. To claim otherwise would, as many writers in this field argue (Harding 1986; Haraway, 1988; Stanley and Wise, 1993; Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1994) involve making essentialist claims not only that all those in a particular ‘oppressed’ group (all women, all disabled people, all stepfamilies) are the same, but also that they are automatically best placed to understand their own oppression. If from my epistemological position parents’ accounts are deemed inadequate as a sole source of knowledge for what I am investigating, then my own experience must be deemed inadequate on similar grounds.

The purposes of my research

In raising issues about critical self-scrutiny, the question is also raised about my purposes or motives for doing this piece of research. As Mason (1996) insists, it is vital to be reflexive and honest about these, and to contextualise them within the ethics and politics of research. In my own case, there were motives or purposes apart from ‘biographical determinants’ (Clark, 1991). These included the twin objectives of

attaining a higher degree and researching something which I considered to be of both personal and public interest. An interest in stepfamilies had been triggered and developed during my undergraduate years which immediately preceded my entry into graduate studies.

The overlap between intellectual interests and personal experience had also alerted me to some of the negative legal, political, social, media and academic discourses around separation, divorce and repartnering. By implication, and as many researchers and writers about family life have pointed out (Burgoyne and Clark, 1984; Finch, 1984; Morgan, 1996; Rodger, 1996; Mason, 1996; Ferri and Smith, 1998; Silva and Smart, 1999) the way in which 'findings' on family life are disseminated is an important issue. Different and possibly competing interest groups – which in my case minimally include those I interviewed, myself, my institution and my funding body – may stand to gain or lose in some way from what I 'do' with my research. I return to some of these issues below.

Ethics

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that ethical practices are implicated in all aspects of research practices. Given that more specific ethical issues, decisions and dilemmas arise at different stages in the research process, I deal with these in more detail as they arise (see below). At this point, I give only a brief statement of my ethical position which in broad terms may be defined as feminist. It takes as its starting point my epistemological position summarised above as 'the relationship of the knower to the known' (Skeggs 1994: 77). If, as I suggest above, 'living-in-a-stepfamily' represents one important factor in this respect, there are others too. I am also middle-aged, middle-class, white, woman, mature research student and so on. The ways in which these different factors interact with the research process will vary according to who is being interviewed or what stage of the research process I have reached. I return to these points below. In connection with these issues I identify a number of key ethical concerns.

These include the significance of women's lives and experience (Alcoff and Potter, 1993; Maynard and Purvis, 1994), the relationship between the researcher and the researched and the impact of the former on the research process (Stanley and Wise, 1993), explanations for the grounds on which sampling decisions and interpretation of data have been made (Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1994), a focus on the material forces which shape people's lives (Purvis, 1994), a commitment both to the *creation* of 'useful knowledge' (Kelly, Burton and Regan, 1994: 28) and to the *use* of that knowledge in the *interests* of those directly or indirectly involved (Finch, 1984; Mason, 1996). These concerns do not necessarily imply exclusive focus on women. If gender divisions and other social relations are to be fully understood, men must also be included in a research practice (Stanley and Wise, 1993; Kelly, Burton and Regan, 1994). Specifically, as Morgan (1996) argues (see Chapter 2), men's accounts must be heard.

Selecting a study population

As I suggested above, the logic of my ontological and epistemological perspective, or what Marshall and Rossman (1995: 40) call the 'epistemological integrity' between my research question and my research design suggests that qualitative interviewing is the best way of generating the kind of rich, contextual, in-depth data on parents' experiences, interpretations and understandings of the issues involved. In this section I describe the logic of my sampling strategy and how I went about selecting a particular study population in practice.

In broad terms Mason (1996) defines sampling and selecting as principles and procedures used to identify, choose, and gain access to relevant units which will be used for data generation' (1996: 83). It is assumed that these sampling units or 'units of analysis' will in some way relate to a relevant wider or 'parent' population - whether this be an empirical link (Marsh, 1988) or a theoretical one (Mason, 1996). A researcher's principle of selection is important for her study as a whole. Specifically the rigour with which this is done is viewed by many (Finch and Mason, 1990b; Silverman, 1993; Dey, 1993) as a decisive factor in upholding or undermining the analytical validity (see below) of her overall interpretation of the data.

Principles on which I selected a population: theoretical sampling

As I argued in Chapters 1 and 2, stepfamilies have a range of social characteristics and are constituted in diverse and complex ways. This raises problems when thinking about ways in which to select a sample. Specifically, there is no empirical population with clearly defined key characteristics whose parameters are known and which can be drawn upon to select a representative sample (see Mason, 1996: 91). Representative sampling seeks to achieve a randomly-selected representative microcosm of the wider population under study in order to be able to claim that patterns in this smaller sample are likely to appear in similar proportions in the larger one (Marsh, 1998: 3-4; Mason, 1996: 91).

However, patterns generated from representative sampling tend to be superficial, not particularly well suited to the development of analysis and theory. The nature of my interest in a wider population of stepfamilies is not simply empirical but theoretical and conceptual. There is a wider universe of social theory and explanation (Mason, 1996: 85) – around issues of kinship, intimacy, relationships, social change – related to my research question about which I want to have something to say. A sampling logic better suited to the analytic logic of much qualitative researching and, importantly, to detailed exploration of social processes is theoretical or purposive sampling.

Generally associated with Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss (1987), its utility is not restricted to those engaging more fully with their principles of grounded theory. The aim in constructing a non-representative sample is to select units which will enable me to make key comparisons and to test and develop theoretical propositions. It links sampling directly to the process of generating theory and explanation ‘inductively’ from data (Mason, 1996: 85-93; see also Finch and Mason, 1990; Dey, 1993). From this perspective, sampling means constructing a sample or ‘study group’ on the basis of its *theoretical* relevance to my research question, my analytical framework and practice, and most importantly, to the kind of explanation I develop (Finch and Mason, 1990b: 28).

Key to this process (and this is linked to my analytical and explanatory logic) is the selection of sampling units which will not only support or develop my theoretical arguments or explanation, but will also test them (Mason, 1996: 94). In other words, as with procedures associated with 'analytic induction' (Fielding, 1988; Denzin, 1989; Silverman, 1993), it is important too to seek out negative instances or cases which contradict my developing concepts or analytical ideas. This process is derived from the logic of 'analytic induction' (Denzin, 1989; Finch and Mason, 1990b) and has in turn important implications for what type of generalisations, that is, what type of wider claims I can make on the basis of my research (Platt, 1988; Finch and Mason, 1990: 25-34).

Putting principles of theoretical sampling into practice

As suggested above, in theoretical sampling, the processes of sampling, data generation and data analysis are interactive (Mason, 1996: 100). For this reason sampling decisions are not made once and for all at the beginning of the research project. This process helps to identify gaps in the range of experiences under study and enables further decisions to be made which are both situated and informed, sensitive to the data emerging (Sayer, 1992; see also Hughes, 1990). Finch and Mason (1990b) refer to these later decisions as 'stock-taking exercises'. As Sayer (1992) observes, this acts as a 'counter to the rather peculiar idea that researchers should specify what they are going to find out before they begin' (Sayer, 1992: 245). The strength of this kind of sampling is that it allows flexibility (Silverman, 1993; Dey, 1993; Marshall and Rossman, 1995). However, this method has been criticised for being not purposive but vague if not practised systematically. It is therefore important to keep an ongoing record of sampling decisions. This record is substantially reproduced in what follows.

Quotas I targeted and quotas I reached

Size of sample or study population

The proposed size of my sample or study population moved from 50 (on my ESRC application) to 70 (the number preferred by my upgrading panel) to 30 (the number finally agreed between myself and my supervisors as temporal, financial and practical constraints began to assert themselves). This number is large enough to allow me to understand the process being studied (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame, 1981) and to make meaningful comparisons between units of a particular type. Deciding how many units of a particular type to target was based on the need to constitute a relevant range of social characteristics for purposes of exploring similarities and differences in people's experiences of this process (of reformulating their family relationships) and to test and develop theory and explanation to account for why these similarities and differences exist (Mason, 1996: 97). In the context of my research question this meant selecting people as sampling units *on the basis of key experiences* they had rather than because they were people *per se* (Mason, 1996: 87).

An important decision to make at this stage was whether or not I would interview couples together or separately. There has been much discussion about the ethics and relative merits of taking either route (Bennett and McAivty, 1992; England, 1994; Hertz, 1995; Valentine, 1999). Whichever route is taken, different accounts, interpretations or stories will emerge. Given the sensitive nature of topics to be explored, specifically 'other people's children' and the unpredictability of associated issues that may (and did) arise, I decided to interview couples separately. In addition, as I argued in Chapter 2, existing research evidence suggests we need women's and men's separate accounts if we are to understand some of the complexities and differences in their experiences (Morgan, 1996).

With these considerations, objectives and my key research question in mind, I set some initial sampling quotas and targets, specifying my intentions in relation to a range of sampling units and their numbers (see Figure 1). The total number of experiences exceeds the total number of people to be interviewed because many people will fill more than one quota slot, that is, have more than one of these experiences or characteristics.

Figure 1 *Composition of study population: quota targets (Total=30)*

30 people (preferably 15 couples) who are living in a heterosexual stepfamily situation in which they and their partner co-reside and one or both of them has a child or children (dependent and/or adult) from a former partnership (whether or not they also have children from their current one, and whether or not all dependent children have 'residence' with them)

20 people who are currently remarried

10 people who are currently cohabiting

15 people with dependent stepchildren

15 people with adult stepchildren

5 people who have experience of widow(er)hood

15 people who are aged less than fifty years

15 people who are aged fifty years or more

20 women

10 men

30 people who are homeowners

15 people who define themselves as middle-class

15 people who define themselves as working-class

Setting quota targets not only forced me to work out carefully what experiences and characteristics were likely to be important for understanding the processes under study, it also enabled me to monitor how far my sampling practice was 'on target' in fulfilling these objectives, and how far these initial targets needed to be modified in the light of how my analysis was developing (Finch and Mason, 1990: 25-34). In what follows I describe the logic behind these targets, noting when, how and for what reasons these were changed during the initial and 'stock-taking' phases of sample selection. Finally, I describe the methods I used to achieve my sample.

1) *A specific experience of stepfamily life*

There are a number of points to be made in relation to my decision to focus on a specific experience of stepfamily life. First, in Chapters 1 and 2, I identified a wide variety of stepfamily forms. I do not however target or include all these conceptual variants in my study population. In particular, I do not include gay and lesbian stepfamilies. As I showed in Chapter 2, current research on kinship in gay and lesbian stepfamilies suggests that the principle of ‘choice’ is a major factor in how they formulate their family relationships. This is at odds with the clearly defined parameters of heterosexual family and kin relationships. In addition, as I also argued, the legal process of separating and terminating a relationship provides some structural constraints that are not present in gay and/or lesbian relationships (Baber and Allen, 1992; Smart and Neale, 1999). ‘Family’ law operates with heterosexist assumptions. Meaningful comparisons that do justice to the very different constraints and possibilities (Morgan, 1996) within which gay, lesbian and heterosexual families practice kinship could not be made within a small sample such as mine.

Secondly, within the variant forms of heterosexual stepfamilies, it is the ‘normative’ concept of stepfamily as defined by Haskey (1994) and Ferri and Smith, (1998) which has yet to be problematised and which I am therefore targeting. From the research evidence (Burgoyne and Clark, 1984) it is in these families, whose members may aspire to the model of the ‘intact’ nuclear family, that tensions are likely to be greater. For example, where parents in stepfamilies co-reside (as they do in my study) it may be expected that more tensions surface around the issue of ‘contact’ than in stepfamilies where parents are not co-resident (Burgoyne and Clark, 1984). Similarly, as I suggested in Chapter 2 (see also Chapter 7), given that inheritance law operates with a model of kinship based on one couple and a direct line of descent, it is again in the model of stepfamily I am targeting (where law assumes co-residence means a shared economy and relationships of dependency) that tensions around inheritance may be expected to surface (Firth *et al*, 1970).

Thirdly, if as the literature suggests, shared history is an important factor in building kinship ties and solidarities, then co-resident stepfamilies (some of whom have adult children and some of whom have dependent children) are most likely to be able to illuminate some of the factors influencing these processes. Related to this is the point that some stepfathers in my sample will probably have biological children of dependent age who do not have 'residence' with them. Fourthly, given the negative and/or lack of attention to kinship ties among cohabiting couple stepfamilies in the research literature, as well as their lack of any automatic rights under the intestacy rules in inheritance law (see Chapter 7), it is important to explore their reformulated ideas of their family relationships too.

All 30 people in my sample had the experience of stepfamily life I specified. This number comprised 12 couples and 6 individuals. Although the partners of these 6 individuals were asked (either directly by me or via their partners) whether they would also like to take part in the study, they declined on various grounds. These included that they were 'too shy', 'too busy,' 'didn't want to' or worked too far away to make it practicable. One person told me she had agreed with her partner that only one of them would take part so that any differences of opinion between them would not be apparent. Of these 30, 23 were married, 7 were cohabiting. The majority had been separated or divorced prior to moving into their current stepfamily situation, but as I intended, 5 people in my sample had been widowed. Finding parents in cohabiting couple stepfamilies proved especially difficult through my 'snowballing' methods (see below). A number of people claimed they could be considered as part of a cohabiting couple stepfamily because they had 'only just got married'. I declined these offers but included some of them as married couples.

2) Age of children in sample

Including some parents who have adult children (biological and/or step-) and some with dependent children is relevant for two reasons. First, differences in children's age-related patterns of contact may be reflected in different levels of tensions and in how parents feel about contact. For example, the younger the child(ren) the more frequently parents in 'new' families may have to mediate telephone calls or visits from non-

resident parents. Second, given suggestions in the research literature that younger children develop closer relationship with stepparents more quickly and more permanently than older children do, it is important to make comparisons between the experiences of parents with younger children and those with older children. (Burgoyne and Clark, 1984; Ferri and Smith, 1998). My sample included 14 people with dependent stepchildren, 12 with adult stepchildren.

3) Age of parents in sample

There are two main reasons for interviewing ‘older’ and ‘younger’ parents in stepfamilies. First, in relation to my final point in 2) above, it was envisaged that some of the ‘older’ stepparents would have had a longer shared history with their step- and biological children than some or many of the ‘younger’ stepparents. Again, this would allow similarities and differences to be noted in the quality of relationships between parents and children in these different groups. Second, this has implications for inheritance. It is more likely that ‘older’ parents will have something of significance to bequeath (Hamnett, Harmer and Williams, 1991). Younger parents in stepfamilies who may have separated and/or divorced more recently, may have inheritance issues on the agenda (National Stepfamily Association, 1993) because solicitors have invited them to think about making a will. 18 parents in my sample were aged under 50 years.

4) Ethnicity

While I did not intend to make any formal comparisons between minority ethnic groups, again because a sample of thirty does not permit me to do this adequately, I intended where possible to include people from ethnic minorities. One black (non-British) couple I approached declined to take part in the study primarily because they thought I would be unable to understand family life in their culture. They were also uneasy about discussing inheritance. Another British couple of Asian origin initially agreed to talk to me but later declined because they were ‘having some financial problems’. Although for them too the issue of inheritance seemed to be particularly worrying, I also felt that they (or more specifically the male partner) regarded me as inappropriately placed – as a white woman who did not share their religious affiliations – to speak to them about such

matters. As Phoenix (1994) argues, whatever the theoretical debates about the impact of an interviewer's ethnic difference, the expressed preferences (and, I would add, the implicit preferences) of interviewees in this respect are important in themselves (1994: 67). I felt uneasy about pursuing the matter further. Although I interviewed one parent whose child from a previous partnership was black, my sample was composed entirely of white British parents.

5) *Gender*

In the initial stages of designing my research project, I had decided to interview a greater proportion of women than men. This decision was taken on the grounds that studies suggest that women do most of the kin work (see Finch, 1989; Stacey, 1991) and that men are more reluctant than women to be interviewed, particularly on family matters (Chandler, 1990: 123; Edwards, Ribbens and Gillies, 1997). On reflection, given how men responded in my pilot study (which included two women and three men) these reasons no longer provided adequate grounds for targeting women and men in that ratio. In addition, as I argued in Chapter 2, given the negative stereotyping of stepfathers, it is important to explore their understandings and experiences of (step)family life. This led me to revise my initial quotas and target an equal number of women and men. Two women declined to be interviewed. The first declined because she didn't 'agree with sociologists prying into people's private lives', while the second said she had only very recently moved into her stepfamily situation and felt 'unsure about whether it will survive'. My sample included 14 men and 16 women.

6) *Class*

Although initially I did not set quota targets on class, I aimed to include people with differing socio-economic statuses. I was uncertain at first how to approach the task of defining respondents' class position. Existing ways of defining class, for example, on the basis of occupation or level of consumption are too rigid given the degree to which social mobility is a recognised feature of individual biographies. In particular, in situations of relationship change, many people - especially women - experience some downward social mobility (Maclean, 1991). I therefore began by asking people to

define their own class position and, because they had no difficulty in doing this I decided (following a stock-taking exercise after eight interviews) to continue in this way. At this point I also decided that in order to make meaningful comparisons in relation to inheritance, it seemed important to interview people whose resources were significantly different. To this end, I began to target people more widely in terms of occupation, as well as those who were unemployed or retired. In addition, I revised my initial plan to focus solely on homeowners and began to target people in rented accommodation too. My sample included 14 working-class and 16 middle-class parents.

Achieving a sample: snowball sampling

In order to compose a sample which achieved my quota targets (including my revised ones), I required a method of sample selection which was practicable, safe, ethical and which would allow access to appropriate numbers of relevant sampling units. This required some kind of 'sampling frame' (Mason, 1996: 102) from which a smaller sample could be taken. As stated above, in my case there was no discrete parent population from which suitable, cloned offspring could be drawn. While it is possible that the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) which commenced in 1991 may eventually generate very useful quantitative data on stepfamilies, the type of large-scale data set from which a statistically representative sample could be drawn does not exist at the present time. An alternative avenue I could have explored was through the Stepfamily Association. I rejected this on the grounds that its members may tend towards a more uniform or 'corporate profile' (through attendance of the association's meetings, reading of its literature or pamphlets) which might obscure some of the very differences in stepfamily practices I was keen to explore.

For these reasons I decided to generate my own sampling frame through 'snowball' sampling. Starting with one sampling unit, that is, one person with the experience of stepfamily life defined above, I then asked them to put me in touch with others who also had this experience. Snowball sampling has been criticised for being used uncritically and unsystematically, that is, for taking people who are in some way linked and for

'taking each person who comes along'. However, as I demonstrate below, I am not being 'opportunistic' in this respect. By making my quota targets directly relevant to my research question I made *strategic and systematic* use of the links and flexibility this approach affords. As Sayer (1992) argues, use of this method is not intended as justification for 'empty-headed fishing expeditions' (1992: 244-5).

Having a range of quota slots to fill allowed me to get the ball rolling easily at first. However, because the first snowball gathered three or four middle-class contacts (in terms of occupation, place of residence and resources at their disposal), I decided to set another four snowballs rolling. Two of these were started by me, one via a contact in a rural area, and one via my city-based hairdresser. I also accepted two offers of help from friends. One, who works as a teacher in an inner-city primary school put me in touch with four potential respondents, all parents of her pupils. The other, a probation officer, mentioned my research to some of his clients, two of whom said they would be interested in taking part. All four put me in touch with other people in a similar situation. In taking these routes, it meant that many people I interviewed had no personal links with each other. An exception to this was my decision to seize the opportunity of interviewing five members of the same kin group in which the parents were in a stepfamily situation and so too were each of their two adult (step)sons.

As I explain below, this method of using an intermediary worked well and had distinct ethical and practical advantages. From the point of view of achieving a sample which fulfilled a substantial proportion of my quota targets, setting several snowballs rolling proved effective. It gathered enough potential respondents to allow me to make systematic choices among them. Sometimes this was difficult because it entailed 'turning down' people who wanted to take part. The exception to this, as I describe above, was my failure to include people from different ethnic groups. However, this has less to do with my sampling method than with my inability successfully to negotiate their participation once initial contact had been made.

The research process

Designing and doing qualitative interviewing

Qualitative interviews tend to be fairly informal, either loosely or semi-structured, what Burgess calls 'conversations with a purpose' (1984: 102; see also Maynard and Purvis, 1994). Because the interactions between interviewer and interviewee are the data sources from which analysis and explanation proceed (Skeggs, 1994; Mason, 1996), they require a range of both intellectual and social skills. In addition, as a number of writers have argued, qualitative interviewing also raises important ethical issues, some of which can be anticipated in advance, some of which arise unexpectedly in the interview situation.

Several weeks planning work went into devising an interview schedule that would enable me not only to 'get at' some of the issues and complexities posed by my 'big' research question, but would also be (what seemed to me at least) ethical and non-directive. These considerations implied devising a schedule that was relatively informal (and this I think was as much with my own comfort in mind as that of my interviewees) at the same time as being structured enough to ensure that certain key issues and topics were adequately covered. This task covers question of substance, style, scope and sequence (Mason, 1996: 43) and the challenge it posed was one I underestimated. I frequently found that in getting one dimension of the interview schedule 'right', I was getting another dimension 'wrong'. In particular, it seemed that in trying to meet my ethical requirements that questions were not too insistent or intrusive, I was not meeting intellectual requirements that certain topics be covered in-depth.

Gradually, by breaking down my main research question into a series of smaller related ones, I was able to develop ideas about converting these smaller questions into possible interview topics. I then tried to frame possible interview questions around these topics, trying also to imagine how well these would translate into an interview situation. From these I developed my interview schedule (see Appendix 1) with questions designed to generate data which link back directly to my research question. It was for these

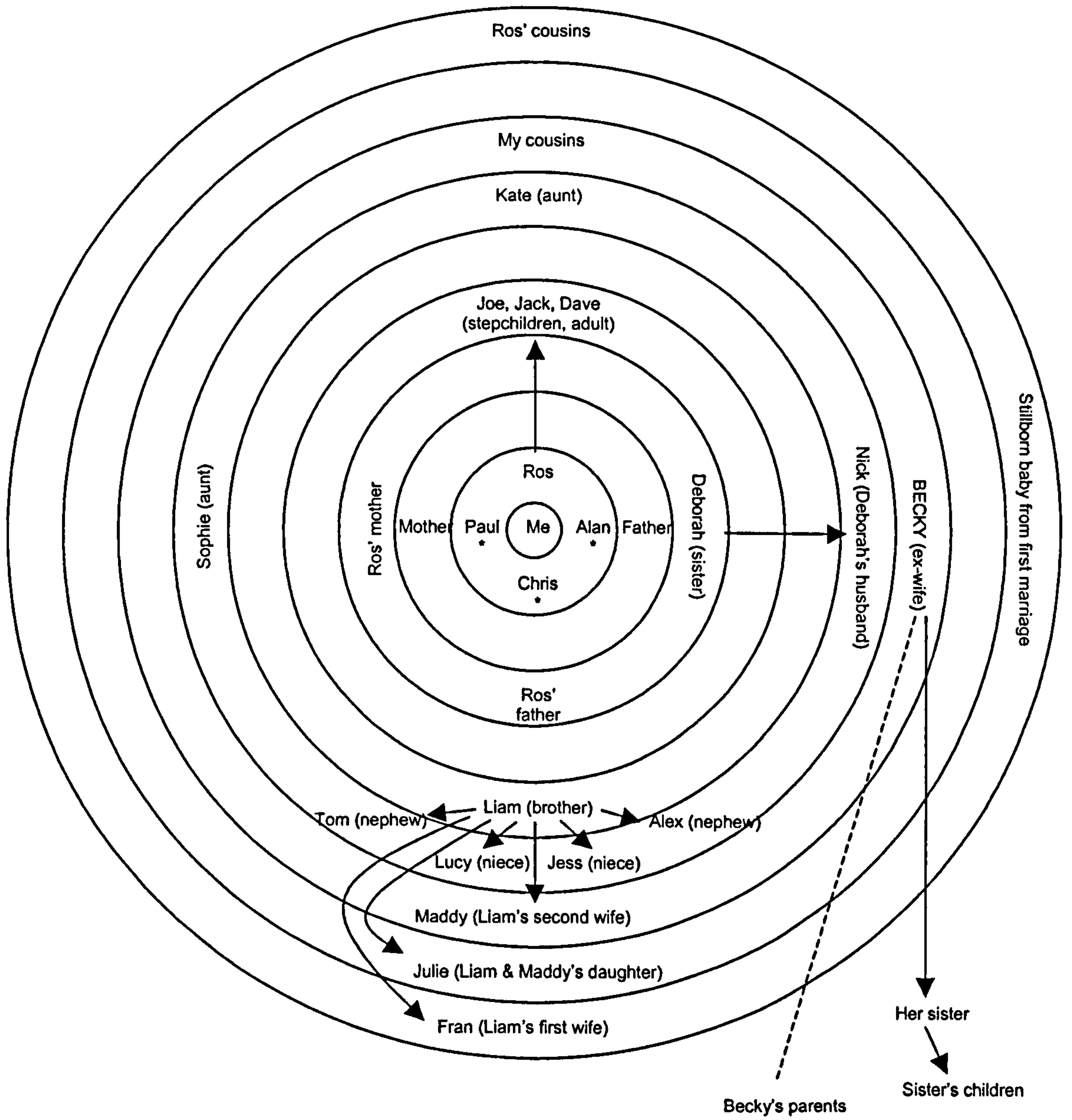
purposes that, in my own mind, I divided the interview into four parts. It was not intended that these parts must follow a rigidly preconceived order.

Thus, although its format is quite structured and its questions break down key topics into quite fine detail, many of these questions follow logically from each other. I therefore anticipated (as proved to be the case) that some people would move from one topic to the next without needing to be asked. For example, when asking people whether they had previously been married, in all but one case they told me too about the children they had from that relationship. On the other hand, my scheduled question also triggered responses which were unanticipated because they were specific to a respondent's own situation. I was able to explore these in more depth as seemed appropriate in the light of my research question. In addition, depending on what I already knew about a respondent's circumstances, some questions which were obviously inappropriate or irrelevant were not asked at all. In this sense my schedule could be used both flexibly and as a reminder of the topics I needed to cover. I used it in both my pilot study and my main study. Because it worked well in the former, I included my pilot interviews as part of my main study. Sections 1, 3 and 4 cover household, a brief history of intimate relationships and inheritance respectively.

Section 2 incorporates a 'visual chart' (see Figure 2) of ten concentric circles. This, too was used in my pilot study and was enthusiastically received both there and in my main study. Following suggestions from respondents in my pilot study, I changed the size of paper from A4 to A3. The chart is designed to illuminate how people (re)conceptualise emotional 'closeness' and 'distance' in their family relationships in the light of separation, divorce and repartnering. With their own names written in the innermost circle, respondents were asked to write down the names of anybody they 'think of' or 'wish to include' as family. They were asked to locate people in terms of emotional closeness, that is, 'how close' they felt to each person.

Closeness and distance are represented visually according to how near or far people's names were placed in relation to respondents' own. Those defined as 'closest family' were located in circles nearer to the centre; those considered less close were located in circles further out. Comparative distance and closeness could also be represented by

Figure 2 *Visual chart*



* Adult biological sons from first marriage to Becky

leaving intervening circles empty, or alternatively, by placing a number of people in the same circle. In addition, people were told they could include people who had died if they so wished, and that they could delete or add names as they wished in the course of the interview. Finally, they were asked to write down (in one corner of the paper) the names of anybody they felt uncertain or ambivalent about including.

My rationale for focusing on *emotional* closeness as a defining feature of family and kin relationships (rather than, say, contact or frequency and amounts of support) derives from my reading of the research literature on 'close' ties and solidarities. It was seen in Chapter 2 that these ties are assumed to arise 'naturally' and 'for life' between those and only those, related by 'blood', in particular between parents and their biological children (Schneider, 1968). In asking parents in stepfamilies to rank family members in terms of emotional closeness, I wanted to see how far findings from my study support or undermine these claims. Had I asked about closeness in other terms, different rankings may have emerged. However, as I show in later chapters, these dimensions are not discrete. In talking about emotional closeness parents invariably illustrate their accounts with reference to these other dimensions.

This chart is not intended as any kind of 'objective' *measurement* of closeness. It is unlikely, given the specificities of people's experiences that they will understand the concept of closeness in the same way. However, since I am gathering data on the process of the task as well as its outcomes, I am in a position to understand some of the variations in interpretation and meaning which emerged. It is designed for comparative purposes, in particular to compare parents' positioning of their biological and step-children and the implications of this for how they handle contact and inheritance. In making this my aim rather than focusing strictly on kin-counting, there are some similarities between my approach and Firth *et al*'s (1970) distinctions between the social significance for people of their named, effective and intimate kin (see Chapter 2).

However, in designing it I made one important and wrong assumption, namely, that all adults can read and write. Noticing that one interviewee did not pick up the pen I put down for him, I grasped quite quickly (but too late) what the difficulty was. I said (untruthfully) that some people had asked me to fill the chart in for them, telling me

what to write and where to write it. I asked him which he would prefer. He told me he would like me to do it because he could not write. From that point onwards (after about twenty interviews) I explained the task in such a way that left this issue 'open'. All other respondents filled in their own charts.

From what other respondents said, filling in this chart not only focused their minds on the content of the interview, it also helped to ease some initial difficulties in talking about things they would usually share only with intimate others. This raises a number of questions around power relationships between the researcher and researched. Although semi-structured or in-depth interviewing may be 'useful' in getting people to talk about sensitive topics and has been found to work particularly well between women respondents and interviewers (Finch, 1984; Maynard and Purvis, 1994), this 'easy intimacy' (Phoenix, 1994) does not automatically ensure that the situation is any less exploitative (Stanley and Wise, 1993; Phoenix, 1994). On the basis of my own experience I would argue that this applies to men as well as women respondents.

For example, I envisaged in the planning stage that interviewees might get 'stuck' around unresolved and painful issues related to relationship change and that this would 'compromise' my access to, and adequate coverage of, topics more 'relevant' to my intellectual project. In the interview situation, I tended to let people talk on, even if in some cases constraints of time meant more superficial coverage of key issues. As Skeggs (1994) says 'But what else can you do?' (1994: 81). This is an ongoing dilemma of doing feminist research. Sometimes, this had less to do with my ethical position than my inability (that particular day) to summon the necessary skills to get back 'on course'. I was aware at times as I left respondents' houses with stimulating intellectual and analytical ideas, that they might be left with less comfortable stimulations of uncertainty and worry. Over several months of interviewing, I learned (I think) to make distinctions – on the basis of demeanour, body language and more explicit articulations – between respondents who found some questions too difficult or intrusive and others who found them 'really interesting'.

At the same time, as a number of writers point out, power relationships do not operate in one direction only during the interview process (Mason, 1996; Valentine, 1999). There

were times (particularly while interviewing 'busy' academics and people with 'friendly' dogs) when I felt powerless and cross. Returning to these busy, barking locations to interview partners was an ordeal. More worrying was the emotional cost and isolation entailed in being a research student interviewing people on sensitive and sometimes distressing topics. This anxiety was heightened by the tendency of some people (though by no means all) to see me as somebody who had 'answers' to some of the dilemmas which emerged during interview. This misperception derived I think from my combined status as both a researcher of stepfamily life and as a direct participator in that life. When asked, or when I considered it appropriate, I gave telephone numbers of organisations, for example the Stepfamily Association, which might be useful.

Negotiating respondent participation, confidentiality and consent

I have described above the ways in which my sampling methods put me in touch with a number of potential participants. If in-depth interviewing is to be understood as some kind of conversation (Maynard and Purvis, 1994), then it suggests dialogue between those party to it. As Holland and Ramazanoglu (1994) insist, that dialogue should begin as early as possible in the research process. Initial contact with potential participants, whether made by me or through a third party (on the telephone or in person), began with some explanation of what my project was about, what I hoped to get out of it, what participation might entail in terms of time or venue, confidentiality and what the project's outcomes might be (seminars, publications and so on). Most of these issues were raised again and in more detail at the point of interview. It was also at this point that people asked about and/or I disclosed my own familiarity with the experiences I was researching. In the way people responded positively to this, there is little doubt that in terms of getting people to agree to talk to me, my own experience was an enabling factor. I recognise of course that this raises a number of ethical issues (see Finch, 1984).

As stated above in my discussion of quota targets, some people declined at the point of initial contact to take part in my study. Although I assured all participants that they could withdraw at any point before or during interview, I realised that people found it hard to refuse. I repeated this at the point of interview in addition to saying that if there

was any topic they did not wish to discuss we could move on to something else. (Nobody withdrew during interview; two people requested me to move on to another subject). However, given as I have just said that people appeared to find it difficult to refuse me in the first place, I cannot be entirely certain to what extent they gave 'informed consent' to be interviewed or felt free to withdraw.

In all but one case, it was agreed that interviews would take place in respondents' own homes on the grounds that this was most convenient and congenial for them. Where this was not so for one woman with two young children, she asked, and we agreed, to meet at my home one evening. I suggested that interviews would take between one and two hours but possibly longer. I also mentioned that if they had no objections, I would like to tape-record their interviews. I raised this point again when I arrived for interview. I also said that I would be happy to answer questions about myself, but suggested that we leave them until after the interview. Most women (and two men) did ask me quite detailed questions about my own relationship changes and transitions.

At the time of interview I raised again the question of confidentiality. As a number of writers point out (Sieber, 1992; Miles and Huberman, 1994), it is difficult to guarantee anonymity with the kind of contextual, in-depth data generated through such a study as mine. I talked to people about different ways in which my 'findings' may be disseminated, for example, through publications or seminars. I asked permission to use material from their interviews in these ways, adding that while I would change all names and locations of everybody mentioned during interview, I could not offer *absolute* guarantees that their own accounts would not be identified.

I promised confidentiality, anonymity and privacy in relation to how and by whom their 'data' (tapes, charts, fieldnotes or transcripts) were seen or handled. I *guaranteed* that I would transcribe all tapes, that I would not transcribe or use any material they asked me not to, and that I would not transcribe or use any material that I judged to be against their best interests (see Homan, 1991; Miles and Huberman, 1994). I also asked them to treat as private and confidential the information I had given them about myself. Nobody raised objections to my requests, but given that I myself was (and remain) unsure about

all the implications of my research in these respects, it is not wholly clear what I was promising and what they were consenting to.

The research process: interpretation, analysis and explanation

Many texts (Bryman, 1988; Dey, 1993, Silverman, 1993; Mason, 1996, Crang, 1997) remind qualitative researchers that if their work is to be convincing to themselves and others, their interpretations and analyses must be rigorous, their explanatory logic 'transparent' (Mason, 1996). Faced with alarmingly large quantities of seemingly unconnected material – tapes, transcribed conversations, fieldnotes, notebooks, memories, memos, ideas and intuitions – the task of building an explanation which meets, or at least makes adequate response to, the intellectual, philosophical and ethical requirements raised in this chapter is daunting.

Given the priority I assign to parents' own accounts, full transcriptions of my interviews was a priority. (The qualifier to 'full', as I stated above, was the decision not to transcribe anything people had asked me not to, or which I considered to be against their interests). Detailed transcription – which included pauses, laughter, silences, interruptions and indications of when people were upset (Silverman, 1993: 118-20) – put my interviews into a form which facilitated 'readings' of them not only at the interpretative level with which I was primarily concerned, but also at a literal and reflexive level too (Mason, 1996: 109).

Although in some sense I probably regarded the task of analysis 'proper' as something to begin after transcription had ceased, it is clear – given the focus of my research question, my own knowledge of its lived realities, my reading round the topic, my planning and implementing of a research strategy and the hundreds of scribbled notes and memos I wrote along the way that this process had long since begun. The lengthy process of transcribing, mentally re-inscribing as it did the particularity and context of each interview, provided further food for interpretative and analytical thought. However, since it also generated a growing physical mass of data, the need to keep organisational and analytical pace was pressing.

Explanatory underpinnings: indexing and categorising

In order to do this, I had to get some kind of overview of the data set as a whole. Cross-sectional indexing (or categorising or coding) which ‘involves devising a consistent system for indexing the whole of a data set according to a set of common principles’ (Mason, 1996: 111) allowed me not only to retrieve sections of text for the purpose of further analysis, it also provided me with initial ideas from which to commence detailed analysis and explanations. Indexing required systematic and painstaking, line by line scrutiny of my transcripts several times over, and trying to think how it related back to my research question and reading. This interactive or ‘iterative’ process of continuous movement between my research question, theory and data (Crang, 1997) was something I commenced during my pilot study. As ideas emerged, I jotted them down in the margins. These tended to make links and/or distinctions between what people said and what I had read in the research literature. They also noted similarities and differences between what was said in one interview and what had been said in others. In this they began the process of cross sectional analysis.

Gradually, as jottings accumulated, I transferred them into a separate set of ‘theoretical memos’ (Crang, 1997: 186). From these I gained some ideas of recurring themes in the data and what might be worth pursuing. This began a more formal process of indexing, developing a range of categories and applying them to different, and sometimes the same, sections of the text. Pursuing what might be relevant meant frantic searching through various bodies of literature from a variety of related disciplines for theories and ideas that made sense of – and did justice to – the complexities of my data. Although my theoretical readings in some ways directed me to look for particular issues and to develop interpretative categories in the light of them, I was also continually modifying these theories as new insights were generated from my data (see Skeggs, 1994). My approach was certainly one in which theory, data generation and analysis are ‘developed simultaneously in a dialectical process’ (Mason, 1996: 141; see also Stanley and Wise, 1993: 155-6).

Some categories worked well and were retained, others proved unworkable and were jettisoned. Those I ditched were those which did not seem directly relevant to the task

of building a systematic and coherent response to, or explanation of, the intellectual puzzle posed by my research question. It was at one such point that I had (reluctantly) to jettison 'space' as an interpretative category on account of its ill fit with the explanation I was building. Alternatively, some larger categories – for example, 'family' – had to be broken down into smaller ones in order to fine tune its meanings. Agar (1986) rightly describes this tortuous process as 'maddeningly recursive'. In other words, as Crang so aptly puts it, development and progress can be made only through a series of 'breakdowns' (1997: 188). Producing a final, consistent and coherent set of cross-sectional categories which were supportable and had a degree of robustness, entailed processes of developing, defining, redefining, categorising and re-categorising (Crang, 1997: 190).

Through such a series of 'breakdowns' I also learned that not all my data lent themselves to cross-sectional indexing with its search for patterns across the whole of a data set. For example, the analysis of how a person's childhood experience of being a stepchild influenced their role as a stepparent, focuses on complex social processes. To give an explanation of these processes, I had to commence with analysis of the holistic 'unit' or case study (Mason, 1996:130). This analytical approach is more sympathetic to understanding the importance of particularity and context. Taking 'slices' or 'chunks' out of such an account in the way cross-sectional analysis requires, is as inappropriate and insensitive as it sounds.

In these kinds of contexts I therefore used non-cross-sectional forms of organising my data. Taking this combined approach to indexing was fundamentally important to the kinds of analyses and explanations I subsequently developed. Throughout this period, I interspersed re-readings of my transcripts with re-listening to my interview tapes. Not only did this re-immense me in the context of specific interviews and familiarise me with all my data, it also made me scrutinise what influence my actions (demeanour, mood, interruptions, comments) may have had on data generation (see Crang, 1997:185).

Finally, although I could have made use of computer software for cross-sectional indexing (it would not have been able to assist me in organising my data in non-cross-

sectional ways), I was concerned about how far my analytical activity would be inappropriately driven by a logic of variable analysis (see Agar, 1991; Lee and Fielding, 1991; Miles and Huberman, 1994). More importantly, I wanted to go through, and understand, the process of analysis in a way I felt uncertain a computer package would allow. An additional concern was my isolated position as a lone researcher living at some distance from my academic institution. If things 'went wrong', and according to fellow researchers they often did, help would not be at hand.

Building analyses and explanations

As suggested above, the purpose behind indexing is linked to the kind of explanatory and analytical logic one intends to rely upon. The products of indexing are not an explanatory framework in themselves. They are an aid in making sense of materials, a means of conceptually organising data (Mason, 1996: 114-5; Crang, 1997: 188). The conceptual or interpretative categories generated from my data provided the *mechanisms* through which my interpretation and analysis were gradually made. Having cross-sectionally indexed parts of my data set, I was able to make cross-sectional analytical comparisons of themes or 'slices' from my data and to build comparative explanations from them (Mason, 1996: 117-38).

Non-cross-sectional indexing supports an analytical logic whereby explanations proceed from analysis and comparison of holistic 'units' (or elements of them) rather than from slices or themes compared across a data set (Mason, 1996: 130-1). For example, having developed an explanation of how in one case parents reached a decision to bequeath their property equally to all their (step-) children, I then compared this first explanation with the explanation I developed around similar issues in a second case. Crucially, whichever analytical approach I took, the logic of my sampling methods which, as I showed above, ensured I captured a range of experiences and characteristics relevant to my research question, meant that *socially* meaningful comparisons and explanations could be made.

In combining these approaches and moving ‘horizontally’ and ‘vertically’ through my data, that is, building explanatory links across different transcripts as well as seeking to explain an unfolding story in one of them, it became clear that the complexity and detail of these realities could not be captured in any totalising discourse or ‘grand narrative’ explanation (see Blaikie, 1993; Stanley and Wise, 1993; Hekman, 1995). This is evidenced in the way that, at various points, I came across ‘negative instances’ of experiences or processes I was ‘on the brink’ of understanding and explaining. Sometimes this meant refining or modifying an explanation I was developing. Sometimes, I allowed these ‘negative instances’ or contradictions to stand. Following Skeggs (1994), I did not always use contradictions to refute or modify other evidence. Rather, I pursued them as part of the analysis, using them as a basis for further enquiry about how contradictions are experienced and lived (see Skeggs, 1994: 84).

A convincing explanation?

Trying to build a convincing explanation raises issues of reliability, validity and generalisability, concepts which require some redefinition in the context of qualitative research. If reliability in a qualitative research context can be taken to mean being careful, thorough, honest and accurate (Mason, 1996:146) with the data one is handling, I have tried to demonstrate in this chapter how in my methodology and methods I have fulfilled requirements for being careful and thorough. Demonstrating honesty and accuracy in relation to my handling of data is a more difficult task, and is I believe, something which can more easily be judged in readings of my analysis chapters. It is perhaps most evident in how I introduce negative instances into my arguments and/or draw attention to the contradictions in what people say (see above). In many respects, these issues also relate to the concept of validity.

Validity

The question of a valid interpretation revolves in part around judgements about whether I have explained what I set out to explain. First, this relates to question about the validity of my data generation methods and how well these link to my research question.

I have tried to demonstrate that the right connecting links have been used and made. Second, validity relates to my interpretation. Although this relies in part on the validity of my methods, it goes much further. Specifically, it raises questions about whether the quality and rigour of my analysis makes my interpretation more compelling, persuasive and convincing than alternative ones.

Throughout this discussion and in the analysis chapters which follow, I have tried to trace the route by which I reached the interpretation I did. A vital part of that travelling time was spent in detailed analysis of the data generated through my interviews, that is, in reaching an interpreting of respondents' own understandings of their experiences. Inextricably linked to this is the knowledge that I began this research journey as a value-laden, historically and geographically situated woman with her own experience and views of the topic under scrutiny. My fundamental standpoint – and on this I am probably unshakeable – is that I reject totalising discourses about the realities of stepfamily life, including I hope any to which I may be susceptible. In rejecting negative discourses as partial, that is, as incomplete and interested, I also reject wholly positive versions of that life (if they exist). This viewpoint is reflected in my analysis. Just as I reveal parents' ambivalences, uncertainties and negative feelings, I also reveal their qualitative opposites.

Undoubtedly, I could have reached other interpretations had my experiential and theoretical routes been different and had I been differently positioned or located in other ways. By implication, somebody else's reading of my data would do this. To accept this is not to suggest that 'anything goes' or that all interpretations are equally valid. There are constraints – cultural, moral and theoretical – on what kinds of interpretations are acceptable or convincing (Sayer, 1992; Hekman, 1995; Graham, 1997). To accept the possibility of other valid interpretations does not invalidate my own (Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1994). If the requirement of a PhD is to produce an 'original' perspective, then I am reluctant to downplay or dilute what may be innovative, creative and different about my own.

Generalisability

On the basis of my arguments above which defend the rigour and ‘reliability’ of my research methods and analysis, I now consider the possible wider resonances of my research. Given, as I argued in my discussion of sampling that no clearly defined empirical population of parents in stepfamilies exists, I am unable to make any generalisations on empirical grounds. Rather, my sampling approach offered ‘a way of designing the variation of the conditions under which the phenomena is studied’ (Flick, 1998). In studying stepfamily life and seeing how it ‘works’ under different social conditions, and in developing an argument on the basis of that, my work contributes to wider theoretical debates.

Conclusion

In tracing the various ‘stages’ in the research process, this discussion has shown how research questions, sampling methods, analysis and explanation are not strictly sequential. They are implicated in, and rely upon each other. The requirements and definitions – intellectual, ethical, methodological and practical – of what counts as relevant are held in tension throughout. To some extent, each is compromised, none is fully or satisfactorily resolved.

Chapter 4

Stepfamilies as Moral Places

'I mean we're not married and it's difficult to get away from that. It's everywhere. I won't phone up the school if Liam's off ill or anything 'cos you get 'Well who are *you*?' 'Well I'm the *partner*' (laughter). You have to go through this whole rigmarole. And I think that people perhaps wouldn't (pause)...maybe *trust* me or something. 'Cos the immediate thing about stepfamilies or boyfriends and things is that they must be abusive and all that kind of thing. So on the practical side of things, it's an *effort* to explain the situation. And then there's that kind of stuff about people's perceptions. 'Cos I mean they worry me. Yeah, they do. Of what people see as being *non-married*. Or rather, not just being non-married, but being a *stepfamily*. From a personal point of view, that people will see me as...I don't know, some kind of a *demon*. I mean most of the stuff about child abuse is always stepparents, stepparents. Or boyfriends.' (Roger Hunt, aged twenty-seven, emphasis in original).

Introduction

I have suggested in earlier chapters that until comparatively recently, theories of family and kinship have assumed ties of blood and marriage to be the 'natural' basis for family and kin relationships and that similar assumptions inform specific aspects of family law and social policy (see also Chapter 7). I argued that a single model of 'the family' outlined above has remained dominant, namely, that it is heterosexual, built around a married couple with their own genetic children who are conceived naturally without the use of reproductive technologies (Van Every, 1991/2; Bourdieu, 1996). Closely

connected to these positions are ideas that morally binding ties and solidarities, responsibilities and commitments are a 'natural' or 'given' feature *only* of these relationships. I also argued that these assumptions have been increasingly undermined through certain 'transformations' (Giddens, 1991; 1992) in people's understandings, expectations and experiences of their intimate relationships, and that these ideas have effected similar shifts in people's understandings, expectations and experiences of their family relationships more widely.

Notwithstanding these changes, the so-called 'traditional' nuclear family remains a cherished institution in social and political discourse, serving as a powerful force in shaping popular conceptions of what properly constitutes family life. Thus the sentiments expressed in Roger Hunt's opening comments are echoed by others in this study who at different points in their relationship histories have felt the weight of what may be termed 'moral pressure' or 'moral disapproval'. It emanates from a number of sources including family, friends, school, church, politicians and the media. In broadest terms, 'moral' relates to distinctions between 'right' and 'wrong'. In this context, pressure to conform to what is 'right' or disapproval of what is 'wrong' is justified in terms of some absolute standard of what 'the family' ought to be and how it ought to conduct itself. Its targets are those whose 'family practices' (Morgan, 1996) diverge from the model referred to above. As Roger Hunt suggests, this censure may at times be explicitly mediated. At others it is implicit, its mediations more subtle, discursive and diffuse.

Yet in the chapters which follow, it emerges clearly that in the ways respondents reflect upon the experience of change in their intimate and family relationships, 'moral voices' (Hekman, 1995) are indeed to be heard. For many people the processes through which family relationships are reordered and family boundaries redrawn cannot be separated from their moral thinking about these issues. Given this and given the way that making such claims is at odds with the positions outlined above, it is my intention in this chapter to justify intellectually the position I take throughout this study, namely, that family relationships – howsoever they are constituted – are centrally located in the moral domain.

In doing this, I draw substantially on the work of three major contemporary thinkers in this field: the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1993; 1995), the political and moral philosopher Seyla Benhabib (1992), and the political scientist Susan Hekman (1995). While this chapter is not intended as an in-depth analysis of material from my data – such analyses are made in Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 – I do use, where appropriate, some illustrative examples from my data to make key points. I begin by defining what is meant by morality and ethics. I move then to detailed and critical analysis of Bauman's arguments about relationship change. Finally, I examine alternative ways of thinking about these issues which better capture the ways they emerge from my data.

Morality and ethics

I suggested above that in broadest terms morality relates to distinctions between 'good' and 'evil' or 'right' and 'wrong'. It is notable that few contemporary writers in this field attempt more precise definitions. Many of them restrict themselves, and morality, to debates around justice and care. Pritchard (1991) suggests that while it may be difficult to be definitive about what morality is, it is something with which we are all familiar. This is by virtue of being moral agents, that is, through our daily confrontation with what we take to be instances of generosity and selfishness, fairness and unfairness, kindness, cruelty and so on. He suggests that we are broadly familiar, too, with what eighteenth century writers called 'moral sentiments' – resentment, indignation, guilt, shame, pride, sympathy, compassion, benevolence, etc. For Pritchard, these sentiments constitute an essential part of our 'moral sensibilities' – our self-respect, sense of dignity, sense of justice, respect for others and concern for others' well-being (Pritchard, 1991: 1).

Pritchard is not advancing this model of morality as definitive. He utilises it to convey a sense of how morality may be understood to encompass a broad range of issues and concerns, and also how it engages our 'moral emotions' (Bauman, 1993, 1995; Pritchard, 1991). In his view – a view increasingly shared by contemporary writers in the field of morality and ethics – morality forms an integral part of our self-identity and daily lives. We are existentially moral beings, standing always in a situation of moral

choice (Bauman, 1993, 1995; Hekman, 1995). What we do, how we deal with these issues and translate our concerns into practice, is what is commonly understood by the term 'ethics', 'ethical practice', or as some writers prefer, 'moral practices' (a term used by some writers to distance themselves from the underlying assumptions of traditional ethical theories).

Modern and postmodern perspectives on morality

As Hekman (1995) insists, moral discourse is a 'deadly serious business' (1995: 114). Almost by definition – as the opening comment to this chapter makes clear – it entails the assertion of certain sets of values over and above others. This implies a hegemony or hierarchy of moral discourses in which those which are dominant marginalize or silence the voices of others (Hekman, 1995: 39). In the context of my research these are important issues.

It is perhaps not surprising that as family forms and boundaries become more fluid, as they slip and slide from the 'traditional' norm, their moral status is perceived as slippery, too. This perception has resulted in attempts to 'remoralize the family, to restore to it the responsibilities for its own welfare and to revive the traditional values of family life' (Clarke, Cochrane and Smart, 1987: 138). In political rhetoric, these attempts have frequently been framed in a language of return and restoration – 'back to basics', 'old virtues', 'traditional' or 'Victorian' family values. And when this cannot be achieved through simple exhortation, then family law and policies are implemented which may more accurately be characterised in terms of moral regulation than supportive family policy (Rodger, 1996). It is as if in the midst of social change and uncertainty 'the family' must remain unchanged, 'frozen' in some idealised form (Smart, 1997).

However, I undertake this discussion with the assumption that diversity in 'family practices' (Morgan, 1996) is here to stay. Attempts to 'remoralize' families in terms of the dominant model outlined above are therefore futile and misguided. At the root of such manoeuvres lies a particular view, not only of 'the family', but also of morality,

moral agency and human nature, namely, that our ethical competence is minimal. If left to ourselves, we will get things ‘wrong’. There can be no morality without clear ethical rules and codes. On this view, morality is identified narrowly with sexual morality (Smart, 1995: 89) and is something that must be imposed from some external source. Only thus can we ensure that families get it ‘right’. Yet, as Hauerwas and MacIntyre (1983) have noted:

‘...history suggests that in those periods when a social order becomes uneasy and even alarmed about the weakening of its moral bonds and the poverty of its moral inheritance and turns for aid to the moral philosopher and theologian, it may not find these disciplines flourishing in such a way as to be able to make available the kind of moral reflections and theory which the culture actually needs’ (Hauerwas and MacIntyre, 1983:vii).

As Bauman rightly argues, it is precisely because there is diversity, not uniformity, that there is little demand for the skills which ethical and cultural legislators, ‘the designers and guardians of proper cultural standards’, prided themselves on earlier in the modern era (1995: 238). It is not that characteristically modern, moral concerns are abandoned. What we reject are the typically modern pathways to responding to, or ‘solving’ moral problems – through normative regulation or through the search for philosophical and ethical absolutes, universals or foundations (Bauman, 1993: 2-4; 1995: 1).

Applying these ideas to my study, if dominant moral discourses on ‘the family’ insist on defining people’s changing practices in terms of a ‘weakening of moral bonds,’ or worse, moral bankruptcy, it is unsurprising that those individuals caught at the sharp end of such definitions turn away from institutions traditionally associated with explicating and validating ethical practice, and seek guidance, affirmation and legitimation from alternative sources, including, it may be argued, their own. This is not to suggest that we will produce more ‘good’ and less ‘evil’ or that our moral dilemmas will be less haunting. What Bauman means is that individual men and women have the chance to discover in themselves the sources of moral power (1995: 42-43). In arguing thus, his vision is compelling. Yet, turning to his discussion of postmodern intimacy, this confident and optimistic outlook is all but abandoned.

A postmodern morality play: Bauman's four love strategies

In his two works *Postmodern Ethics* (1993) and *Life in Fragments* (1995), Bauman makes substantial claims about the intimate life strategies of men and women in late or post-modernity. Some of his ideas draw direct inspiration from the work of Giddens (1991; 1992) specifically Giddens' concepts of 'pure relationship' and 'confluent love'. I suggested in Chapter 2 that while these concepts are suggestive for the analysis of certain aspects of intimate and other family relationships, their conceptual adequacy remains problematic given other findings to emerge in family studies more widely (Finch, 1989; Stacey, 1991; Finch and Mason, 1993; Smart, 1999).

Following Giddens (1991; 1992) Bauman argues that the modern age has forced men and women to become individuals, their lives 'split' into a variety of different roles and functions, each to be pursued in different contexts. The gradual loosening of the grip of tradition, particularly in the management of individual conduct, has given individuals some freedom to choose, to make evaluations about different courses of action (1993: 4-6). Bauman contends that these processes have given rise to the distinctive features of late or post-modernity: lives that are fragmented and episodic, marked by preferences for non-binding commitments and an impatience with anything which limits choice (1995: 8-9). Moving from life contexts in general, Bauman carries these ideas into the sphere of personal relationships. In a bleak and uncompromising account, he analyses what he claims are the now 'common traits' of intimacy under contemporary, late or post-modern conditions.

His main contention is that the 'postmodern experience of intimacy derives its identity from eliminating all reference to moral duties and obligations' (1993: 105). Our lives are guided by three principles: keeping our options open, avoiding commitment and a wariness of mortgaging the future (1995: 80). Ours is the age, he claims, of Giddens' 'pure relationship' and 'confluent love'. Drawing satisfaction by each partner is the only justification for keeping an encounter going. The parallels with Giddens' ideas are striking. Relationships, or what Bauman calls 'encounters' (a word which connotes what is casual, unexpected, or even conflictual), are by nature 'fragmentary' and 'episodic'. That is, we do not fully engage in relationships and we act within them as if

they have no past and no future (Bauman, 1995: 49). The most important consequence of our relationships is precisely their *lack* of consequences. In other words, our relationships do not leave a lasting legacy of mutual roots and obligations.

Bauman develops this line of argument through four 'love strategies' which, he claims, characterise the postmodern era. In what amounts to a postmodern morality play, these strategies are presented through a series of extended metaphors in which '*play*' and '*inconsequentiality*' are recurring motifs. In the way we conduct relationships, we are, he suggests, 'strollers', 'vagabonds', 'tourists' and 'players'. Together, these four figures reflect our horror of being bound and fixed. Like the stroller or 'flaneur' of the modern city, we act towards each other as strangers in a crowd, viewing human reality as *a series of episodes and events without a past and with no consequences*. As vagabonds, we are wayward and erratic, unsettled and unstable. Like players, we enjoy a world of risks in which each game has a beginning and end and no consequences. Partners and players must beware that what they do is '*just a game*' and justify their moves accordingly. Finally, as tourists, we are always on the move, *seekers of new experience*, difference and novelty (Bauman, 1995: 91-100).

Separation and divorce: 'just a game'?

Compelling as these metaphors are, in the context of this study (and it may be assumed Bauman's arguments are aimed directly at those who separate and divorce) they remain little more than figures of speech. Against his fundamental claim that we are *against* 'strings attached' and that we *aim* at relationships that are discontinuous and have no consequences (1995: 100, 155) respondents make it clear that this is neither possible nor desirable. Relationships with children and - surprisingly perhaps - those with former partners are viewed as being hugely consequential.

Relationships with former partners

It emerges clearly from respondents' accounts that separation and divorce do indeed leave a lasting or long-term legacy. This is evident in how men and women reflected

(unprompted) upon their movements into and out of relationship and how they attempt to make coherent sense of their partnership histories. This is captured in the following illustrative examples:

‘There appears to be a presumption that we can, or we ought to be able to, manage endings of events like this in a way that is not only civilised but ‘all right’. And the events, certainly for me, are not all right, in terms of what I expected and wanted and thought. And so that’s very hard...It’s some combination of what we had together, and anxiety, guilt, I don’t know...for me it’s still not resolved. There are lots of these things that are still there, about how it might have been, and what if I’d done this...’ (Charlie Summers, aged fifty-three).

Similarly:

‘It’s quite hard, I come from a church tradition which really finds divorce very difficult...I think my views have changed. I think I regard it as possible now, whereas at the time I didn’t think it was possible for me...I had to think that one out...And it took a while...Otherwise I guess my life would have been very different. I might have been divorced a long time ago...I’m not sure I can ever view the whole thing with total equanimity and feel that this is now totally satisfactory...It’s not what I would have wished (Mike Morton, aged fifty-four)’.

In the following extract, Marjorie Phillips compares her feelings about her two previous marriages, the first of which ended in death, the second one in divorce:

‘To me, divorce is far more painful than death, because you feel a failure. I felt a failure. I felt that death, the death of my first husband, was something I could understand. Death was just one of those things that happened...you’re not responsible for it. But with a marriage breakdown, I feel, you know, that in some way, you’re at fault as well’ (Marjorie Phillips, aged fifty-six).

It is clear from the above examples that it is precisely because these relationships were not 'just a game' or 'played with the intention of inconsequentiality' that they do leave a lasting legacy, and continue to pose moral dilemmas for people. And although it may be argued that those aged fifty and above are more likely to be concerned about the moral stigma of divorce (given they reached adulthood only as divorce rates began to increase) this link is not straightforward (see Chapter 8). If in Bauman's terms these people have 'failed' in the 'art' of episodic encounters, it is clear their 'failure' is to be understood in terms of having aimed at, and expected, a very different kind of encounter from that proposed by Bauman. In asserting that we *aim* at short-term intimate relationships Bauman imposes a conceptual framework which fails to distinguish between intentions and outcomes. In other words, *the moral significance of relationships – the meanings, investments and commitments we bring to them – cannot be 'read off' or inferred in any straightforward way from the duration or frequency of them.*

The above examples suggest that we can no longer (if indeed we ever could) chart a life journey or the trajectories of our relationships and be certain of their outcomes. If people continue – as they do in this study – to believe that long-term commitment in relationships is both possible and desirable, even though experience has taught them it is not always obtainable, then this shows they are able to live with contradictions in their lives. In following Giddens' emphasis on agency – undeniably a crucial concept to retain – Bauman also overestimates the amount of control individuals may have over their life strategies, and underestimates the various constraints which may be imposed upon them. As Maclean and Eekelaar (1997) observe, we live in an age where there are deep uncertainties about what marriage means. If it is not a long-term commitment, if it is not enduring, then it raises the question of what its purpose is (1997: 10).

Although at one point Bauman does concede that social forces militate against the achievement of lasting friendships, marriages and partnerships (1995:100-101), and does recognise that society sets limits on the life strategies which can be practised, he remains unimaginative about what those limits and constraints might be. In alluding solely to capitalism he appears ignorant of wider constraints, those experiences of poverty, death, violence, mental illness, unemployment and sheer misery which haunt the relationship histories of women and men in this study.

Most importantly, Bauman, like Giddens (1991; 1992), fails to recognise the role of children in adults' relationships and the constraints children impose upon them. As I argued in my review of the literature, pure relationships – and the postmodern love strategies – connote individuals who are, and remain, curiously free-floating, who move from one encounter to another with no pain of detachment, untouched and unhampered by relationships with family or children. It is in listening to parents' accounts of their relationships with children that the most serious challenge to Bauman's claims is posed.

Moral dimensions of relationships between parents and (step)children

Children at the 'moral party'

The core of Bauman's argument is that pure relationship is pure not just because it is emancipated from the social functions – reproduction, kinship and generation – which intimate relations once served, but also, and primarily, because it 'neutralises' the moral impulse and denies the moral significance of intimate relationships. Through the practices associated with the various love strategies, we 'suspend' our identity as moral subjects for the duration (1993: 106). Central to Bauman's position is his claim that with the inevitability of choice, the moral responsibilities of the actor become profound and consequential (1995: 6-7). 'Following the moral impulse means assuming *responsibility* for the Other, which in turn leads to the engagement in the fate of the Other and *commitment* to her or his welfare' (1995: 100, italics in original). It is this relationship of emotional engagement, of caring for others, which creates moral intimacy or what Bauman calls 'the moral party of two'. Only through emotional engagement do we make ourselves responsible for others and for the choices we make in relation to them (1995: 61-63).

These ideas raise some difficulties. First, Bauman's conclusion that in relationship we suspend our identity as moral subjects awkwardly contradicts his earlier arguments that we are existentially moral beings. Nor does he suggest how and at what point that identity may be picked up again. Secondly, and more importantly, his assertions that children are often discounted are seriously undermined when placed alongside empirical studies in this field (see for example Maclean, 1991; Maclean and Eekelaar 1997; Kier

and Lewis, forthcoming). This is made plain in the following example where Dave Hughes reflects upon the implications of his relationship with his new partner and her young son from her former marriage:

‘I did think about all these things before getting married...I’ve been around since before Joseph was born, since Marion was six months pregnant with him. And from the time he was born, every day I’ve looked after him, cleared up after him...I knew all along when I was going out with Marion that it wasn’t just about going out with her, it was always about Joseph too. He was part of everything we’d done really...And I didn’t mind that at all. It just didn’t seem an option ‘cos Marion had been left before Joseph was born. And she and Joseph are very close, and I don’t think she would ever consider going out with someone who didn’t recognise that. The getting married was a big thing in acknowledging that side of things’ (Dave Hughes, aged twenty-seven).

There is clear evidence here that Dave Hughes is knowingly mortgaging his future. Nor does he seem uneasy about the kinds of commitments and obligations he is building. Certainly his young stepson, Joseph, is not discounted as the mere ‘side-effects’ of his new partner’s former marriage. This is reflected in my data more widely. It will be seen in Chapters 5 and 6 that children and their interests – at least when they are of dependent age – are centrally positioned in people’s representations of their close family relationships. Invariably this is expressed in the moral language of obligation, commitment and responsibility. This language also characterises the following example in which Ken Phillips, a stepfather of twenty-five years’ standing, recalls his movement into that role and relationship with his two young stepsons:

‘It was the first time I got married, see. But they was well behaved...They weren’t causing any bother...And well, I did want to marry the mother. And I accepted that if I wanted one, I would have to have the other. But I was willing anyway. But she was a bit dubious because she thought it was a lot for me to take on. So she kept on, when I said about us getting married, two or three times she said ‘No’...But she

might've thought that after a couple of years he'll be walking out like the other one did because he can't cope with all this. 'Cos if you've had it happen to you once, you wouldn't want it to happen to you again. Not really. Once is enough. So I can understand from that point of view that she wanted to be a bit cautious' (Ken Phillips, aged fifty-eight).

These examples demonstrate how these relationships have from the start an inescapably moral dimension. Against Bauman's complaint that nothing solid is sedimented by relationships, children's 'solidity' and the heavy demands their physical presence makes on resources, challenges such a notion. As Smart (1997) remarks 'Children stop confluent love in its tracks' (1997: 314). Their presence requires newcomers on the scene to engage at once with the practical, emotional and moral implications of, not just one relationship, but possibly several. New partners face stark choices between commitment avoidance or mortgaging their futures; between taking on the whole 'package' of parent and child or keeping their options open and losing the chance of a particular relationship altogether.

What is striking about these examples then, and follows from the logic of what people say both here and in later chapters, is that children are centrally located in people's conceptions of moral responsibility, central that is, to that relationship of emotional engagement, caring and commitment which in Bauman's view creates the 'moral party'. This suggests that in the same way women and men in this study challenge Giddens' notion of a reflexive project based solely on the *self*, they similarly challenge Bauman's notion of a moral party based solely on membership of *two*. Data generated through my research indicate that commitment and responsibility reach beyond Bauman's 'moral party of two', beyond those two adults most immediately and intimately caught in relationship change, to include other family members, primarily children, but others too. I draw on this 'enlarged' version of Bauman's concept of 'moral party' at several points below and in subsequent chapters.

Stepparents: latecomers to the 'moral party'

There are glimpses too in some of these examples of the beginnings or early stages of those processes Finch and Mason (1993) have identified whereby family members – in this case new partners – begin to build up moral reputations and moral identities. Following Becker's (1960) insights, Finch and Mason argue that these are developed through the kinds of commitments or 'investments' people make to other family members over time. In this way, moral reputations are 'negotiated' (1993: 158-159). Evidence from my data more widely suggest that in many cases the moral and material 'valuables' respondents created through association with their 'old' families have indeed been lost. People are perceived to have abandoned their commitment to a particular relationship path. Not only that, but as Bauman (1993; 1995) claims, they are perceived to have abandoned any consequences or responsibilities associated with that relationship. Experiences of separation, divorce, remarriage or repartnering are not yet widely associated with the development of a 'good' moral reputation.

Arguably, parents in all families have concerns about their moral reputations. But given the question mark under which parents in stepfamilies may perceive themselves to be living – in relation to their capacities for responsibility, trustworthiness, stability and commitment – it is conceivable that their anxieties about moral reputation are experienced in a particularly acute form. 'Latecomers' to the moral party have not yet had the opportunity to build or negotiate their moral identities and reputations with their 'new' families. This suggests some pressure on them to invest heavily in their 'new' relationships in terms of these kinds of capacities. They therefore have to be prepared to make a substantial commitment to all those, including children, who are already there. There may be little room for manoeuvre or negotiation as far as the moral terms of their relationship with a new partner is concerned.

Stepfamilies and moral reflexivity

Moral issues are forced onto the agenda in stepfamilies which force parents to confront a series of dilemmas for which there are few normative guidelines. In Bauman's view, it is precisely this kind of dilemma – one for which there is no ethical blueprint – which distinguishes late or post-modern morality from more orthodox understandings of moral

life. Ethical theories of the modern age are ill-equipped to cope with the range and scale of moral choices now facing us (1993: 2-4). This suggests that if we want to understand the significance of people's moral thinking in these contexts, we need to stop talking about family moralities in terms of what families are not doing or ought to do, and look instead at what they *do*.

I am not of course claiming that stepfamilies are *more* moral than other families. Rather I am suggesting that because stepfamilies are required to confront certain issues which do not arise in 'intact' families, they are likely to engage critically with moral discourses on 'the family' which ignore the specificities and complexities of the contexts in which their own ethical decisions are made. In this study it will be seen that such issues include the comparative significance of blood ties and step-ties; assumptions that divorce and separation sever ties of attachment and responsibility towards family members some define as 'ex'; the divergent interests of children and parents in relation to contact, and the concept of fairness and how this is to be (re)formulated in relation to inheritance. In negotiating these issues, in being forced to question the values and scrutinise the assumptions of hegemonic moral codes designed for the 'traditional' nuclear family, stepfamilies are likely to become practised in being morally reflexive.

In the following section I examine the work of other key writers in this field. In doing this, I acknowledge a huge and prior debt to the work of Carol Gilligan. Contemporary debates in moral theory – as well as those in the related fields of feminism, epistemology, methodology and theories of the subject – were revolutionised by publication in 1982 of her work *In a Different Voice*, an empirical study of the decision-making process of young women confronted with a series of moral dilemmas (Gilligan, 1982; see also Hekman, 1995). Against Kohlberg, who concluded that women's inferior moral reasoning left them at a lower stage of moral development than men, Gilligan argued that the women she interviewed articulated their moral dilemmas 'in a different voice', one which is equal, not inferior, to men's.

While both critics and defenders of her work have been fierce in their response, many would agree that her lasting contribution to moral theory is in terms of making us aware of the implicit models of selfhood, autonomy, impartiality and justice which are

sustained and privileged there (Benhabib, 1992: 170). Most importantly for what I am arguing here, her work on the ‘different voice’ gives a new perspective on relationships, one which in her words, ‘expands the moral domain’ (Gilligan, 1982: 173). It is her work with its insights into the relational – and by implication, familial – dimension of moral life, which enables ‘voices’ heard in this study to press for inclusion.

Morality begins at home

Moral subjects and moral domains

As Hekman (1995) argues, Gilligan’s work in moral psychology and moral philosophy may be viewed as evidence of a ‘sea change’ in late twentieth century thought. As I argued in Chapter 3, in almost every branch of intellectual life there has been a move away from the universalism and absolutism of modernist epistemology towards conceptions which emphasise particularity and concreteness. The focal point of this shift has been the centrepiece of modernist, Enlightenment philosophy and epistemology: ‘man’, the rational, abstract, autonomous constitutor of knowledge. In opposition to this (Cartesian) conception of the subject, many twentieth century thinkers advance a subject who is embedded or situated, constituted by language, culture, discourse and history (Hekman, 1990, 1995; Weedon, 1987).

Given the importance of the former model in moral philosophy, particularly since the eighteenth century, it is unsurprising that this discipline has proved one of those most resistant to change. The paradigm of this tradition is Kant’s self-legislating moral subject, one whose moral development is understood in terms of the evolution of an autonomous, separate and rational self, removed from relationships and the connectedness of everyday life, who eventually becomes capable of applying abstract, universal principles to moral problems (Hekman, 1995: 4,30). Crucially, as Tronto (1993) points out, in conceptualising the moral subject as separate and autonomous, the moral realm is also defined in terms of a separate, autonomous sphere. For as Gilligan (1982) has shown – and in this lies one of her major themes and contributions – selfhood and morality are intimately linked. Subjects develop moral voices as a

function of the emergence of selfhood. Their definition of the moral realm, and of what constitutes a moral problem in the first place, is necessarily structured by the conception of the self that informs it (Gilligan, 1982; Hekman, 1995: 5-6).

Kant's emphasis on separateness and autonomy structures his notion of morality and the ethical life. Morality has to be severed from its social and political connections because, it is argued, these are matters of personal rather than moral interest. What he and others term the 'moral point of view' consists of principles that are impartial, of universal applicability, concerned with matters of public justice and rights (Tronto, 1993: 27-28). On this view, the link between morality and men's traditional sphere of activity – the polity or public realm – is evident. As Held (1987) has said, these moral agents resemble adult, male heads of households acting in the market-place with like others. It is from here that Kohlberg derives his notions of moral development and maturity. And as Gilligan and other feminist writers have been swift to point out, a moral point of view which so privileges economic or political man, and justice and rights, thereby renders morally invisible and morally inaudible women's traditional sphere of activity – the domestic, the familial, the relational.

For what is extraordinary about the Kantian paradigm is its neglect of what Held (1987) has called the genealogy of the self. In other words, it ignores the reality that we are children before we are adults. As Benhabib (1992) assumes, the moral subject is a human infant whose body can only be kept alive and whose 'self' can only develop within the community. It becomes a 'self', capable of speech and action, only through human interaction. As children, we can only survive and develop within networks of dependence on 'concrete' others – family members, friends, and others we know in the community. Not only as children, but as adults too, as concrete, embodied beings, with needs and vulnerabilities, desires and emotions, we spend our lives caught in what Gilligan (1982) calls networks of 'care and dependence'. From these networks, we can, as autonomous adult individuals begin to consider the moral claims of 'general others', those beyond family and friends (1992: 5, 10, 50).

Despite its associations with Kantian theory, Benhabib, like others (Pritchard, 1991; Hekman, 1995) is reluctant to jettison entirely the concept of moral autonomy

(particularly in relation to women) because of its associations with agency, accountability, intentionality, and resistance. She argues that it can be retained if it is understood as the process, not of moving out of relationship, but of growth, change and moral maturation within it. It is for these reasons that she resists a more explicitly postmodern perspective on subjectivity or a strong version of the 'Death of the Subject' argument. Thus she would reject a subject strategy such as Butler's (1990) or Hekman's (1995) whose discursive subject emerges entirely through discursive relations, and for whom agency is a product of discourse, on the grounds that it insufficiently explains how the individual can be constituted by discourse and yet not be determined by it (Benhabib, 1992: 214-218).

Through these 'contingent processes of socialisation' an individual's self-identity develops and 'becomes capable of projecting a narrative into the world of which she is not only the author but the actor as well' (Benhabib: 1992:5, 126; see also Hekman, 1995: 7-8). The link between narrative and selfhood has of course been explored by a number of writers. And indeed, as I shall show in later chapters, the ways in which individual men and women position themselves in relation to intimate and more distant others in these domains, are central to their understandings of their narrative histories. Following Gilligan's lead on the link between selfhood and morality, these stories have also to make moral sense to the teller or author. Importantly, because women's sphere of activity has traditionally been concentrated in the domain where children are raised, human relationships maintained, traditions handed down, the female experience has been more attuned to the narrative structure of experience and the standpoint of the 'concrete other'. In dealing with concrete individuals, their wants and needs, 'women as primary caregivers have had to exercise insight into the claims of the particular' (Benhabib, 1992: 14; see also Hekman, 1995: 125).

The importance of drawing attention to both 'concrete' and 'general' others means that we must not privilege justice in the moral domain as traditional theories have done. The moral domain includes life in the family no less than life in the state. On these grounds, Benhabib rejects – as I do – Kohlberg's view that 'the spheres of kinship, love, friendship and sex that elicit considerations of care are usually understood to be spheres of personal decision-making as are, for instance, the problems of marriage and divorce'

(Kohlberg: 229-230). She insists that to view these as personal rather than moral issues runs counter to our moral intuitions. The moral issues which preoccupy us most – and this is made plain by respondents in this study – derive not from problems in the economy and the polity but precisely from the quality of our relationships with others. On this view, responsibility and relations of care are at the centre, not the margins of morality (Benhabib, 1992: 153, 184).

Resisting an essentialist or definitive morality

In foregrounding the familial and relational context of moral subjectivity and moral practice, it is not my intention to frame a morality in oppositional terms nor build a different set of essentialist criteria or definitive claims. Critics and defenders of Gilligan have become obsessed with the hierarchy of justice and care. Defenders of modernist theory argue justice subsumes care. Feminist critics say Gilligan perpetuates women's inferiority by emphasising traditional differences. Feminist defenders enlist Gilligan as an ally in their arguments for the superiority of the care voice. Following Hekman's lead, this obsession is not only unhelpful, it is ultimately futile (1995: 10).

For as Tronto (1993) has shown, these rigid 'moral boundaries' were not drawn until relatively recently, that is, since the close of the eighteenth century when a series of social transformations required people to re-think existing moral boundaries. At that time – and indeed considerably earlier if one considers Aristotelian ethics with its view that the moral life is a virtuous disposition – morality did concern itself with the local and particular. The local and particular was the only world people knew. Context and connection were important for shaping individuals' dispositions or inner qualities. Thus, the 'moral sentiments' referred to earlier – resentment, indignation, guilt, shame, pride, sympathy, compassion and benevolence (Pritchard, 1991: 1) – started from daily moral life and formed as much a part of men's moral thinking as women's.

But as Tronto goes on to argue, with the emergence of global, commercial societies, concerns for and about distant others became morally relevant. Moral criteria resting on a particular social context appeared inadequate. Universal moral criteria became

increasingly relevant and important. While a universal morality need not assume proximity amongst members of the same moral community, it did assume a shared commitment to the same rules. This was useful in the context of a geographically large, diverse and market-oriented world, implying as it did that one did not need to fear the immoral conduct of intimate or distant others. The historical circumstances of the eighteenth century thus led to the development of arguments which contained both women and moral sentiments within the domestic sphere. In these ways, Tronto suggests, more domestic understandings about moral development became gendered (Tronto, 1993: 26).

While it may be argued that Tronto's arguments oversimplify the processes through which gendered understandings of morality emerged – and by implication the processes through which they may be eradicated – they make the point that in any age, moral theory addresses the kinds of moral questions that seem most urgent at the time. What constitutes morality or the moral domain is shaped by the historical, social, political and intellectual aspects of life at any given time (Tronto, 1993: 28). Morality is not therefore something fixed or immutable, but arises, as Tronto suggests, out of the ongoing practices of a group of people (1993: 62).

Specifically, Tronto's account challenges gendered ideas about morality. If historically, men as well as women have been morally attuned to the concrete and particular, this means that we have to stop talking about 'women's morality' in terms of care and the non-rational. By implication (and as I suggested in chapter 2 in my review of the research literature), this means that we cannot view 'men's morality' solely in terms of justice and rights. We need to try and displace oppositional thought about justice and care and view both as having a relational basis, and both as being primary dimensions of moral development and maturity – for women and men (Hekman, 1995: 10, 24; Benhabib, 1992).

Furthermore, we need to move away from preoccupations with 'the' different voice and talk about different moral voices. As I suggested in Chapter 3, multiple subjectivities imply multiple moral voices (Hekman, 1995: 65). Without denying the significance of gender as a factor in the development or constitution of moral subjectivity, it

nonetheless remains but one factor. We need to address the implications for morality of other factors – class, ethnicity, age, and culture (1995: 21). Hekman's conception of subjectivity as discursively constituted means, as others argue, that morality is culturally constituted and culturally located.

Importantly, Hekman makes the point that although moral beliefs vary across cultures, this does not mean they are arbitrary (1995: 159). Cultures provide us not only with a moral practice but also with characteristic parameters to it. This brings me back to my earlier point that stepfamily moral practices are likely to incorporate many of the values – responsibility, commitment, stability, fairness – which inform and preoccupy moral practices in 'intact' families. Wolfe (1989) suggests that morality may matter most during certain highlighted moments in the life course – marriage, death and, as I am arguing, divorce, remarriage or repartnering – those points of passage from one structural status to another. These are 'bracketed moments' in people's lives and they make it possible for people to account for what they are doing by reflecting on the moral consequences of their actions and experiences. The 'moral passages' people go through help them make sense of the situations they find themselves in (Wolfe, 1989: 214-215).

Conclusion

While moral values in stepfamilies are not likely to be oppositional to dominant moral values, they are likely, as Hekman's arguments suggest, to be re-worked to meet the demands of the more complex family situations in which people find themselves. We do not all speak the same moral discourse. We use the discursive tools available to us to create an ethic or moral practice appropriate to our needs. What we fashion will differ according to a range of factors – class, age, gender and so on. Moral practices are therefore flexible and evolving rather than static and fixed. And if, as Hekman contends, moral practices like languages are subject to change, not so much from external pressure, but from practitioners, then individuals' narratives of their moral life provide a valuable resource for exploring such change. It is to some such moral narratives the following chapters turn.

Chapter 5

Family relationships: Inclusions and Exclusions, Commitments and Contingencies

'It's difficult. I know I'm contradicting myself...I don't really know what I think...I still think of Lizzie as my niece really, but if that's the case, then she should be on this chart somewhere...It's very complicated...I don't think it's just the divorce. It's also the remarriage, Alan remarrying and me remarrying. It changed things, more than I thought it would...I think it would have been far easier to stay much more in touch with Lizzie and her mum, to stay close to them, had I not got involved with someone else...All I know *now* is that I can't look on them as family...I think of them as '*ex-family*'...It takes time for things to settle down when they've all been thrown up in the air...But apparently his new wife's pregnant and I don't know how that might affect his contact with Joseph. So things are changing again (laughter)' (Marion Hughes, aged 33, emphasis in original).

Introduction

It was shown in Chapter 2 how until comparatively recently many social and anthropological theories have assumed ties of 'blood' along with those of marriage, to be the 'natural' basis of family and kinship in western cultures and societies (Schneider, 1968). This chapter explores how, in the light of separation, divorce and repartnering, people's perspectives on who or what constitutes 'family' are fundamentally revised or changed. As the opening comment to this chapter indicates, these experiences 'change

things' in a number of unwelcome and unanticipated directions. In many cases, people's assumptions that ties of blood and marriage are the 'natural' and stable basis of family and kinship are forcibly and painfully overturned. It takes time, as Marion Hughes explains, for the different relationships to resolve themselves into some kind of pattern or shape - a shape, moreover, which many people would not previously have recognised as 'family'.

In particular, parents' desires to make a 'fresh start' as a 'new' family are often held in tension with the recognition that their children have interests in maintaining contact and sustaining relationships with members of their 'first' or previous families – not only with a non-resident biological parent, but also with the grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles, and 'honorary' members associated with that family. And indeed, as will be seen in this chapter, parents', too, may desire to maintain these relationships at some level. They, too, express regret for family relationships lost or unaccounted for along the route of their changing partnership histories. Thus, whether it be on account of their own needs and interests or those of their children, working out to what extent 'former' kin can be incorporated alongside 'new' kin, requires parents in stepfamilies to adopt a flexible and dynamic approach in their understanding of family and kinship, one which is able to accommodate, as well as bear the loss of, complex sets of relationships.

Family change is thus *processual*. Separation, divorce and repartnering are not events which happen neatly, discretely or resolutely – even if the legal 'ordering' of relationships seduces people initially into the belief that they are. The endings and beginnings of these relationships are often blurred and contingent, accompanied by feelings of uncertainty and ambivalence. That this is so – and it is a finding which emerged during every single interview – it is unsurprising that people's revised understandings of 'family' and their 'family relationships' are also marked by uncertainties and contradictions, and in some cases, the reluctant observation that in some ways these revisions are themselves contingent, open to the possibility of further revision and change.

In the analysis which follows I examine four types of relationship which, in diverse ways and combinations, emerge as most significant in people's understandings of their

reordered family relationships: those based on 'blood' ties, those based on step-ties, those between former partners, and those based on friendship. In doing so, I explore people's perceptions of what it is that underpins these relationships, what it is that makes people regard them as unconditional significant, or indeed, expendable. I begin, however, by focusing on one aspect of 'family' which *all* respondents identified as fundamental.

Consolidation and commitment: core relationships

Notwithstanding the fluidity and uncertainty of family relationships following separation and divorce, it is important to emphasise that these are not perceived to be attributes of all these relationships. On this point respondents were unanimous. However equivocal, contradictory or unresolved people's feelings were about some of their family relationships, and however much people diverged in their understandings of what family *is*, all respondents commenced discussion of their families with reference to a core unit minimally comprising themselves, their current partners and their children – the last group appearing in various combinations of biological and step. It was notable that in all cases this was done without hesitation or uncertainty.

It is only as people move out from discussion of this core set of relationships regarded as close, committed and *stable* and reflect upon those relationships which are contingent – about which they are ambivalent, less certain and less secure – that differences, contradictions and tensions begin to emerge. It is at this point, when people are trying to unravel what precisely it is that distinguishes close and more distant family relationships, and what it is that makes or unmakes someone as a family member, that the process becomes what some described as 'hard'. Importantly in distinguishing certain relationships as key and the embodiment of their 'close family', people were able – despite the ways contact with former partners and their families disrupts this process – to realise at *some level* the 'fresh start' as a 'new' family which many said they sought.

A second important and related point is that while commitment to these core relationships is linked in people's minds with a shared household, it is not linked to a

particular marital status. In other words all respondents, whether married or cohabiting, articulated the quality and depth of their commitment in broadly similar ways. Indeed, it may be argued further that commitment to a core set of family relationships is not linked to any *partnership* status, since (as will become clear in the course of this analysis) respondents refer to a core unit of themselves and their children when recalling their earlier experiences of living *without* a partner. In all cases, partners are perceived as expendable. Children, specifically younger ones, are not

And if, in singling out a core family unit in this way, parents in stepfamilies appear to endorse or converge upon a model of 'family' which approximates closely to the model of the 'traditional', intact, nuclear family referred to elsewhere, it is also the case – in their inclusion of stepchildren and 'ex' relatives at the heart of family life – that their model of 'family' is divergent in a number of important ways.

Bonds between parents and biological children

It was shown in Chapter 2 how ties of 'blood' are ascribed an almost 'mystical' power and status in western cultures, attributes which are further endorsed in legal statutes. In particular, it emerged that the 'parent-child' bond – the bond, that is, between *biological* parent and child – is regarded as primary or one of the closest (Finch, 1989; Strathern, 1992, 1992; Finch and Mason, 1993; Allan, 1996). Importantly however, and on the basis of their own research, Finch and Mason (1991, 1993) make the point that while this bond does indeed frequently emerge as primary, it cannot automatically be assumed to be significant solely on account of its genealogical basis. While similar findings concerning the bond between biological parent and child emerge from these data, the overall picture is more complex, given that multiple sets of relationships – biological and step- are involved. There are therefore, important qualifications and distinctions to be noted which appear to be specific to the context of stepfamily relationships.

Parents and younger biological children

Children are more likely to reside with their biological mothers than with their fathers following the separation or divorce of their parents (Maclean and Eekelaar, 1997). This was so in the majority of cases in this study. It was particularly striking that in those cases where parents separated during either the mother's pregnancy or during the early months or years of a child's life, the bond between biological mother and her child or children was expressed in very close terms, sometimes in terms of inseparability. This was visually represented by placing children in the same circle, or in the one immediately adjacent to the innermost circle, containing the mother's name. In the following passage, a mother talks about her relationship with her eleven-year-old son:

'I was on my own before Liam was born...I'm very protective towards him...But there's Andrew now...Whereas before, it used to be just Liam and I...It's always been the two of us from the day of Liam's birth. So then Andrew came along and he'd got to get through this (pause) *barrier* of Liam and I...Andrew's relationship with Liam is different to mine. I don't know how to put it but Liam is *mine*. And I don't know if Andrew understands fully what I meant by saying that, if he thought he was being excluded. And that wasn't what I was saying at all...If Andrew goes tomorrow, Andrew goes...I've lived without a partner for seven years but I've not lived without a son. As long as I've been on my own, I've been on my own with Liam. So our *bond* (pause), there was none of this *maternal* bond, youknow, straight away. There was none of that. But over the years...(Emma Marshall, aged thirty-four, emphasis in original).

Emma Marshall does not specify what she considers to be the precise nature of the bond between herself and her biological son. While she does not explicitly deny the significance of so-called 'blood' ties, she does deny the notion of an immediate or automatic, maternal bonding based on biological or genetic connection. Rather, in her phrase 'But over the years...' there is the suggestion that it is as much their experience of shared history as any bio-genetic 'shared substance' (Schneider, 1968) which creates the close bond between them. Here, as elsewhere- and it will be seen to emerge consistently

in these data - shared history is regarded as constitutive of close family bonds or relationships, a significant and fundamental basis on which people are either included or excluded as 'family'.

While there are a number of other examples in my data where mothers prioritise the bond between themselves and their biological children, there is an important point on which some of them they diverge. The significance of shared history may account in part for this difference. Where a new partner appears on the scene in a child's infancy, mothers feel no concern that a new partner will feel 'excluded'. Yet this concern is made explicit by Emma Marshall above. It is notable that it surfaced in all interviews with women whose biographies similarly included lengthy periods of what they invariably, if euphemistically, described as being 'on my own with the children'. This is powerfully expressed in the following extract, where a mother talks about the close bond which continues to exist between herself and her two daughters. She recalls the time ten years earlier when she moved into relationship with her current partner. In doing so she makes an important point about why she and her children in some way excluded her new partner at that time:

'I'd been the sole parent, and I didn't like somebody else stepping in...For instance, if Susie and Gemma were rude to me, he'd say something to them, and then we'd all turn on him basically. At the time I didn't think I was being nasty. It's awful really...But the girls and me, we thought of ourselves as a family...That was important at the time...I had to work quite hard to loosen up and let John in...And even now if we were all on a sinking boat, I would put them first. I guess that will change. I hope it will. I feel as if it ought to change and that I should put John first...I've always felt guilty about that because I'm sure he would put me first...And it's nothing about trying to hurt somebody. It's just how it is I suppose' (Deb Casson, aged forty-seven).

What is implicit in Emma Marshall's account and is made explicit here by Deb Casson, is that mothers who have been 'on their own with the children' have a strong sense of family identity. Although the composition of their families has been altered by the

departure of one partner and the arrival of a new one, this is not to suggest its former composition of lone parent and children was any less constitutive of family. This corresponds with findings discussed above on people's core relationships. That is, although respondents display diversity in whom they define as 'family', and although many recognise how these inclusions and exclusions shift over time, all of them include a core unit of parent(s) and child(ren) (in varied combinations of biological and step-). This suggests that however normally chaotic (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995) love relationships may prove to be, people in my study dislike chaos in their lives (Bauman, 1993) and work hard to return familiar order to them.

However, the burden of bringing order to this chaos does not fall equally on men and women. This work – what Bourdieu (1996) describes as 'constant maintenance work on feelings' – falls mainly to women. Arguably, this maintenance or repair work is particularly important during the kinds of transitions dealt with in this study. These gendered differences of experience in this regard are important, reflected as they are in some of the commitments and contingencies men and women subsequently identify in their family relationships.

It is unsurprising that women, who often spend several years living without a partner at the same time as being primary carers of children, emerge as those who work creatively and resourcefully to develop close family relationships centrally comprising themselves and their children. At the same time, as will be seen in the section below on friends, in this significant phase of their biographies women are creative and resourceful in their approach to family relationships more widely. Thus, as Emma Marshall makes plain above, although her designated 'close' family currently includes her new partner, if he goes tomorrow, 'he goes', but she and Liam remain. Her family identity would remain intact retaining as it does the key figures of herself and her child included in its earlier composition.

Similarly, in all but one instance, men too represented their younger biological children as being emotionally very close to them. This was particularly striking in two cases where fathers also had older, biological children from their previous relationships. In neither case were their older children represented as close to them emotionally as their

younger ones. Other factors, including that of age, come into play. These are dealt with more fully in the section immediately following where parents speak about their relationships with older biological children. Similarly, it will be seen that age also emerges as a significant factor in relations between parents and their older step-children.

In the one case where a father did *not* place his young biological child as closely as his other children, a quite complex series of step- and biological relationships was entailed. He placed his three young stepchildren (*triplets, aged two years*) as closer members of his family than either his older stepson aged six years, or his biological son aged eight years:

‘Kenny, my son, shouldn’t really be out there (*on chart*). But in a sense I feel a lot closer to the little ones (*three of his stepchildren, triplets, aged two*) than to Simon, their older brother, or to Kenny...The little ones were six months old when I first met them. But the way I feel is that Kenny and Simon are included there. They’re my children. But as I say, it’s more so with the little ones because they’ve never had anybody else. I’ve been their father...But having said that I had a lot of contact with Kenny when he was little...The contact order now is that I pick Kenny up twice a week from school and he stays with us till about seven o’clock...At the moment, I think the little ones are more emotionally forthcoming than Kenny is. I mean he’s an eight year old boy with all the stereotypical things (laughter)...So the two-way thing is there with them. With Kenny, the two-way thing hasn’t stopped, it’s just sort of different. *But* I’d do anything for any of them if I could, no matter what. They’re all my children’ (Jamie Singleton, aged thirty).

This passage raises a number of points. First, Jamie Singleton’s reference to his son’s behaviour as ‘stereotypical’ of an eight year old boy is something which emerges with a number of parents as a possible explanation for why they may feel more or less close to some of their children than to others, regardless of whether these are biological or step-children. In making distinctions on the grounds of stereotypically gendered behaviour, parents indicate that other factors – specifically the quality of the relationship – are important in how close they feel to children. At the same time, Jamie Singleton and

other parents are keen to qualify these distinctions. Parents emphasise that if they do distinguish between their children in terms of how close they feel towards them, this should not be taken to mean they do not hold them in equal regard or would not act equally on their behalf. This is clearly demonstrated in Chapter 7 on inheritance where parents rarely make any distinctions between their children.

Secondly, given the emphasis parents place on shared experience or shared history in how closely children and others are included as family members, the reduced contact between Jamie Singleton and his son may, arguably, be another contributory factor to the less close relationship he shares with his son Kenny. And indeed, this is a point he makes later in his interview. As Janet Walker (1992a) points out, for 'absent parents', the majority of whom are men, the extent to which they are able to take a lead or equal role in parenting is circumscribed by the fact that they are not living with their children on a daily basis (1992a: 25).

There were a number of other differences in how men perceived their relationships with their younger, biological children. First, they more frequently placed partners (rather than children) as those immediately closest to them. Secondly, in reflecting on the period between the ending of their previous partnerships and the beginning of their current ones, they did not explicitly talk about themselves and their children in terms of being a 'family'. This was so even in the three cases where children had their main residence with their biological fathers (in two cases, this followed separation and divorce; in the third it followed the death of a partner). However, all three fathers described their biological children as very close to them. Thirdly, and this may be related to the fact that so few fathers were main carers of their children, they did not express concerns that new partners may feel excluded from the relationships they had built up with their biological children.

This discussion emphasises feelings of closeness felt by biological parents towards their younger children. In doing this, the significance of shared experience is also emphasised. However, parents of young children did not entirely ignore the issue of genetic links. This was raised unprompted. Biological ties were variously described as 'inexplicable', 'different' in some indefinable way from other bonds. In the following

extract, a mother talks about her two year old son's reaction to the prospect of a visit from his non-resident biological father whom he sees every six weeks or so:

'He's very excited when Paul comes, as if he knows he's his daddy. And we don't know why that is at all (laughter) because he didn't have very much time with him at all when he was little...We often sort of say, we wonder if it's something sort of biological (laughter). But how? (laughter). They're all very excited, the girls, too' (Linda Townsend, aged thirty-five).

Similarly, another mother reflects upon this phenomenon:

'Joseph is more in the picture with Alan, his father, than anyone ever thought he would be...I don't know why really...Except that what's very obvious, and must be very obvious to him, is that Joseph looks just like him...So I don't know whether that is anything to do with it. I mean, I'm sure that when Alan and his new wife go out visiting with Joseph, people must say 'Oh doesn't he look like his Dad'. And it must have an effect on Alan...I've often thought it creates some sort of bond between them...Perhaps I'm making too much of it, but I think it probably is a factor' (Marion Hughes, aged thirty-three).

Notwithstanding the socially recognised significance of 'blood ties' and, as Marion Hughes hints, the influence they may have on the development of relationships between children and their non-resident biological parents, closeness between parents and their younger children is rarely expressed in straightforward terms as being based on bio-genetic links. Shared history and feelings of protectiveness towards young children figure more prominently as the basis on which close links are forged during the transitions from one set of family arrangements to another.

Parents and older biological children

In considering people's reflections on their relationships with older biological children, a different and more complex picture begins to emerge concerning the connection between biological ties and 'family'. One third of those interviewed whose biological children were now adult (five parents out of fifteen), placed one or more of them further out than their other biological children, their stepchildren or other family members. In all of these cases, lack of regular contact was initially given as parents' reasons for doing this. All parents, however, wished to elaborate on this – albeit with some unease and hesitation – making it clear that lack of contact was regarded as neither a sufficient nor primary reason for making these distinctions. This is illustrated in the following extract, where a father reflects on the reasons he distinguishes between his elder, twenty-seven year old son, and his younger, fifteen-year-old son in terms of closeness:

'Son 'one' is older and lives on his own in London, and I see less of him...So it's partly that (long pause)...I always feel closer to the younger one than to the older one, but it's not *that* significant...The second is placed there simply because he's fifteen, and therefore, he is a lot more dependent on me than the other one. It's probably *mainly* that (long pause). He's also an easier child (laughter), if it's all right to say so' (Mike Morton, aged fifty-four, emphasis in original).

In two cases, fathers who had both older and younger biological children from previous and current partnerships, distinguished between them in terms of closeness. While in one instance, older children were entirely excluded as family members, in both cases, their younger biological children from their current relationships were included as very close family. Both these fathers (aged sixty and fifty-one years) were no longer working outside the home – one was retired, one was unemployed. As a consequence, they both spent substantial amounts of time with their younger children, taking them to and from school or playgroup, cooking meals and so on. They were aware that this was in marked contrast to the amount and quality of daily contact they had had with their children from their first marriages. During their first marriages, one father had been in full-time employment; the other had spent many years in prison.

While both fathers considered these variable amounts of contact to be a significant contributory factor to the relative distance and closeness they felt towards their different children, it was clear that neither of them believed these differences could be wholly attributed to this factor. Again, although lack of contact with their older children was initially given as the reason for making these distinctions, with elaboration, more complex narratives began to unfold. This is apparent in the following extract, where a father's four, adult, biological children from his first marriage are entirely excluded as members of his family, although his oldest child does appear in the 'ambiguous' section of his chart:

'Since 1981, when my first wife emigrated with the kids, I didn't have anything to do with them right up until three years ago...I hadn't seen Ben and Micky since they were two and four, and then when I saw them they were fifteen and sixteen. Paul, the oldest, I did see once or twice, because he came back over here...I wasn't sure where to put him on here...And the reason he isn't in the circles is I don't trust Paul, and that's important...You know, if I talk to him in confidence, I can't trust him enough not to tell anybody. To me, when you've got a friend, you can tell them something and it'll go no further. And loyalty. I don't think he's got the loyalty for family I think he should have...And funnily enough, my first wife (*whose name also appears in the 'ambiguous' section*), she's very, very loyal' (Steve Thompson, aged fifty-one).

Sometimes parents were explicit in their awareness that infrequent contact followed from, rather than preceded, more distant relationships with their older biological children. This was most clearly evidenced in the accounts of the four parents for whom remarriage had followed the death of their previous partners. The negative reactions of older and adult children's to this event – and the reduction in contact which ensued – emerges as an important factor in parents' reasons for regarding them as less close than formerly. One man, whose two, adult, biological daughters were represented as less close than his first wife's sister and husband, provides an illustration of this:

'My first wife, Pamela died. She had cancer. That was the end of '94. We'd been married forty-three years. I remarried in '95. And Pamela's sister and husband, I suppose they're the closest to me on my side of the family. Pamela was ill for two years, and they gave me a lot of help. They were very supportive. But that relationship has always been very strong, since about 1950. And I suspect it was probably hardest for her sister to accept me getting married again. But she was very good about accepting Mary, my new wife. She was the one person who really helped me by accepting Mary. That's why I've put her in before the kids. The children didn't accept her so well' (George Gallagher, aged sixty-eight).

These comments suggest it is less the lack of contact than the unsatisfactory quality of the relationship which leads parents to exclude or distinguish between their adult, biological children. For these parents, the 'blood tie' – howsoever it is understood and defined, be it in bio-genetic or psychological terms – by itself is no longer an adequate basis for close or continued family membership. It appears from what is said here that parents hold expectations of their adult children – trust, loyalty, emotional support – those qualities of relationship which, as Steve Thompson states, resemble those he expects from his relationships with friends. Or, as Giddens (1991, 1992) argues, these data indicate that elements of the 'pure relationship' are present in these family relationships, too. Finally, in identifying family relationships with friendships, Steve Thompson raises an important issue regarding family relationships, a point addressed more fully in the final section on friends.

Bonds between stepparents and stepchildren

It was seen in the preceding section that while the so-called 'blood tie' emerges (in all but one case) from these data as a primary bond between parents and younger children, its overriding significance cannot be assumed. Parents state both implicitly and explicitly that shared experience, shared history and the overall quality of the relationship are key considerations in who is included or excluded as family, and where they are located in terms of closeness. Thus, as already noted, these data support Finch

and Mason's (1993) arguments that the degree of closeness accorded to different family members cannot be 'read off' in any straightforward way from their genealogical position. This is further supported in this section which explores the bonds between parents and their stepchildren.

Younger stepchildren

It was striking how stepparents' reflections on their relationships with their young stepchildren resembled those of parents on their younger biological children. In those instances where stepparents had appeared on the scene before a stepchild was born, or in the child's early infancy and childhood, these children were represented as very close members of their stepparents' family, a part of the core family unit discussed above. One stepfather describes his relationship with his eleven-year-old stepson thus:

'I think of Liam as my son. It's a continuous process. It's not something that one day he's not my son, and the next day he is my son...it's very kind of blurred. But the more involved we are, and the more we spend time together and that kind of thing...I introduce Liam as Liam. I wouldn't introduce him as my stepson...And if anything happened to Emma, I'd like me and Liam to stay together. And he might, I suppose, want to go and live with his biological father...Liam would have to make the decision in the end. Now it would hurt if he didn't want to stay with me, because that bond is very strong, even if anything were to happen to his Mum' (Roger Hunt, aged twenty-eight).

For Roger Hunt, the role of biology in forging enduring, close family relationships is less significant in this relationship than long-term commitment and support. While a number of parents in this study expressed similar sentiments, it was notable that in cases where parents subsequently had a 'child of their own' (Burgoyne and Clark, 1984) in their 'new' family, there was evidence of a slight tension or uncertainty in this regard, even though on their charts, stepparents visually represented their biological and

stepchildren as equal. In the following example, there are hints of these uncertainties in how another stepfather reflects upon his relationship with his stepson:

'I don't make a point of saying Joseph is my son or anything but that is how I think about him. It's the thing of time, how much time you spend with them and over what kind of timespan...And I would hope that Joseph would always think of me as Dad...And now there's Matthew his brother. ..I mean I try my best not to differentiate between the two of them...I think the thing is they're both at different stages. Matthew is only one and a half, a loving and happy little lad, smiling all the time. But when you talk to Joseph, he's grumpy (laughter). I mean I wouldn't say that I *never* think that they *are* different, but it's not something that preys on my mind' (Dave Hughes, aged twenty-seven).

What begins to emerge from the above example and emerges forcefully from the data more widely, is that stepparents not only have concerns about *treating* children equally, they also have concerns about *feeling* equally about them. This is a 'tall order' for any parent. Another father, who also positioned his biological daughter and three stepchildren equally in terms of their membership as close family, none the less distinguished between them in terms of how he 'got on' with them. He identified a number of reasons for making these distinctions, which he explains in the following way:

'I try to treat them the same as such, and I don't think I treat them any different to the way I treat Becky (his biological daughter)...I probably don't feel quite as close to the older two, Evie and Shelley, as I do to Sam and Becky. I think it's the age. I very much put Sam and Becky together. The two of them are going through their very early formative years, both of them with me. And again that's complicated. Because Becky's my own *blood* as it were, but I only see her two days a week. Sam *isn't* my blood but I see him seven days a week. And it kind of balances out. So it's very different when you take a child on from that age, from say when they're older, like the other two. And if at the

weekends I devote more time to Becky, that's not so much the blood thing, it's more to do with *time*, because she only has two days and he has seven. I'm harder on Sam, but I think that's more to do with gender, because he's harder work. But I'm sure that isn't because he isn't my blood. I'm sure it's a gender thing (Tom O'Hare, aged thirty-three, emphasis in original).

Again, this passage demonstrates parents' concerns about equality of treatment for their children, and the difficulty of achieving this given children's different needs, ages, and the differential time constraints surrounding contact. Tom O'Hare also raises the issue of gender, noting – as did parents in the preceding section – how stereotypically gendered behaviour in children can influence their parents' relationships with them.

In one case, a father did not include his two young stepsons as family. Nor did he include his older, biological children from a previous marriage. The only child he did include, and this was as a close member of his family, was his six year old, biological son from his current partnership. He is aware of contradictions in doing this:

'Seeing someone a lot is part of what makes family...But that's a contradiction isn't it with Dean and Gary 'cos I see a lot of them [*his stepsons*]...'cos to be honest, I've got to be totally honest, I don't think of Dean and Gary as family, possibly because they're not my own...I mean I love them to bits, but I don't think of them as mine, as family. It's different with Ryan 'cos he is, he's mine...But I haven't got the love for Dean and Gary that I've got for Ryan. It's just there with Ryan, regardless of whether I'm telling him off, putting him to bed or whatever. It's just still there...it's very hard to treat them all the same. But it's important to try and treat them all the same because of the jealousy and upset it would cause between the three of them...and I don't want that' (Steve Thompson, aged fifty-one).

The above examples highlight some of the tensions underlying the steprelationship. In particular they demonstrate some of the tensions experienced by stepparents in trying to

meet certain expectations, held both by themselves and others. As Ochiltree (1990) remarks, we expect a great deal from stepparents. We expect them to assume parental responsibilities, yet these parental roles and responsibilities are not clearly-defined (Walker, 1992a). From what is said by parents in this study, it is clear that from an early age, children carry memories and histories from their 'old' families into their 'new' family situations. Parents recognise this and acknowledge the wider frame of reference such children have. In these circumstances, as Ochiltree (1990) says, 'instant' love between even relatively young stepchildren and their stepparents is both unlikely and unrealistic.

Together the above passages show a complex interweaving of factors – age, gender, durations of relationships – which together form the basis of qualitatively different relationships between parents and their younger stepchildren. This mirrors findings in the section above where qualitatively different relationships also emerge in relationships between parents and younger biological children. Evidence from family studies more widely indicates that such differences are present in all families (see Morgan, 1996). However, given the specifically negative discourses surrounding stepparents, it is unsurprising that they, in particular, feel unsafe or uneasy, not only about disclosing these differences, but about acknowledging their existence in the first place. This reluctance is especially marked when the children concerned are young. Again, as was argued in the previous chapter, it is clear that people's reflections on their reordered family relationships are inseparable from their moral thinking about these issues.

Older stepchildren

In analysing relationships between parents and their *older* stepchildren, there are striking similarities with what emerged between parents and their older *biological* children. In the same way some parents distinguished between their older biological children in terms of how closely, if at all, they include them as family members, stepparents, too, are more likely to distinguish between their older stepchildren in the same way. This did not emerge as a pattern in relationships between parents and younger children. In other words, a more complex picture emerges, one in which *both parents and children*

have expectations concerning the quality of relationship between them. This is well articulated by Rachel Cunningham, where she describes her relationships with her two stepsons, David aged sixteen years, and Jeff who is twenty-seven:

‘I’ve put David there about the same as my brother. He’s quite significant...He’s been quite a big part of my life and we get on very well. I’ve known him since he was a little boy, since he was eight (long pause)...Jeff, Mike’s older son, em, he would be (long pause)...No, (long pause) I don’t include him. No (laughter). I thought ‘yes’ I would, because I see him more than these people whom I hardly ever see. And part of what family is, is contact. But I don’t have any real *relationship* with him, any emotional connection. He’d already left home when I married Mike. And before he left home he was *rarely* around, so I didn’t really know him at all. And he’s not very close to Mike. He sort of comes up occasionally, usually when he needs something...But when everything’s fine in his day-to-day life, we don’t hear a word’ (Rachel Cunningham, aged thirty-two, emphasis in original).

There are resonances in Rachel Cunningham’s comments of what parents said earlier about their relationships with older biological children - particularly in their indication that elements of the ‘pure’ relationship’ are present in a variety of family relationships. Stepparents with older stepchildren often cited a lack of emotional connection or emotional ties as the reason they positioned them further out than their biological children or younger stepchildren. Further, if the ‘two-way’, mutual quality of a relationship is important, then time shared is perceived as an important factor in determining how the quality of that relationship develops. Given the emphasis placed on shared history throughout this discussion, it is unsurprising that here, too, it emerges as an important factor – or even a prerequisite – in allowing relationships with older stepchildren to develop in a mutually satisfying way. In decisions to include or exclude someone as a family member, relationship and shared history each play a major role.

An emphasis on the importance and *continuing* significance of shared history surfaces again in the context of those who repartnered following the death of a previous partner.

In the same way that this created tensions in relationships between parents and their older biological children, it emerges, too, as an explicit cause of friction between parents and older stepchildren. In the following extract, Mary Gallagher explains how this tension makes it impossible to include her three adult stepdaughters as family:

‘I would if they’d let me (laughter). I mean it is very hard for them...They were very close to their mother. It was only sort of six months after she died that George asked me to marry him. So that’s why. I think we just need time. I’ve only met two of them. We’re trying to work at it and we keep in communication as far as we can, you know, presents to grandchildren, birthday cards’ (Mary Gallagher, aged fifty).

Here, the brevity of the shared history between stepparent and stepchildren cannot begin to assert a significance to match the twenty or thirty years these adult children shared with their biological mother. Not only that, but it is clear that an appropriate length of time is not perceived to have elapsed between the ‘ending’ of one family history and the ‘beginning’ of another. It is interesting that for the four people in this study who had been bereaved, the ‘one year of mourning’ associated with dominant or traditional moral discourse continues to be influential. For three of the five people who had been widowed, repartnering within the first year had created serious difficulties between themselves and their new partners’ families.

The absence of shared history thus helps to explain why the majority of parents whose stepchildren were already adults when they arrived on the scene, tended to place them ‘further out’ in terms of closeness than their biological children, or (as in the case of Rachel Cunningham above), to exclude them altogether. However, there was one notable exception to this. In contrast to the above examples, Meg Chandler (see opening comment to Chapter 2) explains that it is precisely because her relationship with her adult, biological daughter is not ‘two-way’ – in spite of the long history they share - that she regards her as a less close family member than her adult stepdaughter.

Arguably, the significance of Meg Chandler’s case lies not only – or indeed primarily – in its affirmation of the steprelationship, but in the range of contradictory claims it

makes concerning what constitutes family. Given the emotional, practical and financial investments they have made in building stepfamily relationships, parents in stepfamilies are unlikely to overstate the significance of biological ties between parents and children at the cost of underplaying the important role played in their children's lives by social or step- ties. In addition parents also voiced concerns about fairness and the importance of equal regard and treatment for children (biological and step-). Moreover, it is possible that negative discourses around stepfamilies which focus on stereotypes of 'wicked stepmothers' and 'abusing stepfathers' make it seem difficult or even 'dangerous' for stepparents to make distinctions in terms of 'how close' they feel towards their step- and biological children. These concerns were noticeably more marked in the discussion of younger stepchildren whose status is perceived as especially vulnerable.

Finally, in addition to the significance of emotional connection and shared history, it is evident from the above examples that geographical distance is also an important factor in how relationships between parents and their older stepchildren develop (as it does in relationships between parents and biological children). This has of course been noted in a number of family studies (Finch, 1989; Finch and Mason, 1991; Finch and Mason, 1993). Stepfamily arrangements coming into existence when children are adult inevitably means their 'shared history' is of a briefer duration. The difficulties of developing close relationships are then compounded by adult children's geographical mobility and distance. This is made explicit in the following extract where a stepfather reflects on his relationships with his adult stepdaughters:

'I'm closer to Mary's daughter, Annie, who is quieter, very shy. I spent a lot of time with her when she was getting a place of her own. It was me went with her to see the flats. So that sort of bonded us...But Helen, her sister, is a completely different kettle of fish, quite aggressive...Though in a way, she's closer now, a lot better now than she was before...She's still less close than Annie, but she lives further away and that makes a difference in the closeness...So there is a relationship with Helen but I can't develop it because of the geographical distance. It's personality as well. It's geography and personality...Annie and Helen are chalk and

cheese. Just as different in a way as my three daughters' (George Gallagher, aged sixty-eight).

In his last two sentences, George Gallagher makes a crucial point about stepfamily relationships. Stepchildren, like biological children have different personalities, needs and interests. Indeed, it was striking how often the views of both stepparent and biological parent converged on these points in relation to a specific child. Children, younger and older, are not passive receivers in relationship, whether this be with stepkin or biological kin. They are active in the processes of creating kinship. Claiming kinship is a two-way process for parents and children.

Parents' recognition of this illuminates and reinforces their moral thinking about relationships – their responsibilities and commitment to their children's welfare – discussed in the preceding chapter. It is clear, as some stepfathers said, that in contemplating the choices facing them, the closeness and protectiveness felt by mothers towards their children leaves little room for manoeuvre as far as the moral dimensions of these relationships are concerned. Responsibilities and commitments in relation to children are an inescapable feature of the whole relationship 'package'. Again, they illustrate how children cannot be understood as mere onlookers to the 'moral party' (Bauman, 1993, 1995), but rather how they are, and remain, central to it.

Former partnership ties

It emerges clearly from these data that ties with former partners and their families present people with some of their most difficult dilemmas in terms of reformulating their ideas on 'family' and family relationships. It is around these relationships, and the moral and emotional issues they raise, that the greatest diversity of opinion and understanding exists. It is here that contradictory discourses and the contradictory impulses they give rise to, lie uneasily juxtaposed. Thus, desires to rescue what is 'good' in a relationship may run with demands to 'leave it all behind'. The myths, memories and losses of the marriage that ends in death rest uneasily alongside those associated with marriages which end in divorce. Commitments to 'new' family

relationships must be developed while retaining firm loyalties to 'old' ones. It was shown through some of the illustrative examples in Chapter 4 that parents in stepfamilies are only too aware that it is 'wishful thinking' to assume that disengagement from former relationships can be effected easily and resolutely. Often, the link between these contradictory impulses is children, and the losses or gains entailed for them in choosing one line of thinking or one course of action over another.

While the majority of those interviewed specifically excluded former partners as members of their families, a minority (seven out of thirty people) did include them. Of these, four had been divorced; three had been widowed. In the following extract, Charlie Summers, divorced from his first wife, reflects upon why he still includes her as family:

'And that's Becky, my first wife...I've put her in capitals there 'cos I can't, I (pause) em, I don't know where to place her...I, I find it very difficult. I certainly can't do what a lot of people do, and talk about my 'ex'. I find that very uncomfortable, and I think, I don't think I'm easy with the nature of me and Becky really...So I've deliberately used capitals 'cos it's very large...I don't feel it's settled, or in order, or resolved...Which is why her name straddles these circles' (Charlie Summers, aged fifty-three).

Later in his interview, Charlie Summers contrasts the tensions which continue to exist between himself and his former partner with the kind of relationship he perceives to exist between his current partner and her first husband:

'Ros talks to her former husband, Tony - he rang up the other day and wanted to talk to one of the children. There was this conversation going on, and it was a very mutual conversation, no tensions or anything. I mean I can't but be aware of the fact that although this is now a very neutral conversation, that actually this bloke (laughs) was the centre of her life for twenty-five years or more...And I'm not worried as I might have been in other relationships that she's still got some hankering to be with him...But it's peculiar (laughs) isn't it, that there's this man

with whom she shares this life history. You can't pretend it isn't there. It's there, as it is with me and Becky...And I suspect there are limits to what you can do by talking about it. I mean it just is *there*' (Charlie Summers, aged fifty-three, emphasis in original).

These extracts suggest that for Charlie Summers, it is the inescapable fact of a shared history which leads him to include his first wife as family. In his view, the impact of shared history is something which cannot be erased or 'talked' away. And this is so, whether – as in his case – aspects of the former relationship remain unsettled or unresolved, or, as is the case with his new partner and her ex husband, things appear 'neutral', with 'no tensions'. In the following example, Rachel Cunningham, divorced and now remarried, makes similar observations about the significance of shared history and some of the tensions this may raise with new partners. Despite these difficulties she continues to include her first husband as fairly close (fourth circle) family:

'Chris is my first husband. We still keep in touch but I think that's more to do with the fact that a large part of my life was bound up with this person...As time goes on...we keep in touch less. So gradually, I think he'll probably go, move outwards (laughter). But he's still quite a significant person, though we were married only four or five years. We've known each other a long time, and they were kind of formative years. We usually ring up. We used to be quite close after we separated, but since he got another partner it's slightly more difficult. I always feel she might not like it. Mike (respondent's current husband) finds it unusual...I don't think he minds but I don't think he particularly likes it (laughter)...Chris didn't come to our wedding. I think Mike would have drawn the line there (laughter). I wouldn't have minded if he'd been there, but I didn't feel strongly about it. It's difficult, people don't talk about it' (Rachel Cunningham, aged thirty-two).

The above two extracts testify to an awkwardness in handling relationships with former partners, even where these appear to be straightforward. The presence of new partners contributes in some way to this uneasiness, although neither Charlie Summers nor

Rachel Cunningham are quite clear as to why this is. There are hints that what people sometimes feel about their former partners is at odds with what they and others think they 'ought' to feel in these situations. What they *do* both know, and this is supported by what others in this study say, is that there are social constraints, often subtle and difficult to identify, which inhibit discussion of these issues in a more open way. Pressure from current partners is only one direction from which constraints may be felt.

Another striking feature suggested by what people are saying here concerns the quality of relationship between those adults most immediately concerned. It is difficult to detect the antagonisms and adversarial qualities assumed by many to be an inevitable feature of post-separation or post-divorce relationships. This is not to suggest that all those interviewed conformed to this model of relationship. On the other hand, open hostility emerged on only one occasion. That the above examples are taken from interviews with people whose experiences of separation and divorce had occurred several years earlier is probably an important factor. It is important to draw attention to these aspects of relationships, given, as Morgan (1996) also argues, many critiques of 'the family' and much of the research literature on divorce ignores, or pays scant attention to these more positive aspects of family life. And if, as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) argue, there are changes in process and people are learning new ways of living together and apart, it is unsurprising that transitions which – uncommonly it seems – include less confrontational and adversarial forms of relationship with former partners, may prove uneasy or awkward for people to handle.

What is also interesting to note, is that while the presence or absence of conflict between former partners can be related to how contact is handled, there is no straightforward connection – as one might possibly expect there to be – between either conflict or contact and the inclusion or exclusion of someone as a family member. Often, those whose contact arrangements were working well, were also those who explicitly and emphatically excluded their former partners as family, regardless of whether this relationship was conflictual. It is, moreover, difficult to pinpoint or isolate the issues which feed these exclusionary processes. On the whole, people were unable or reluctant to elaborate upon them. If people had not already broached the topic, the question was

asked 'Would you include your former partner as family?' The commonest response was an emphatic 'No' or 'No, not at all'. Sometimes, these brief replies were amplified:

'...there's no emotional attachment whatsoever...Three years ago...she would have been on this' (Jamie Singleton, aged thirty).

Here, emotional connection or attachment again emerges – as it did in earlier sections of this chapter – as a key element in family relationships. And occasionally, as this passage also illustrates, people draw attention to the fact that if former partners are not included at the point of interview, they would have been had the interview taken place some time earlier. Mary Gallagher makes this point in the following passage:

'...because when you're on your own, OK, you've got friends, but you don't move on very much...I just couldn't let go for a long time...thinking that things might alter...I did think of him as family then. But then the new relationship comes along, and suddenly you think 'Oh, I can let go of that now (laughter). This has come and this is better (laughter). But yeah, I would probably, definitely have put him in then as family (Mary Gallagher, aged fifty).

What the above two examples suggest is that inclusion or exclusion of former partners as family is linked in part to the quality of emotional engagement or cut-off which currently exists between them. And as Mary Gallagher implies, this in turn may be linked to whether or not former partners have yet moved into another significant relationship. However, it is not only the current emotional state of play which matters. Inclusionary and exclusionary processes revolve around a number of issues. These included the recognition that former partners continue to be the parents of their children; consideration of former partners' attitudes towards contact with those children; the quality of the relationship between former partners at earlier stages in its history; the grounds on which that relationship had been ended and by whom; the kinds of support – practical and financial – former partners currently offer. These issues also appeared to influence people's decisions to include former partners in the ambiguous section of the chart.

Many of these examples are important, too, in their allusions to how someone's position in a family may gradually 'move outwards', demonstrating as this does people's awareness of how things can shift and change with family attachments. On the basis of data in this study, it is in connection with former partnership ties that awareness of this possibility is most marked. However, if these examples indicate certain contingencies in people's thinking about their reordered family relationships, they also demonstrate, contrary to central tenets of Giddens' (1991, 1992) and Bauman's (1993, 1995) arguments, that intimate relationships continue to have an impact on partners' lives long beyond the point of separation. Specifically, these data undermine his claims that relationships are continued only as long as each person derives satisfactions from them.

Many of the above examples, together with what has been said in earlier chapters, suggests that mutual satisfactions have long since disappeared. What remains is the inescapable fact of shared history, a huge part of which is children. Although the examples above do not specifically allude to the significance of children in parents' decisions to include their former partners as family, it is a link which is made explicit elsewhere in their interviews, as well as in those of other respondents. The following provides an illustration of this point:

'I think she's probably achieved her position now in my little universe (*laughs, indicating chart*)...I'm more likely to think of her as the mother of Jeff and David than my 'ex' or 'former' wife, and *therefore* inextricably linked to me through them, because she'll always be their mother...Inevitably I shall hear less about her and what she's doing, I guess. But we do see each other through the children. We have to...So you can't wish them *away* when they're *not*. That's wishful thinking' (Mike Morton, aged fifty-four, emphasis in original).

In the case of Mike Morton, as with others, it is precisely the link between his children and their mother which leads him, not only to include her as a member of his family, but also – and amongst those who had divorced, this was exceptional – to reject notions of any change or gradual drift outwards in her position there. For him, remarriage and a

new partner are not perceived as justifiable reasons for altering this. Thus, while there is evidence here and elsewhere to support Giddens' argument that relationships are currently based on 'confluent love', a contingent love which jars with the 'forever' qualities of romantic love, there is much, too, which contradicts these claims or requires some modification. As Smart has stated in connection with her own research with families, 'children stop confluent love in its tracks' (1997).

Former partners who have died

Discourses around marriages which end in death - whether enshrined in inheritance law, informing the manuals of 'self-help' literature, or articulated through well-meaning friends and relatives - all carry assumptions that because the death of a partner is unsought, these unions are inherently harmonious and trouble-free. People whose marriages last until death are placed in a different moral category from those whose marriages end in separation and divorce. Bauman's arguments on postmodern intimacy which formed the basis of critical analysis in Chapter 4, exemplify this approach. Morally, the bereaved are discursively constituted as resilient, committed and caring, while those who separate and divorce are flighty, irresponsible and self seeking. It follows that those who seek the comforts of another relationship following bereavement, are perceived as taking a wholly appropriate course of action. And it is assumed, again, that somehow these new unions will be comparatively straightforward and unproblematic.

At the same time, as will become clear in the course of this discussion, there are conditions attached to this moral approbation. It is interesting to note, therefore, that in handling relationships with the families of their former partners, no fewer tensions were evident amongst this group than amongst those who had separated and divorced. Rather it is in the nature of these tensions that differences between these groups may be noted. Those who repartner following bereavement thus face social pressures of a different kind. It was notable how for three of the four respondents in this study who had been widowed, inclusion of their previous partners as close family members was immediate and spontaneous, with no suggestion, moreover, of the possibility of a gradual 'move

outwards'. An important factor here appeared to be the duration of a particular relationship:

'Can I put my first wife in the same circle as myself and my second wife?...We'd been married forty-eight years...' (George Gallagher, aged sixty-eight).

At the same time, it is clear from what emerges later in this (and other) interviews, that it is not solely or primarily the duration of a relationship which leads people to include their deceased partners as family. Nick Carter, whose first wife died two years earlier at the age of forty-six, is now remarried to Jenny:

'...although my relationship with my first wife was not perfect (pause), you know I miss her and I love her still. And I know the children loved her too...It's difficult for people to realise that just because I'm loving Jenny, it doesn't mean I'm not loving Clare, too' (Nick Carter, aged forty-two).

Thus, as others also insisted, if first marriages were not 'perfect', they were none the less remembered as 'happy' or 'good'. It is the quality of relationship shared with first partners, together with links to them through their children, which leads people to include partners who have died as family. This relates to earlier findings, where similar reasons for including former partners were given by those who had separated and divorced. Yet, as the above passage also indicates, loving *two* partners is socially problematic. A recurrent theme during Nick Carter's interview was the *mismatch* he perceived between his own understandings and experiences of the processes of bereavement and those of other people. These were most marked between himself and members of his first wife's family (whom he continues to include as members of his). As stated earlier, while people are generally sympathetic to those who repartner under these circumstances, this sympathy is not, he makes clear, unconditional:

'Sasha, my first wife was one of six children. I view them all the same but more remote than other members of my family...That's because of

their attitude towards me since I've remarried. I've been excommunicated (laughter)...I think it's basically all about time and the perceived quickness of my remarriage...It really hurts...It makes me angry, too...' (Nick Carter, aged forty-two).

For those in this study who have repartnered following bereavement, it is, as Nick Carter describes above, the perceived quickness with which they move into another relationship which is the commonest cause of tension between themselves and their former partners' families. This, together with what emerged among those who had separated and divorced, suggests that it is in the handling of *memories* that one of the major differences between these groups lies. By whatever routes people have arrived at their current partnership status, whether it be through separation, divorce or the death of a partner, memories are integral to understanding these transitions. This is demonstrated during interview, when descriptions of partnership histories necessarily entail processes of recall.

In contrast to those who separate and divorce, those who are widowed often have memories and relationships they – and their families – wish to celebrate and recall. Respondents described these memories as 'good' or 'excellent'. And ironically, it is because these are 'good' and the 'imaginary co-presence' (Urry, 1990) of former partners is so powerfully sustained, that tensions arise. And as was seen above these tensions sometimes triggered a less close relationship between adult children and a newly remarried biological parent. Nor are the difficulties in dealing with this imaginary co-presence confined to former partners' families. Tensions also surface between current partners.

On the basis of these data, then, marriage even where it lasts till death, carries no automatic guarantee that those party to it will include each other as family members. Similarly, no more can it be assumed that separation and divorce automatically entail exclusion of former partners as family. As a number of writers (Cancian, 1987; Clark et al, 1991; Baber and Allen, 1992; Allan, 1996) argue, marriage as an institution appears to be evolving, moving from a social and legal act of contract to a symbol of personal commitment (Allan, 1996:11). Elements of the 'pure relationship' and 'confluent love'

– mutual satisfaction, emotional congruence, trust – constitute some of the major expectations people have about contemporary intimate relationships (Giddens, 1991, 1992). In the section which follows, it will be seen that it is precisely the presence of these elements in close friendships which leads people to include friends, too, as family.

Finally, this section has focused on ties between former *partners*. It should be noted, however, that ties with former partners' *families* also emerge as significant. It is not within the scope of the current discussion to explore these many relationships in equivalent detail. It may be noted, however, that for eight out of thirty people interviewed, *former partners' sisters* were named as those whose changed status following separation or divorce was a cause for regret because of the loss of relationship entailed. Often, they were still included as family. Others included former parents-in-law, speaking of their continued support and relationship both with themselves and with their grandchildren. Again, in the way people reflect upon these issues their 'moral voices' (Hekman, 1995) are clearly heard. Their 'moral parties' (Bauman, 1993, 1995), as I argued in Chapter 4 include a range of people for whom they feel a sense of responsibility and commitment.

Friends as family

In this final section, attention is drawn to the significance of friends in people's reformulated ideas of family relationships. It was shown in Chapter 2 that normative assumptions about 'family' and 'friends' have focused on the notion of 'choice' as one of the key distinguishing features of these relationships – friends can be chosen, family cannot. This dichotomous way of thinking about these relationships is rejected by parents in this study. As I showed in chapter 2 some writers (Weston, 1991) have shown that family relationships cannot or do not rely solely on bio-genetic or legal connections for their social recognition. In these contexts people rely heavily on friends for membership. In addition, a focus on friend as family emphasises the importance of commitments and obligations built up over time (1993).

Together, these different studies make important contributions to understanding the processes through which friends feature in stepfamily relationships. It was immediately striking how gender was a significant factor in this regard. Only one out of fifteen men interviewed included friends as family. By contrast, almost all the women included friends. And for a number of these women, friends were identified as very close members of their family, often as 'sisters'. It was suggested above that differences associated with the post-divorce biographies of women and men, particularly in relation to their levels of parental responsibilities, means that women often spend several years 'living on their own with the children' – that is, living with children but without a partner.

In this, women have neither the possibility of leading the independent lifestyle associated with single people, nor the shared lifestyle of the stereotypical couple. In these situations, as Stacey (1991) also found in her study of post-divorce families in California, women have to be resourceful in mobilising other forms of support. Often, this exceptional and unconditional support comes from other women. The significance of these friendships for people is well captured by Joan Harker:

'I feel close to her. I mean there has been a long period during which we didn't see each other, but I feel close because I feel she knows me and we can talk about anything. And even if I'd done something really wrong, I mean I've no sisters, but I feel it's like having a sister...I mean if something happened, I'd feel she was always there. I remember when I was alone, before Bob, she was very supportive and used to come and visit me in the evenings. But we go back a long way. We've known each other through our marriages, our separations and divorces. I feel I wouldn't have to say anything if I just popped up. I could just say, 'I feel really awful' (Joan Harker, aged forty-eight).

In some respects friends seem to take on the role of partners. It is clear that in their post-separation or post-divorce lives, many women find themselves in situations where they have maximum responsibility without a corresponding degree of autonomy and freedom. In the absence of partners and other family members, they are able to seek out

other women, often in similar situations, who may be relied upon and called upon in good times and bad. As one woman said, such friends are crucial for enabling one to ‘climb out of the situation’. And it is this, the unconditional support these friends offer – practical, emotional and sometimes financial – which leads some people to regard them, not only *like* family, but sometimes *as* family.

What also emerges is that the arrival of another partner on the scene invariably signalled changes to these relationships, ostensibly because contact at its previously high level could not be maintained. While reduced contact was partially accounted for by geographical distance (a factor which emerged earlier in this chapter), more often there were other constraints, too. Deb Casson’s reflections on these, quoted at some length in the extract which follows, capture the experiences of a number of women in this study at the point they moved into another significant relationship with a man:

‘It’s also because of my relationship with John...When Kath and I have been on the ‘phone at eleven or twelve o’clock at night for an hour, John (laughter) would be in bed next to me, and he’d either want to be cuddling or reading his book, and I’d be annoying him by laughing or giggling on the ‘phone, or moaning on. So at times, I’d go downstairs. But basically Kath stopped phoning because I think she caught on I was a bit on edge. It’s very difficult to weigh up the two relationships and not have jealousy. If it hadn’t been for John, I think things would have been very different. We’d be ‘phoning a lot more...And if I was still living in Manchester, there would be a lot more popping in to see each other’ (Deb Casson, aged forty-eight, emphasis in original).

Although these friendships become more attenuated over time, as women move into longer term relationships with new partners, these data do not suggest in any straightforward way, a corresponding decrease in their emotional significance for the parties involved. In this respect, these relationships may be compared with those between parents and their adult children. Decreasing amounts of contact as children leave home or move into relationships with partners do not necessarily imply a decrease in emotional closeness or significance. In other ways, the changes in women’s

friendships described above - the jealousies and uncertainties - are more readily associated with relationship change between *partners*. Howsoever they may be characterised, these relationships continue to be regarded as emotionally rewarding, even if subject to geographical and other constraints.

As with many family relationships, the history shared by these friends continues to exert a powerful hold on the present. It is the quality of relationship this shared history evokes – loyalty, trust, and unconditional acceptance – which provides the major impulse towards including these friends as family. As Baber and Allen (1992) argue, a postmodern analysis of women's experience in families requires critical reconsideration of marriage and a recognition that women's intimate relationships are not static or fixed. Evidence on women's friendships and extra-marital relationships suggests their primary emotional attachment is not necessarily with their husbands or partners (Baber and Allen, 1992).

The above examples are important for the insights they offer into how women handle all their family relationships. Separation, divorce and repartnering are not regarded as sufficient reasons in themselves for severance from relationships. In this respect, women's actions provide qualified support for Giddens' arguments on 'pure relationships'. While it cannot be said – given the continuing significance and sense of commitment a shared history appears to impose – that these relationships are continued 'purely for their own sake', it is the case that their continued existence is not contingent upon legal or other definitions of their status, but on the mutual, if changing, satisfactions they continue to provide for the parties concerned.

At the same time, as Deb Casson indicates above, the commitments generated by these friendships are held in tension with those emerging from the new relationships or partnerships into which women may subsequently move. Trying to achieve a satisfactory balance is problematic and may be represented as part of women's ongoing struggle to create or sustain a 'life of their own' alongside other family relationships and commitments. Women's relationship trajectories, embedded as these are in children's lives and the family relationships associated with them, do not tend towards the

unconnected, 'free-floating' destinations suggested by Giddens (1991, 1992) in a 'reflexive project of the self'.

Conclusion

It has been argued in this chapter that experiences of separation, divorce and repartnering 'force' people to be reflexive about their social ties (Beck, 1992). Women in particular emerge as creative and resourceful in mobilising relationship resources where they can and choose to. There is, too, evidence from these data to lend some support to Giddens' (1991, 1992) claims that elements of the 'pure relationship' are now present and discernible in a number of family relationships. While Giddens specifies the relationship between stepparents and their adult stepchildren as that which most exemplifies this shift – and this is supported by what was said in the section on step-ties – he suggests, as this analysis also demonstrates, that elements of the pure relationship may also be identified in relationships between parents and their older biological children. Further, it is precisely the presence of these qualities in their relationship with former partners and friends, which leads people to include them as family, too. While 'blood' and 'shared history' emerge as key elements of 'family', a number of other factors emerge as important too – mutuality, trust, loyalty, unconditional support and contact. It has also been shown that people's definitions, understandings and expectations of 'family' are inseparable from their moral thinking on this subject, particularly in relation to younger children. These concerns are carried through into the next chapter on contact.

Chapter 6

Contact:

Reaching for a Collaborative Ethic

‘All I could think about is what’s best for the children really...I didn’t want to stop him seeing them...I think you’re torn sometimes because you just want to cocoon yourselves in an airy-fairy way. But you know it can’t be. You do know they’ve got a history...’ (Linda Townsend, aged thirty-five).

Introduction

Bauman suggests that moral choice is both our ‘bane and chance’ in contemporary life (1995: 8). In confronting the choice between good and evil, there is an inherent ambivalence: the possibility of making a ‘wrong’ or unwise choice. Moral dilemmas have no ready-made solutions. The necessity of choice comes with no certainty of making the best choice. Attempts to do ‘good’ must be undertaken with no guarantees that either the intentions or the results are good. Uncertain outcomes, unintended consequences do not promise a comfortable life. For Bauman morality is full of internal contradictions. Few moral choices are unambiguously good, the majority are made between contradictory impulses (1993: 10-13; 1995: 4-7). In this study, these ideas are vividly realised in how parents reflect upon and handle the issue of ‘contact’: contact between a child and her or his non-resident, biological parent. If the preceding chapter revealed some certainty in parents’ understandings of responsibility and commitment in relation to their children’s welfare, this chapter reveals their ambivalence and uncertainty as to how these values or ‘principled positions’ (Connor, 1993) are to be translated into practice.

While there exists a variety of routes to setting up and establishing arrangements for contact between children and their biological parents, these are unlikely to specify (except in cases where residency and/or contact is contested) more than the frequency and duration of that contact. In other words, the ‘statements of arrangements’ for children which are currently drawn up in the event of divorce do not contain detailed directives on how, where and by whom this contact is to be negotiated, mediated and maintained. Given, as I showed in Chapter 5, that data from this and other studies (Maclean, 1991) indicate that in the event of separation and divorce, children are most likely to reside with their biological mothers, it is women who are most likely to be the mediators and maintainers of contact, often over a period of years.

These arrangements have implications for all family members, particularly when ‘newcomers’ – new partners and their children – appear on the scene. Pre-existing arrangements for contact which worked poorly, adequately or well may have to be renegotiated or reworked in the light of ‘new’ family formation. It will be seen that the processes through which decisions about contact are made are not morally neutral; they are morally weighted in complex ways according to how the relationships at their centre are prioritised. Specifically, while responsibility for the child remains pivotal, it is recognised that the balance of that responsibility shifts over time as children develop their own capacities for making (morally) informed decisions about who and what is in their best interests.

Contact: ‘bane and chance’

Given that biological and step- parents have their own wants, needs and interests to consider – in relation to themselves as well as to the children they ‘share’ – and given that these may not coincide, it is clear that contact has the potential for highlighting any tensions in this regard and for being a disruptive force within a particular relationship field. In their study of stepfamily relationships in Sheffield, Burgoyne and Clark (1984) found that many stepfamilies had a fundamental desire to ‘start over’ or make ‘a fresh start’ as a ‘new family’. Some fifteen years later, this desire emerges as a similarly important goal in relation to men and women in this study. Contact inevitably militates

against the achievement of such goals. Various descriptions by respondents as 'stressful', a 'hassle', or more vividly, as a 'a spanner in the works of family life', it is clear that it is precisely in its potential for disruption that contact may be characterised as the 'bane' of stepfamily life. One stepfather describes his feelings thus:

'I suppose in my heart of hearts, I mean I think anyone would prefer the contact not to happen (long pause). I mean I don't mind. Well I *do* mind him coming round but only because I don't like him (laughter). It's not because I resent Sam going off with him. That's up to Sam. Until he tells us he doesn't want to go, then we have to assume that he does want to go...I can't do anything about it...But it's a *hassle*. You have to fit in round him...And it'll be months between visits...I feel obliged for Jane's sake to be here when he comes. She finds it difficult to see him...I mean I feel on the periphery when he comes in, because there's no relationship between him and me. It's difficult, yeah...And these are things you don't normally talk about to anyone' (Roger Hunt, aged twenty-eight, emphasis in original).

Even where relations between current and former partners appear to be amicable, there is scope for tensions of a different nature to surface:

'I hate it honestly (laughs)...They completely change. They're allowed to stay up until ten or eleven o'clock at night...They've got two sets of values. If I could stop them going, yes I would. Then they'd just have one set of rules...And I get on all right with Bill, their Dad. He's all right in his own way...' (Steve Thompson, aged fifty-one).

Moreover, even in those cases where contact had never, or no longer, featured as part of a family's life (for example, where children were adults and had now left home), its disruptive potential was still recognised in comments such as 'I just always wonder how people manage and cope' or 'I don't know how some stepparents cope with that contact'. Martin Hunt, a stepfather for whom contact was a short-lived feature of his life some fourteen years ago recalls it in the following terms:

‘Well, just after I moved in, they did have some contact, but only about twice...I mean I wasn’t resentful at the time, because at the end of the day, I was the *new* partner, if you like. But now after all these years (pause), I would not be able to handle any contact between Jason and his dad, his biological father. It would be like a kick in the teeth. Basically I’ve brought Jason up, and then, if he’s seeing his biological father, it would, I would feel like I’d been kicked in the teeth (long pause)...And you can imagine all the problems you could get, where I tell Jason to do something and he says ‘No, you’re not my Dad, I’m not going to’. You know that would be *very* hurtful. Yeah, I would feel very hurt. ‘Cos although there might not be any problem, it might be fine, I couldn’t see it, not really...It would upset our family life. It’d be like throwing a spanner in the works’ (Martin Hunt, aged thirty-one).

These different comments raise a number of points. First, it is evident here (as it is in the data more widely) that contact between children and their non-resident, biological parents does indeed entail some degree of intrusion by former partners into the ‘new’ family’s domestic space and a disruption of both long-term and more recently established routines and practices. These may take the form of visits, telephone calls or, as Steve Thompson explains, different sets of values and ground rules.

Secondly, it emerges that it is not only the practical and organisational aspects of contact which have to be worked at, but people’s feelings and emotions too. Disruption and intrusion are not only to be understood in terms of former partners’ access to the *household* space of the ‘new’ family; they signify, too, their access to the *affective* space of that family. For many, it is this emotional dimension which represents the most significant hurdle to overcome when confronted with choices about how to handle contact. As Roger Hunt suggests above, feelings of hurt, resentment or anger may be compounded by perceptions that ‘these are feelings you don’t normally talk about’ because in some way they fall short of what the respondents as well as others may consider acceptable or appropriate. Moral pressures to find space for the emotional claims of former partners sit uneasily with current partners’ hopes that space might also be found for their own.

Thirdly, it is clear from the above examples that new partners feel constrained to 'fit round' and support existing contact arrangements, while at the same time being 'on the periphery' of them. This suggests new partners perceive that their arrival on the scene has little impact. In reality, as will become apparent in the course of this discussion, arrival of a new partner does effect some discernible shifts in people's positions, although this cannot be visualised crudely in terms of their movement from periphery to centre or vice versa. That these shifts are often gradual suggests another reason why they may not be apparent to those most recently involved. It cannot be assumed, therefore, that feelings of having to 'fit round' other people's priorities are confined solely to newcomers on the scene. There is some evidence that these feelings, and the tensions and discontents associated with them, feature amongst 'old' partners too. This suggests, although it cannot be stated with certainty, that the non-resident biological parents associated with these families may share these feelings too. This poses a moral dilemma for both step- and biological parents in terms of deciding who, if anyone, should stand 'on the periphery' when it comes to decisions about contact.

Finally, given these difficulties, it is striking that in all cases where arrangements for contact were currently in place, respondents' views about these were not wholly or straightforwardly negative, but elicited a decidedly ambivalent response. If parents' views about contact can be understood as existing along a continuum between those who would like it to continue and those who would like it to cease, all parents, both biological and step-, were adamant that to stop it or obstruct it would be wrong. This was so (as in the examples above), even in cases where the 'ideal' situation was envisaged as a complete loss of contact:

'My ideal would be if Joseph lost contact with Alan. But I know I can't really say that. That's their decision and it would be wrong of me to push that in any way...But if I had the choice...(laughter)' (Dave Hughes, aged twenty-seven).

Exceptions to the view that impeding contact is 'wrong' arose only in limited and specific contexts. First, they arose in one case where contact had already ceased some years previously (see comment by Martin Hunt above). Secondly, they arose in two situations where children had themselves decided they wished contact to cease (see

below). Thirdly, absence of contact was justified in two cases where it was perceived by the biological mother that either herself or her child was at risk from violence. Even then, in one of these cases, an effort was made to accommodate contact in some mutually acceptable form:

‘I was having my first night out after Amy was born and her dad came over and asked me ‘Do you know if she’s mine yet?’. ‘Cos she hadn’t got her colour then and the other bloke I was seeing was white. And the next minute, his new girlfriend glassed me. I had a bottle over my head and I was on the floor. And I thought ‘I’m not putting up with this’...So really, it’s like she’s stopping him coming to see Amy. And of course I won’t let him take her up there. Because I mean, she’s had a go at me, so you don’t know what might get into her. So he’s said he’ll take her up to his mother’s. And I know his mum and I trust them on that’ (Lesley Morrison, aged twenty-one).

Contact: for the sake of the children

Together, these passages provide some illustration of Bauman’s point that many moral decisions are made between contradictory impulses. But if contact is haunted by difficulty, ambivalence and uncertainty, then it raises the question of *why* parents go to such lengths to accommodate it. In reflecting on this, there was a discernible shift from positions of ambivalence to the positions of certainty which marked parents’ views in the preceding chapter on relationships. It emerges unequivocally that contact takes place ‘for the children’s sake’ because parents believe it’s what’s ‘best for the children’. One biological mother captures the mood of many respondents when she says:

‘I just think it’s worth having the contact for the children’s sake. I think it’s really important. A mother’s and a father’s. And the children know where they’re coming from themselves, so they have a stability. And if you’re not together, at least they know each side of their family and they are stable in their own home’ (Joan Harker, aged forty-eight).

Similarly, a stepfather:

‘I mean what we do here...it’s only because we believe it’s best for the children. I’m not saying that as the years go by and the kids are older, if we were doing something as a family and their Dad was coming up, then they wouldn’t necessarily get invited round as they do now. I mean I wouldn’t say we consider them as friends but there’s no animosity’ (Tom O’Hare, aged thirty-three).

In talking about why parents believe contact is important, two respondents (both men, who happen also to be brothers) raised the question of the relationship between contact and Child Support or maintenance payments. Both expressed the view that there was some correlation between the payment of maintenance and the kind of contact which ensues. Martin Hunt recalls the time that Jason’s biological father was paying maintenance:

‘He did pay for a little while, but when it stopped we didn’t push it. We didn’t want him to start again because that money, if you like, gave him access to Jason...And when the money stopped, he stopped coming. He didn’t even *try* and contact Jason...They’re saying, if I’m paying for a child, I want something for my money...But that’s the wrong reason for wanting to see their kids. But the money gives them contact...I mean if I was paying all that money, I would want some influence on the child’s upbringing (Martin Hunt, aged thirty-one).

Martin’s brother, Roger Hunt, views the implications of maintenance in very similar terms:

‘I think in most cases the paying of maintenance is like saying ‘I have automatic access on my terms to the children’...which is why, although I agree with maintenance, I don’t think it should be linked to access...It just changes the whole attitude. If you pay, then that payment is more than just money...Financial isn’t just financial. Oh no, I don’t think so.

Definitely not. There are what are perceived as certain rights which go with the paying of maintenance. So there are implications there, very much so, for people in new families' (Roger Hunt, aged twenty-eight).

The view advanced by these two brothers is that 'money is never just money' and that child support payments do in some way 'buy into' relationships between non-resident biological parents (most of whom are fathers) and their children. Because this is seen to prioritise financial interests over children's interests, both men regard this as the 'wrong' reason for contact to take place. While there is little direct evidence from the data in this study to support such views, it may be supposed, as Roger Hunt claims, that both contact and child support payments do have implications for 'new families', and that some of these implications relate to family and kinship boundaries in the longer term. These views are to some extent supported in research literature elsewhere (Maclean and Eekelaar, 1997).

It is clear from all these examples that the question of *why* parents have contact is to be distinguished sharply from questions of how they *feel* about it. And in the way some parents spontaneously drew this distinction themselves, they showed they were aware of the contradictions in what they did. Sometimes awareness was implicit as in the following case:

R: 'Joseph started getting rather unsure about going after Matthew had been born. And the first time my ex-husband came to pick him up, he wouldn't go...It went on for at least six months...We talked about it, him not going, refusing to go. So during that time, it got to the point of my ex-husband coming to the house and playing with Joseph at the house, while I (laughter) skedaddled. Sometimes his new wife came as well.

I: Oh (laughter). Did you feel OK about that?

R: No, not really...It was a bit awkward. We were there lurking in the kitchen and they were feeling very awkward in the lounge (laughter). But I did it (pause) because Joseph quite enjoyed having him on his own territory, rather than having to go out to a strange place...So to keep

everybody happy...You know, rather than to just shut the door. Not that Alan wants to stay out of the way. He's always wanted to see Joseph, even if it's only once a fortnight. I just felt it was better for Joseph to see something of him...And now he's happy to go again...Alan's obviously bonded with him more, become a bit closer by coming into Joseph's house to play with him...I feel it's got to be better for Joseph' (Marion Hughes, aged thirty-three).

At other times, awareness of the contradiction was explicit. Here, a stepfather who has just described how he 'hates' contact and would like it to cease (see above), almost immediately retracts:

'But you know, I contradict myself here, because I know what it's like to have your kids, sort of taken away, if you like. Because that's what it would be...And Bill would hurt, it would hurt him. It's the same thing with my kids from my first wife...I was really hurt when she emigrated and I couldn't see them...But a couple of months after we split, I got into trouble again and went into prison again. And that was the end of it. She'd had enough and I don't blame her (laughter). She just went...There was no way I could see them. There was nothing I could do about it. And it was years that I didn't see the kids...So unless Bill came up here to see them, then he wouldn't see them.

I: And would you mind if he came up here?

R: No, not at all...he does come to see them here. 'Cos that's what's best for the kids (pause). You know, I'd like to get it, do it right' (Steve Thompson, aged fifty-one).

What emerges clearly from all these examples is that parents' concerns about contact do not derive solely or primarily from legal requirements in this regard. It seems, as Steve Thompson says, that doing 'what's best for the kids' is the key motivation behind parents' desires 'to get it' or 'do it right'. Interestingly, he draws on his own experience of being 'on the periphery' in decisions about contact as a resource enabling him to

decide what is the best course of action in the current situation. This is an important point (and one to which I return in Chapter 8).

Moral reputations

At the same time, there are hints in what people say that ‘what’s best for the kids’ is not the only issue at stake. There are suggestions that concerns about moral reputation may be another motivating factor in ‘getting it right’ in this context. In Chapter 2, attention was drawn to Finch and Mason’s (1993) arguments that moral reputations in families are negotiated over time through the kinds of commitments people make (Finch and Mason, 1993: 158). It was suggested that parents in stepfamilies may feel under pressure to invest heavily in their new relationships in order to negotiate – or renegotiate – the kinds of moral reputations they aspire to. And as Roger Hunt points out in the opening comment to the preceding chapter, this may be particularly important in the case of stepparents given the negative stereotypes of them in existence.

Drawing on Howard Becker’s ideas, Finch and Mason also argue that people make investments or ‘side bets’ (Becker, 1960) in relationships. Through this process of side-betting, moral and material ‘valuables’ (Becker, 1960) are created which may be lost if people withdraw from relationships or fail to continue along a committed path (Finch and Mason, 1993: 93-94). These ideas seem particularly apposite for what is happening here. Having set out along a particular path of commitment with their ‘new’ families, stepparents in particular are aware that if they hinder contact, it might as one stepfather suggests, ‘work against me in the long run’ and have repercussions in precisely the ways Becker suggests. Another stepfather voices similar concerns:

‘It’s difficult when you’re coming into a situation like this. I mean you can’t turn round and say ‘No, I’m not having it’. I can’t do that...It would affect my relationship with Emma and with Liam, too, of course. If I didn’t take this kind of passive role...if I made things more difficult, it could be used against me...It could jeopardise *our* relationship, Liam’s and mine’ (Roger Hunt, aged twenty-eight).

Roger Hunt's views on contact are shared by his partner, Emma Marshall, who is Liam's biological mother:

'...if they want a relationship, they will have to work at it. And I've given them the access to do that and that's as much as I can do, and that's as much as I want to do (laughter). And I suppose really that I know that either Liam or his father can turn round to me and say 'Because of you, I have no relationship with my son or father'. So, if I had my own way, I would say 'No. you don't see him again'. But...(long pause)' (Emma Marshall, aged thirty-four).

What is important to observe here is that the way in which contact is handled is assumed or acknowledged to have some influence on the *child's* kin relationships. It is also interesting to note here is that it is children's role in the process of negotiating moral reputations which emerges as a major concern for parents. This follows from what parents have said earlier about relationships with their children. Alongside, or prior to, their relationships with current partners, it is relationships with children which are most valued and which parents are most reluctant to jeopardise. As I argued in my discussion of the moral subject, as children grow older, they too learn the moral language of their culture and develop moral skills and moral knowledge accordingly. Although Finch and Mason (1993) do not specifically include children (those aged eighteen years and under) in their schema of family negotiations, it may be argued that these children do have an important role to play in negotiating the moral reputations of their parents, particularly when their parents separate, divorce and introduce new partners. Certainly this is the perception of parents in this study. The role of children may be particularly significant in the context of reordered or stepfamily relationships where negative images of stepparents' moral reputations are also on the agenda.

Discourses focusing on the continuing responsibilities of all parents for their children's welfare in post-divorce situations point to contact as a key means through which these responsibilities are to be realised (see Maclean and Eekelaar, 1997). By implication, this suggests it is a key means through which parents in stepfamilies can create 'valuables' in terms of the moral reputations they build and negotiate. If parents'

handling of contact must secure not only their children's interests but their own moral reputations as well, then to 'get it' or to 'do it right' will require more than the minimal effort implied in legal definitions of contact. For this reason, if contact is the bane of parents' lives, some are alert, too, to its opportunities. Contradictory though it may seem, contact can provide parents in stepfamilies with the chance to 'get it and do it right', to reach for an ethic which puts into visible form the 'principled positions' (Connor, 1993) of responsibility, engagement and commitment which they advocate in relation to their children's welfare. In what follows, I explore the processes through which some parents achieve this.

'Moral conversations'

While there are many ways in which parents handle the organisational and practical aspects of contact, there are some common features in how people approach the decision-making process, specifically in how they put aside or overcome their feelings of ambivalence. In conceptualising this process, aspects of Benhabib's (1992) work provide some valuable insights. She proposes a universalist discourse ethic based on an 'interactive' universalism, where the emphasis is on process rather than outcome (Benhabib, 1992: 37). In doing this, her conception of a developmental, relational moral subject remains central. The core idea behind her reformulation of the universalist tradition in ethics is the construction of the 'moral point of view' in terms of 'the model of a *'moral conversation' in which the capacity to reverse perspectives and be willing to reason from the other's point of view, and the sensitivity to hear that voice is paramount*' (Benhabib, 1992: 8).

Central to the art of moral conversation and a reversal of perspective is what Benhabib calls 'enlarged thinking': *thinking in the company of others and attempting to see things from their point of view*. Importantly, the goal of a moral conversation is not consensus or unanimity, but *reaching some form of practicable agreement*. Insofar as we are willing and able to practise this art, we can claim to be taking a 'moral point of view'. She suggests that respect for others, or 'reciprocal recognition' is key to what binds all social groupings or communities, whether members of a kin group, religion or whatever.

It is an attitude and moral feeling acquired through socialisation and corresponds to the 'golden rule' of 'Do unto others as you would have others do unto you'. It is this universal rule which enjoins us to reverse perspective among members of a given moral community' (Benhabib, 1992: 31-32). And again - and herein lies the importance of her position for what I am arguing - she locates this process firmly in 'those ethical relationships in which we are always already immersed in the lifeworld', including that is, family relationships (10).

She argues that to be a family member means to know how to reason from the standpoint of the 'concrete other'. The process begins, she claims, in admonitions to children – and I would add, admonitions *between* children – which begin 'What if someone threw sand in your face? How would you feel then?' Indeed, she contends (over optimistically, perhaps, if one considers family studies more widely), that one cannot act within these ethical relationships without being able to think from the standpoint of our child, our spouse, our sister or brother. It is not, of course, my intention to engage here in debates about discourse ethics. Rather, it is my intention to show how the (familial) processes through which Benhabib claims such an ethic may be put into practice are relevant in the analysis of how parents in this study reach for some workable agreement about contact.

Reversing perspectives: contact and the locational interest of children

It is clear from what has already been said that one of the key concerns for parents is where contact should take place. In other words, the *locational interests* of children in relation to contact, and how these may change over time, are regarded by parents as an important aspect of their overall responsibilities for their children's welfare. It has been shown that, despite the disruption caused, contact sometimes takes place within the household space of the 'new' family unit. This willingness to put one's domestic space at the disposal of former partners because it is believed to be in children's best interests emerges as not unusual in these data. In the passage which follows, Tom O'Hare, a cohabiting stepfather with three stepchildren and one, non-resident, biological child,

talks about contact arrangements between his three stepchildren and their biological father:

‘And he comes up to see them on average about once every six weeks...So that’s quite an isolation from the kids. But I suppose the way he does contribute, and in a large way, is that he does give us maintenance...And it was Sam’s second birthday just a few weeks ago, and they came up...They came round to the house in the evening on Saturday to see the kids. And we did a bar-b-q for Sam’s birthday. And they stayed...So it’s quite a friendly situation. I mean obviously we have things which are important for the two of us. But whenever we think it’s really important for the kids, we try to make sure it works for them...And yeah, they used to come and use the house at one point. We would move out...and let him and his partner have the house with the kids. The idea being for the kids, that they weren’t having to move house all the time; we were. And it gave him time with them. And again, he wasn’t working at that time, so, you know, he had very little money. Em, so yeah, it was for the kids’ (Tom O’Hare, aged thirty-three).

Applying Benhabib’s model of a ‘moral conversation’ to the above passage, it is evident that for those who are party to this conversation, a primary concern is how responsibility for, and commitment to, their children’s welfare are to be realised in decisions about contact. Working out and reaching agreement on the children’s locational interests while at the same time acknowledging the financial input and economic status of the biological father, requires imaginative and collaborative effort. Leaving aside for now the possible implications of the biological father’s financial input and its link to access, it is clear that the key to this process is precisely, as Benhabib argues, the capacity to reverse perspective, a willingness to be able to reason from another’s point of view. In doing this, in seeing not only the children, but also their biological father, as a ‘concrete’ other, with particular endowments and needs, this ‘moral party’ (Bauman, 1993) reaches a workable agreement or what may be termed a collaborative ethic.

Here again, Bauman's 'moral party' includes not just two people, but all those who take part in a moral conversation, is intentional, conveying as it does the way in which family responsibilities, almost by definition, entail consideration of more than one other. What parents made clear there, Tom O'Hare reiterates in the passage above: responsibility for children, engagement with their fate, and commitment to their welfare, almost always entails some involvement in those ethical relationships in which that child is 'always already immersed in the lifeworld' (Benhabib, 1992: 10). In the context of stepfamily relationships, that means, by definition, being involved across a series of 'new' and 'old' family relationship, history, and household boundaries.

At the same time, recalling the ambivalence which marked respondents' discussions of contact earlier, it may be imagined that reversing perspective – and acting on it – is not easy. The costs of its moral demands, in both emotional and practical terms, are high. Tom O'Hare makes this explicit in how he continues:

R: 'I mean it's hard in certain respects. And like when they come now we tend to let them go in and see the kids and we stay in the kitchen...you have to step back and out in all kinds of ways (long pause).

I: And why is that do you think?

R: Em (long pause), it's a combination of things. Partly it's my own insecurity that maybe sometimes I'm not sure that the way I deal with Tom is the best way. And maybe his father would deal with him differently and wouldn't like the way I'm doing it...But it's also to do with the fact that I think Paul deserves the respect because he's the father. Because if the situation were reversed, I would like to be given the respect myself. If for some reason I went round and I spent time seeing Becky at Nina's place...I would like to think that whoever was there would give me and Becky a bit of space. So I think when Paul's there, he should have the opportunity to deal with the situation first. And I think under the circumstances, and the person he is, I think he does the best that he can. And that's why I'm prepared to give him the respect. I

mean if he was someone who'd walked out and abandoned them for several years and never seen them and suddenly wanted back in, then I may feel different. But that isn't what's happened' (Tom O'Hare, aged thirty-three years).

Again, this passage reveals that while it is indeed difficult to stand back and see things from other people's points of view, it nonetheless emerges as the most reliable route for reaching a practicable solution which not only meets the children's needs but also gives some recognition to the position of the non-resident father. With regard to the latter, it appears there are two dimensions to Tom O'Hare's respect for the biological father. First, in putting himself in Paul's position, his respect corresponds to the 'Golden Rule' alluded to earlier. Against the charge that such motivation for moral action is too self-referential, it may be argued that precisely for that reason, it is likely to be 'good enough' for achieving its moral objective: contact that is comparatively 'tension-free' and which exists on a regular, ongoing basis. If, as Wolfe argues, morality is a learned practice which entails a great deal of trial and error and imperfect moral decisions (1989: 233), it follows that moral motivations, as an integral part of moral practice, are likely to be similarly 'imperfect' or messy.

Secondly, Tom O'Hare's respect for Paul derives from the latter's consistent approach to contact. Given that Paul has migrated some 250 miles from where his children reside, his visits to see them every six weeks or so are seen as evidence of considerable commitment. Consistency emerges as an important value in parents' moral thinking about contact. As Tom O'Hare says, he 'may feel different', less amenable to contact if the children's biological father was someone 'who'd walked out and abandoned them'. In the case of another stepfather, Martin Hunt, he does indeed 'feel different' for precisely these reasons. It was seen above that the possibility of his stepson's biological father 'wanting back in' after having abandoned contact for fourteen years, was a difficult prospect to deal with emotionally. Nonetheless, he reaches here for some understanding of the situation from his stepson's point of view:

'I can't see it happening now...but if anything, it would be Jason's sort of instigating the contact, as being like he'd want to *know* - because he's

growing up - what the score is. 'Cos possibly if it was *me*, I might want to know about my biological parent. 'Cos it's different, isn't it, 'cos I would be the *child* then, not the parent. And children want to know. *I'd* just want to *know* (long pause) where I came from (long pause)' (Martin Hunt, aged thirty-one, emphasis in original).

Again, it is interesting to note (and this is a point I return to in Chapter 8), that Martin Hunt's own experience of being in a stepfamily from the age of five or six years old, emerges as an important factor in his emphasis on the importance of consistency from both parents, biological and step-.

A question of values: stability

It is clear from the foregoing examples that closely connected to concerns about contact and the locational interests of children are concerns about stability. Stability emerges as a fundamental value or starting point in moral conversations about contact (as indeed it does in parents' moral conversations more widely). A reading of these data indicates that parents in stepfamilies are often aware that charges of family *instability* are likely to be amongst those most frequently levelled at them. That some here reach contact 'solutions' which are considered least disruptive to their children, albeit most disruptive to themselves, suggests again that 'stepfamily' moral values are not oppositional to so-called 'traditional' family values, but remain firmly in line with them. Such a finding is unsurprising in the light of Hekman's (1995) argument that morality may be understood as a set of practices which members of a given culture are likely, in many respects, to share. We have therefore, as Hekman insists (following Butler, 1990) to fashion a moral discourse with the tools available to us.

Applying these arguments here, while parents in stepfamilies may share widely held views on the importance and desirability of stability, they are likely to speak about it in a different 'moral voice' and give it a different shape in moral practice. In dominant moral discourses on 'the family', family stability is linked to a particular view of household: stable families are families where parents and their biological children co-

reside. In families whose relationships have been reordered through separation and divorce, this is most often not the case. In addition, as has become clear in the course of this discussion, contact undermines the possibility of this kind of stability even further. Parents are only too aware of this:

‘Somebody out there rockin’ the boat ain’t *stabilising* the family. I mean that could split ‘em *up*’ (Martin Hunt, aged thirty-one, emphasis in original).

In other words, not only are dominant versions of stability unlikely to serve stepfamilies well, but unless they resist these definitions, they are inevitably setting themselves up to ‘fail’ on the basis of such criteria. Stepfamilies therefore have to reformulate stability in different terms and create a different practice around it.

From what has already been said, parents do this in two ways. Some interpret stability as a need for children to remain in one household while non-resident parents visit them there. Here stability is identified mainly with location. This occurred in those cases where children were younger, not yet at an age where it was considered appropriate or in their best interests for them to travel between households. In other cases, where children were older, there emerges an understanding of stability which emphasises routine and consistency in the frequency of contact. Location, in these instances, is a secondary consideration. In crafting different discourses or perspectives on the meaning of stability, parents are, in Hekman’s (1995) terms, employing the discursive tools available to them and reshuffling them for their purposes. In doing this, parents create a moral space in which they can define an ethical practice appropriate to their needs. It is this creative practice or creative opposition which many regard as the mark of moral agency (see for example Wolfe, 1989; Pritchard, 1991; Benhabib, 1992; Bauman, 1993, 1995; Hekman, 1995).

Keeping the moral conversation open-ended

It is apparent that, sometimes, the costs of reversing perspectives are too high:

‘And for the first few years after we split, he always used to come for Christmas dinner. But the first Christmas after Bob arrived on the scene, Pete wasn’t actually going to come for Christmas dinner. You know, I can remember being a bit worried about whether he would be expecting that. He rang me and said he’d been, but Bob’s car was there and he wasn’t going to come in. And I said ‘well Bob’s gone to work now’. And he said ‘No, I just can’t come. You’ll have to explain to the children why I can’t come’. So he wouldn’t come that Christmas day...And I thought he should have come in to see them. I mean I’d been through a lot with his relationships. But for the children, I’d let him come and go, just for them. And I felt they were expecting him and they wouldn’t understand (Joan Harker, aged forty-eight).

While the explicit target of Joan Harker’s moral disapproval or moral resentment (Pritchard, 1991) is her former partner’s refusal to act as ‘he should’ one Christmas morning, its implicit target is his refusal or inability to practise the art of ‘enlarged thinking’ (Benhabib 1992): a refusal to put himself in the position of his children and try and see things from their point of view. There is the suggestion that if he had done this, a different outcome would have ensued. From the perspective of Joan Harker, his inability to do this results in foreclosure of the moral conversation, and a situation where not only consensus, but practicable agreement, too, remains out of reach.

If this suggests that reversing perspectives is indeed the key process through which agreement can be reached, it also highlights how there is no mechanism inherent in a moral conversation to ensure this. Benhabib’s assertion, quoted earlier, that we ‘cannot’ act in family relationships without reversing perspectives now returns to haunt her. It is clear that we can and do. Perhaps it is in recognition of this that she later emphasises how a willingness to reverse perspective and reason from the other’s point of view cannot in itself guarantee consent or agreement. In order to reach beyond impasse, beyond the real and irreconcilable conflicts of interest which may exist amongst those party to a moral conversation, the conversation must, as Benhabib insists, remain ‘open-ended’. That the moral conversation between Joan Harker and her former partner remained open-ended is implicit in how she continues:

‘But the year after that he came. And he comes in now for about an hour and a half on Christmas day, and he often brings his dad too...and Bob offers them a drink when they come in...And I think it’s for the children I do it’ (Joan Harker, aged forty-eight).

It is notable that in keeping this moral conversation open-ended, those party to it reach a workable agreement which goes beyond what was initially envisaged as possible or desirable. While it is unclear exactly how this change was brought about, it does imply that if the freedom to make moral choices may sometimes result in ‘wrong’ or unwise choices (Bauman, 1993; 1995), an open-ended process of reversing perspective, reciprocal recognition, and ‘thinking in the company of others’ may be one way of minimising such outcomes. Certainly, a reading of these data indicates that contact arrangements ‘work better’ or have fewer tensions when these moral criteria are operative.

As Wolfe suggests, morality is a negotiated process, something we learn through the actual experience of trying to live together. Individuals, by reflecting periodically on what they have done in the past, try to ascertain what they ought to do next (Wolfe, 1989: 216). Following Wolfe’s ideas, a more helpful – because less polarised – understanding of ‘getting it right’ emerges, one in which being moral or learning to choose more wisely is viewed as the acquisition of certain skills, a learned practice. And indeed, this ties in with Benhabib’s view that the ability to reverse perspective is achieved only through the *practice* of enlarged thinking.

Keeping the outcome flexible

New partners on the scene

Implied in what Joan Harker says in the passage above, is not only the importance of keeping the moral conversation open-ended, but the importance of being flexible about its outcome during the various stages of its existence. In this study, the importance of flexibility as a factor in easing tensions around contact emerges in two situations. First, as Joan Harker implies above, it is important at the point a new partner appears on the

scene. This was alluded to earlier where new partners voiced their ambivalence towards existing arrangements for contact. Here, Tom O'Hare recalls the point at which he and his new partner 'went official':

'But when we actually decided we were going official as a couple, when we worked out that I would be able to take over the mortgage, we also made it clear at that point, because we were going to be establishing this as our family home, that we didn't think it would be right, the correct thing for them to come and use the house, I mean to *stay* here. And Paul agreed. In fact he said in his own words that he'd been anticipating this. And when he came up the next time, I was actually quite surprised because we didn't ask, but he actually gave Linda his keys. He said 'You'll be wanting these'...And I was really impressed by that to be honest. I didn't expect it. And I was really impressed' (Tom O'Hare, aged thirty-three, emphasis in original).

There is evidence here that this moral conversation is both open-ended and flexible about its outcome. In practising the art of enlarged thinking and reversing perspectives those party to it are able to take account of each others' altered positionings. What was formerly 'right' or appropriate for contact arrangements is no longer considered to be so. There is reciprocal recognition of the need for a change in practice. This implies that some ethical outcomes to moral conversations may be transitional. In Benhabib's terms, people are demonstrating that ethics needs to be 'contextually sensitive'. The 'principled positions' (Connor, 1993) agreed during a moral conversation – in this case responsibility for children and a commitment to their welfare – remain unchanged.

Another interesting aspect of the example above is the question of what motivates the reciprocal recognition or mutual respect between the step- and biological father. It does not appear to be straightforwardly a mutual respect of persons. It appears also to be a mutual respect of property. There appear to be two important points in effecting this shift. First, Tom O'Hare is taking over the payment of the mortgage so that the property is no longer Paul's in financial terms. Secondly, in doing this the 'old' matrimonial home is now established as the 'new' family home. The changes in arrangements for

contact which result are in line with dominant discourses on 'the family' which stress ownership rights and the 'privacy' of 'the family'. Yet Paul continues to visit the 'new' family's home, albeit on different, more formalised terms.

This raises the same question as was raised earlier in relation to child support payments: namely, whether there is any correlation between paying maintenance (as Paul is doing) and the kind of contact arrangements which ensue. As stated earlier, two respondents make it clear that in their view maintenance payments in some way 'buy into' relationships between non-resident biological parents and their children. There is no hint here, nor in his interview more widely, that Tom O'Hare perceives such a correlation to exist. Indeed (see above), he regards these payments as a mark of Paul's commitment to the children.

Children's decisions about contact

Secondly, flexibility is essential at the point children themselves make it clear what they want to do. Possibly one of the most difficult dilemmas facing parents is deciding at what point the balance of responsibility for making decisions about contact should shift towards the children involved. It was seen above that even when children are very young they are sometimes able to make it plain that existing arrangements for contact are not appropriate for their needs. As Dave Hughes says of his stepson Joseph who is aged five years:

'In fact it's up to Joseph entirely what sort of contact he has. It's purely his decision. But he is still very young to make that decision' (Dave Hughes, aged twenty-seven).

Yet even when children are older it is envisaged that such decisions may not be entirely straightforward. Tom O'Hare, whose biological daughter is only three years old, reflects upon the prospect of facing this dilemma. Experience of his three stepchildren's abilities to change their minds has made him acutely aware of these difficulties:

‘There’s a part of me...that if when she’s older, Becky said ‘I want to come and live with you’, then I would fight for it. But I wouldn’t do it until she’d made that decision because I don’t think that would be at all just or fair. But if she’d made that decision and I knew it was what she really wanted, then yes, I would be prepared to risk the relationship I have with Becky’s mum at the moment which works reasonably well...But then again, that’s difficult, because even at eight and ten, they change their minds completely from one minute to the next, you know (laughter). So I don’t know when you decide a child is old enough to make these decisions’ (Tom O’Hare, aged thirty-three).

Respondents thus appear to be aware of children’s equal claims, if not abilities (Benhabib, 1992) to be considered in decisions affecting their interests. This is so even in those cases where children are not yet able to join verbally in the moral conversations about them. These examples also illustrate that parents recognise the force of Bauman’s point that the moral relationship of responsibility or caring is fundamentally a power relationship, with the ever-present risk of stealing the other’s autonomy. And as he has also said, moral choices have to be made without the certainty that either the intentions or outcomes are good. Sometimes children’s capacities to make these decisions are more apparent and are respected accordingly:

‘But you see, contact was so rare. Months between visits. But I do remember the last time they went on holiday and Roger must have been quite small. They went for a week’s holiday, both the boys. And you see after that Roger didn’t ever want to go again. And I never stopped him from going but I didn’t feel I had to insist he went. And he didn’t want to go, and so he didn’t go’ (Marjorie Phillips, aged fifty-six).

The above examples demonstrate that if moral conversations about children and contact are not to ‘shout down’ children’s own feelings in the matter, parents need to be sensitive to the point at which children’s ‘moral voices’ are ready to be heard. These concerns are made explicit in the following passage where a mother recalls some of the tensions surrounding these shifts in responsibility:

‘They saw their father in the school holidays...At first the girls wanted to go, then they got past wanting to go...I encouraged them to go at first. I don’t know why, I wouldn’t again. I thought it was my duty because I didn’t want to upset him. And when they wouldn’t go once, I took them down the motorway and he met us there, and Gemma wouldn’t get out of the car...She was about eight then and she definitely didn’t want to go. I had to mediate between the two cars. It was crazy...They would have gone if I’d insisted. And so I brought them back again. But I felt like I was shirking my responsibility. That’s how I felt about it at the time. And he was terribly upset of course. And I said I’ll have to take them home. I’ll talk to them and see what I can do. And I drove them home and talked to them and I did try to persuade them, but they wouldn’t go’ (Deb Casson, aged forty-eight).

Conclusion

The costs of the moral demands in relation to contact – of keeping the moral conversation open-ended, of being flexible and creating a contextually sensitive ethic – are high. It requires an ongoing willingness to think in the company of others, to see things from another’s point of view, to practise reciprocal recognition and enlarged thinking, not only in relation to one other, but in relation to several others. Given that in the majority of cases, children reside with their mothers following the separation or divorce of their parents, it is women who are most likely to be the major mediators and maintainers of the contact relationship. But there is clear evidence too that while men in this study are not often the initiators in moral conversations about contact, they do take active part in putting these principles into practice. These morally reflexive qualities are evident too in parents’ handling of inheritance, the issue with which the following chapter is concerned.

Chapter 7

Stepfamilies and Inheritance

‘Cos the problem is, we made a will recently, and Roger and Martin have got their father’s name, but our daughter’s got my name, a different name...We would like them to have equal amounts, equal shares if anything happens to us. So we actually took this will out and got it done so all three get *exactly* the same, regardless of what their *name* is. But they did tell us when we went to do it, that if we didn’t do that, my daughter could claim the whole lot. We wanted to get to the position where nobody would have to go to the solicitor to try and get a bit (laughs). So we thought that if it was all clear, there can’t be no problems. And we’ve told them, all three, what we’ve done...No, see, if people just leave it and see what happens to it, some people are likely to get *nothing*. Not under the present law, unless it’s *changed*. They’d have to take the other one to court. That’s the only way they’d get any if it weren’t already down. So we can sleep easy tonight, see (laughter), knowing that if anything happens it’s all written down’ (Ken Phillips, aged fifty-eight, emphasis in original).

Introduction

It has long been recognised that in a society based upon the private ownership of property, inheritance is a key mechanism through which the social and economic order (and its privileges) are reproduced. In particular, as Engels argues, the transmission of property from one person to another and from one generation to the next – either during the lifetime of both parties or through inheritance after death – enables wealth to remain in the hands of a small number of families (Engels, 1985 edition; Scott, 1982).

However, the spread of home ownership in the UK in the thirty-year period between 1960 and 1990 (from one-third to two-thirds of households) together with a range of other demographic changes – fertility rates, the ages at which parents have children, increased longevity, and increased rates of divorce and remarriage – mean not only that more people have something substantial to bequeath, but also – and this emerged clearly in the preceding chapter – that the shape and composition of families from which testators are drawn are likely to be different from in the past (Hamnett, Harmer and Williams, 1991; Finch, 1994).

In these processes wills play an important role. As Finch, Mason, Masson *et al* (1996) point out in their major study on inheritance, wills are unique documents. Not only do they constitute *personal* statements of a deceased person's wishes and intentions, but – provided they are drawn up in ways prescribed by law – once probated they become *public* documents and carry the force of law. In this, they represent a distinctive form of communication between the living and the dead. Further, since family members figure prominently as beneficiaries, a will can offer insights into a person's family relationships (Finch, Mason, Masson *et al*, 1996: 1-7).

However, while their study does acknowledge the fluidity of contemporary family relationships, and in particular how bequeathing patterns in stepfamilies are little understood (1996: 6), they do not address these issues specifically or in detail. Given the complexity of family commitments – financial, practical and emotional – with which people in stepfamilies have to deal, it is not surprising that inheritance issues often come onto the agenda earlier in stepfamilies than they do in other families (National Stepfamily Association, 1993; Finch, 1994). It thus becomes pressing to explore the ways in which inheritance is handled when a complex series of steprelationships is entailed. It is precisely these processes and the insights they offer into people's reformulated ideas about family and kinship, which provide the basis of this chapter. If, as was argued in Chapter 2, patterns of English kinship are diverse and changing, then those processes may be reflected in cultural expectations about inheritance (Finch, 1994), too.

Building on the arguments and findings of earlier chapters – specifically those which demonstrated the links between people’s moral thinking on family relationships, the inclusions and exclusions they make on this basis, and the centrality of children’s needs and interests in this regard – this chapter shows how, through the mechanism of inheritance, these links are forged in striking and illuminating ways. It is necessary first to consider inheritance in its legal context. It is only by examining key aspects of inheritance law, and in particular the assumptions underlying it, that the significance of what many parents in this study are proposing can be more fully grasped.

The legal context of inheritance

The law relating to inheritance, otherwise known as the law of succession, is founded on the two pillars of testate and intestate succession. In the first, distribution occurs according to a valid will. In the second, where there is no will or the will fails completely, distribution is governed by the inflexible rules relating to intestacy (Mellows, 1993: 3; Jones, 1993: 57). That the law does have a role to play in regulating wills is an expression not only of a strong public interest in who gets ownership and control of wealth, but also in who supports members of a deceased person’s family in the event that adequate provision for them has not been made. In addition, there is a public interest in expediting these matters in a way which is both reliable and cost effective (Finch, Mason, Masson *et al*, 1996: 20,32). These same interests lie, too, behind the intestacy rules (Buck, 1990).

Testate succession: the principle of testamentary freedom

Fundamental to understanding this aspect of inheritance law is the principle of testamentary freedom. If as a principle it implies that a person has an inalienable right to dispose of property as she or he pleases, in practice it survives today in few, if any, countries. It is argued that the rights of the testator are less important than the duties to certain members of her or his family and the state. Jurisdictions have limited this by three different means. Some, like France, give members of the deceased’s family rights to fixed shares of the estate. Others, as in most American jurisdictions, allow family

members to claim a fixed share if they so wish. The third method, adopted by English law, is a system of judicial discretion, where testamentary freedom exists subject to the courts' power to scrutinise and modify the will if reasonable provision for certain persons has not been made (Oughton and Tyler, 1984; Ross Martyn, 1985).

Thus, absolute testamentary freedom has only existed under English law from 1833, when it became possible for a man to dispose of all his property without being subject to 'dower', his widow's right to a life interest in one third of his land, until 1938 and the enactment of the Inheritance (Family Provision) Act. Full equality for women was only effected by the Married Women's Property Act 1882, when they too acquired testamentary capacity without being subject to the rights of 'courtesy', a widower's right to a life interest in *all* of his wife's land. Both before and after this period, restrictions have been imposed (Mellows, 1993).

Given that restrictions focus on testators' obligations to provide for close family members, particularly a spouse, and given the presumption in law that where a relationship is specified in a will the only persons to take are those related by blood, it is clear that this area of law functions to protect the socially recognised criteria of family and kinship: blood and marriage. Thus, while in earlier periods these obligations were understood primarily in terms of the essential link between 'blood and soil' (Glendon, 1989), expressed through the doctrine of tenure and the principle of primogeniture, they did encompass, too, concerns about provision for a surviving spouse, usually a widow, as well as any (biological) children of the marriage (Oughton and Tyler, 1984; Hoggett and Pearl, 1991; Mellows, 1993). And while land gradually became less significant as the sole or major asset in matters of inheritance, the importance of passing property from one generation to the next within the (genealogical) family, at the same time as ensuring adequate provision for a surviving spouse, continued to occupy a central place, particularly in twentieth century law.

Twentieth century limitations on testamentary freedom: family provision legislation

What is most striking, following twentieth century reforms to inheritance law, is the way the legislative balance has shifted, so that the position of the surviving spouse has steadily improved at the expense of the deceased's blood relatives (Glendon, 1989).

Thus the Inheritance (Family Provision Act) 1938, and the more extended powers of the Inheritance (Provision for Family and Dependants) Act 1975 both gave the courts discretionary powers to award reasonable financial provision for the maintenance of certain dependants if the will or the rules of intestacy (see below) failed to do so. Both emphasised, in keeping with twentieth century ideas about companionate marriage (Clark, 1991; Finch and Summerfield, 1991), that inheritance is as much about marriage and the financial responsibilities between spouses as about passing property down the generations (Hoggett and Pearl, 1991; Mellows, 1993).

In the debates surrounding the 1975 Act, the easier availability of divorce was an important influence. It was recognised that increasingly, testators may have more than one spouse or ex-spouse who may feel entitled to make a claim on their estates, as well as the interests of children of more than one marriage to consider. Prior to this Act, there was no provision whereby a stepchild who had not been adopted by the deceased could make an application. This is now conferred by s.1(1)(d) under the heading 'a child of the family'. While this has meant that the step-relationship has indeed begun to draw a number of legal incidents to itself (Glendon, 1989; Cretney and Masson, 1990; Jones, 1993), concerns have been expressed that given the significance of the 'blood tie', the claims of stepchildren may well be 'weaker than those of *true* children' (Ross Martyn, 1985: 41, my emphasis).

Indeed, in two leading cases where provision has been made in favour of an adult stepchild, the court was strongly influenced by the fact that the deceased's estate derived in part from the applicant's 'natural' parent (Green, 1988). This suggests that devolution of property along the blood line was the major consideration. Significant, too, is that 'child of the family' is a concept which applies only to parties to a marriage; it does not apply to unmarried unions (Hayes and Williams, 1995: 557). This places adult stepchildren from cohabiting couple stepfamilies in an ambiguous position when making a claim for provision from the estate of a deceased stepparent.

With regard to cohabitation, the 1975 Act for the first time made it possible for a cohabiting partner, as 'a person maintained by the deceased', to apply for provision (s.1(3)). Here too, the notion of dependency is key, creating, as Masson has noted, the

'absurd paradox' that the more deserving an applicant is (that is, the less financially dependent), the less likely she or he will qualify (Cretney and Masson, 1990: 300). In recognition of this, the Law Commission's Report (1990) recommended that cohabitants of at least two years' standing, living in the same household 'as husband and wife', are made a discrete class of applicant under the 1975 Act. These recommendations were enacted in the Law Reform (Succession) Act 1995.

Yet, despite the Act's extension to entirely new classes of applicants – including former spouses (if they have not remarried), all children including stepchildren, and cohabiting partners – it is the disinherited spouse who, if successful, is rewarded with enhanced material gains (the surviving spouse standard) relative to other applicants (the maintenance standard). As Cretney and Masson (1990) points out, the fundamental point about this legislation is not to decide how the available assets should be *fairly* divided. Rather it is about dependency and how someone put into a position of dependency by the deceased may be left without financial support. It will be seen that this position is strikingly at odds with the concerns of parents in this study for whom fairness – to partners and all children involved – is indeed the fundamental issue.

Intestate succession

The system of intestate succession introduced by the Administration of Estates Act 1925 provided that, where no valid will exists, the residuary estate of a person (after the payment of debts), should be distributed in accordance with certain rules. These rules were reformulated in the Intestate's Estates Act 1952. Based in part on statistical evidence drawn from the analysis of a large number of wills, they are designed to reflect the wishes of the average testator (Cretney and Masson, 1990: 292; Burn, 1994: 875). Unlike the Family Provision legislation outlined above, these rules have no flexibility or discretionary powers. But like that legislation, they too demonstrate the priority accorded to 'blood' relatives as well as the movement of the spousal relationship into the foreground of family relationships.

Thus, one of the immediately apparent features of these rules is the generosity with which these rules treat a surviving spouse. A number of commentators have suggested

this may be a cause of injustice because where a surviving spouse with dependent children remarries, the new spouse will take to the prejudice of the children (Cretney and Masson, 1990: 294). Equally, it may also be argued that children whose parents remarry after divorce may also 'lose out' if a biological parent predeceases a stepparent. Following the Law Commission's review of Intestate distribution in 1989, it was recommended that the issue of former marriages should be included in the statutory distribution, but this was rejected on the grounds that it could adversely affect provision for the surviving spouse (who, arguably, may then require financial assistance from the state). It was also rejected on the grounds that to change the definition of 'issue' so that it includes 'children of the family' (which includes, among others, stepchildren and the issue of former marriages) would be too 'complicated' (Buck, 1990: 269).

After the surviving spouse, then, it is relatives of the 'whole blood' who enjoy substantial priority – children first, then siblings. Under English law, where for example the intestate leaves a spouse but no issue, siblings of the whole blood are included; siblings of the half blood are entirely excluded. Yet, in many other jurisdictions, for example, the United States, Canada and New Zealand, these distinctions between collaterals have been abolished on the grounds that it is inappropriate given the frequency nowadays of divorce and remarriage, with the children of each union being brought up as one family (Wright, 1986: 124). It was seen in the preceding chapter on family relationships and will be seen in the analysis below, that these distinctions are similarly eschewed by many parents in this study.

Finally, cohabiting partners have no automatic rights on intestacy and must seek provision under the family provision legislation outlined above. In this, they are in a much weaker position than those who are married. Proving actual contributions and joint intentions can be very difficult and, increasingly, judges and legislators are confronted with unsatisfactory situations facing long-term cohabiting partners when one of them dies (Hoggett and Pearl, 1991). These difficulties may be compounded if they have the interests of their partner's children to consider as well. A possible solution (apart from making a will) lies in making a cohabitation contract.

Overall, it emerges clearly from this discussion that, in the priority accorded to the surviving spouse and the significance attached to 'blood' ties, inheritance law functions to reinforce and promote that model of 'the family' referred to in earlier chapters – one that is built around a once-married, heterosexual couple and their own genetic children (VanEvery, 1991/2). By definition, any model of 'the inheritance family' (Finch, Mason, Masson *et al*, 1996) which assumes as its starting point one couple and a single line of descent, necessarily represents the steprelationship – with two or more couples and different lines of descent – as anomalous. And while there is some legal remedy for both stepchildren and cohabiting partners through family provision legislation, the fact that they have no automatic rights but must make costly and lengthy application (Jackson, 1990: 439) through the courts, renders these social ties secondary or peripheral to other family ties, namely those of blood and marriage. If the balance has shifted in where twentieth century inheritance law accords priority, what is *in* the balance has not.

Parents' handling of inheritance: the importance of being fair

It emerges unequivocally from these data that the question of fairness lies at the heart of all parents' discussions and decisions regarding inheritance. In this, writing a will is a morally reflexive act, an important means of moral self-representation (Hekman, 1995). In broad terms, two conceptual patterns emerge in relation to inheritance and the principle of fairness. In the first, fairness seeks to ensure equal outcomes; in the second, it does not. The salience of fairness as a principle of family life is widely acknowledged (Backett, 1982; Allatt and Yeandle, 1986; Allatt, 1996) and emerges too specifically in relation to stepfamily life (Burgoyne and Clark, 1982). It was argued in Chapter 4 that it is primarily through our family relationships, those 'ethical relationships in which we are always already immersed' (Benhabib, 1992), that we learn what morality *is*. If fairness may be understood as the familial face of distributive and social justice, it is through our everyday interactions with familiar others, through the actual experience of trying to live together, that our ideas and understandings about fair and unfair practices are shaped and realised, and that agreement, disagreement, or compromise is reached.

Early on, children develop sophisticated and nuanced understandings of what is fair. Thus, while quite young siblings may learn to accept the notion of age-dependent bedtimes or amounts of pocket money, they may be less willing to accept the distribution of sweets according to these criteria, or that the monetary value of their Christmas presents be assessed along similar lines. Such distinctions in children's understandings derive in part from their parents' understandings of the concept of fairness and how it is to be operationalised in specific contexts. In stepfamilies, where parents and children bring together different sets of 'ground rules', different histories and economic resources, fairness in relation to inheritance *necessarily* assumes a more complex and, possibly, a more contested shape.

In my review of the research literature on stepfamilies it was precisely this issue – fairness in relation to inheritance – which led Noy (1991) to write about stepfamilies as 'troublesome places'. Firth, Hubert and Forge (1970) in their study of kinship in Britain, concluded that fairness in this context was so complex that it was impossible to make a definitive statement about what form it should take. Yet, a definitive statement is exactly what stepfamilies have to achieve when writing a will. Interestingly, all parents, to varying degrees, were aware that inheritance in stepfamilies had the potential to be a contentious issue. This was reflected either through explicit knowledge of how the law in this context operates, or less commonly, through the telling of stories in which property had passed to a second spouse, thereby delaying or thwarting its passage to the children of a first or former relationship.

It is almost certainly this awareness which accounts for the fact that (in contrast to what Finch, Mason, Masson *et al* (1996) found in their study), the majority of parents in this study, including those in their twenties and thirties, had already written a will, or, where they had not yet done so, intended to do it 'soon' and had worked out what they were going to do. In only one instance was it suggested that the interview had prompted action in this direction. While all those who had written a will had sought legal help or advice, they had clear ideas beforehand about what they wanted to do. Legal help was sought more in terms of how to implement parents' wishes and intentions in a valid will. Usually, this help or advice was sought from the same solicitor who had handled the financial aspects of their divorce or separation, and, in some cases, the subject of writing

a will had arisen during divorce proceedings. However, with one exception, respondents did not draw up a will until they moved into another significant relationship.

In addition, given that all but one parent in this study who had already written a will had – as is typically the case between spouses or partners (Finch, Mason, Masson *et al*, 1996) ‘left everything to each other’ in the first instance, *trust* between partners also emerges as an important principle in this context. In other words, since a second spouse has no restrictions imposed by law on how she or he can dispose of any property, and certainly has no legal obligation to bequeath to any stepchildren (Finch, 1994: 8), in leaving everything to each other, partners have to ‘trust each other to supply their different families’ and secure transmission of their property in ways that had already been agreed between them. That partners have no legal obligations to honour each other’s wishes has important implications for children in stepfamilies given that after the surviving spouse, it is children who emerge from these data (as they do in other studies) as the major beneficiaries. This explains why the needs and interests of children from a former marriage have remained a focus of concern among some legal commentators.

Fair means equal: immediate and emergent resolutions

Immediate resolution: ‘it’s natural’

By far the commonest finding to emerge from these data is the firm belief held by parents that children – both step- and biological – should be treated equally in matters of inheritance. By this, they meant primarily that financial gifts from parents should be equal, since it was recognised by many that equal outcomes could not, for reasons which will become clear, be guaranteed. Typically, these views were expressed in unequivocal terms, often given further emphasis in concluding comments such as ‘And we’re quite clear about that’ or ‘We both think that’. It was also noticeable that some parents who subscribed to this view implied that they thought the ‘equal shares’ solution was obvious. In other words, for them ‘equal shares’ represented a form of ‘natural’ justice,

one for which no justification is required. One man, who has a stepson and a biological daughter made this explicit:

‘I’d treat them as equal, fifty-fifty. We never *talked* about it ‘cos I don’t think it’s interesting (laughter). It was just that the woman from the insurance was sat there and she said ‘What are you going to do?’ And it was ‘fifty-fifty’. Just like that. It’s just *natural*...I’ve always thought of splitting it down the middle’ (Martin Hunt, aged thirty-one, emphasis in original).

While another respondent, Dave Hughes (who has one biological son and one stepson), does not suggest his ideas on handling inheritance are self-evident, his views nonetheless reflect those of Martin Hunt above, as well as those of many other parents too:

‘They’d be treated the same. They’d be *equal*. I mean I would *never* - I mean I try my best not to differentiate between the two of them *now*. *No way* could I ever do anything like that in a *will*’ (Dave Hughes, aged twenty-seven, emphasis in original).

There is some suggestion in Dave Hughes’ emphasis on the word ‘will’ that he does indeed regard it as an important means of communicating what he feels about his two sons – not only to them personally, but to others, too. Whereas the occasional differential treatment of his sons – which he tries to avoid anyway – represents, in his view, a fleeting or temporary aberration of his relationship with them, differential treatment in a will is more serious, representing as it does a permanent – and more public – statement about those relationships. It is therefore, as Finch, Mason, Masson *et al* (1996) suggest, precisely on account of the insights a will offers into family relationships that Dave Hughes and others may worry.

Ken Phillips and his wife, Marjorie, also want their children to inherit ‘equal amounts, equal shares’ (see the opening comment to this chapter). Ken married Marjorie twenty-five years ago, at the same time becoming stepfather to her two sons (then aged six and

four) by a previous marriage. He and Marjorie subsequently had a daughter, Helen. Helen has the same surname as her mother and father, while the boys have retained the surname of their biological father. What Ken says about inheritance reinforces what he has said earlier about his relationships with his biological daughter and two stepsons. The difficulties he has experienced with each of his children in the twenty-five years of being both a stepfather and a biological parent, are viewed by him as an inevitable part of parenting *any child*. Given the significance that Ken and many others attach to a day-to-day shared history, it is not surprising that he in no way distinguishes among them in terms of how close he feels towards them.

Nor is it surprising – given the priority accorded to blood relatives under the intestacy rules and the fact that stepchildren have no automatic rights – that Ken and Marjorie were anxious about what would happen if they did *not* get it ‘all written down’ in a will. If neither of them had written a valid will (and assuming Marjorie had predeceased Ken), the intestacy rules would distinguish between Ken’s biological and step- children, favouring the claims of the former over the latter, and would distribute his assets accordingly. Such an outcome would constitute a gross *misrepresentation* of their family relationships. For them, as for many parents in this study, the equal treatment of children is important, not only in relation to inheritance, but as a fundamental and guiding principle of family life more generally. This emerges clearly when talking to Ken’s wife Marjorie. What she says about fairness offers considerable insights into some of the *processes* through which decisions about inheritance come to be made, and, since it reflects the views of a number of parents, is quoted at some length:

‘So the will’s been made. And the house is to be *divided* between the *three* of the children. All three are the executors as well as the beneficiaries. So they have to sort it *out* too. And if anything happens to *them*, then their share goes to their children (respondent’s biological and step- grandchildren)...And both me and Ken have agreed on this. We didn’t want any unpleasantness or anything. It was all to be *shared*, to be equal shares between the *three* of them...It’s the same, if ever I get anything for the grandchildren down here, I make sure that just because I don’t see Liam (stepgrandson who lives two hundred miles away), that

eventually I must send him something too...And if ever I get myself a tea towel or something, I get one for Shelley, too (older son's partner who lives locally). I see her quite a lot. But then I'm making up this pack for Emma (Liam's mother) as well (laughter). Because I do feel it's very important that everybody's treated the same. I don't like any different treatment at all...And Ken's the same. Like, last week I got a pen for the two grandchildren down here. And he says 'Don't forget, you *are* going to get Liam a pen aren't you. You see, *he* won't forget him either' (Marjorie Phillips, aged fifty-six, emphasis in original).

This passage illustrates a number of important points. First, it highlights how parents' reflections on the moral dimensions of stepfamily life – what in an earlier chapter I described as parents' *moral reflexivity* – have far-reaching implications, not only in terms of who is included or excluded as 'family', but also for the obligations and commitments – emotional, financial, and practical – these relationships build up over time (Finch and Mason, 1993). Thus, what Marjorie Phillips and many other parents say about inheritance follows directly from what they said about family relationships in the preceding chapter, where distinctions, if any, in how close they *felt* towards their biological and step- children were invariably followed by the qualification that their children should receive equal *treatment*. In the above example, this is illustrated in the way Marjorie Phillips monitors fair practice within her family on both a small and grand scale – from the fair distribution of goods during her lifetime, to the fair distribution of material assets after her death.

Secondly, in attending to the requirements of what she and her husband regard as fair practice, their thoughts and actions epitomise that imaginative 'reversal of perspective' and 'reciprocal recognition' (Benhabib, 1992) analysed in relation to 'contact' in Chapter 5. In other words, by putting themselves in the position of their stepgrandson, Liam, they reach the conclusion that he must be treated no differently from their other, geographically closer, grandchildren (a stepgrandson and a biological granddaughter). This is so whether it is a matter of sending him some small gift now, or considering his interests for the future as a beneficiary in their will. Similarly, their younger son's new partner, Emma, whom they see rarely and have known for only two years, must not be

treated differently from their elder son's partner, Shelley, whom they see regularly and have known for thirteen years or more. And interestingly, as both Ken and Marjorie insist elsewhere in their separate interviews, their commitment to their step- and biological grandchildren is in no way diminished by the fact that their sons are cohabiting with their respective partners (Shelley and Emma) rather than married to them.

Finally, in designating their children as both executors and beneficiaries of their will, so that 'they have to sort it out too', it is clear that their children's presence at the 'moral party' (Bauman, 1993; 1995) and their participation in 'the moral conversation' (Benhabib, 1992) is actively required. Indeed, as her husband's comment at the beginning of this chapter indicates, their children have already been brought onto the moral stage by being told in advance what their parents' intentions and wishes are. In other words, in making her will, Marjorie Phillips, like her husband, bequeaths not only material assets but also a set of values.

Implicit in their decisions about inheritance are the hopes and expectations that their children will act co-operatively to promote each other's interests. This hope was echoed in comments from other parents whose children were now adult. There is moreover, no ambiguity on the part of parents concerning the moral entitlement of stepchildren to a share in a stepparent's estate. Interestingly, these examples are at odds with Finch's (1994) claim, made on the basis of what adult stepchildren revealed in her study of inheritance, that 'the claims of stepchildren are ambiguous at best' (1994: 9). In the morally reflexive act of writing a will, Ken and Marjorie Phillips, like many others in this study, subscribe to a broader, richer view of inheritance, one in which cultural and moral values (Gittens, 1993; Thompson, 1990) concerning stepfamily life are also made explicit and passed on. Exploration and development of this latter theme forms the basis of analysis in the following chapter.

Emergent resolutions: 'We struggled...'

While some parents believed it was only 'natural' to treat children equally in relation to inheritance, or were able to reach this decision without undue difficulty, this was not so

for everyone. Some couples moved only gradually to this position. It emerges from these data that some of the most sensitive issues for parents in stepfamilies revolve around their differential access – both past and present – to economic resources. As has been noted a number of times, given that women are more likely to be the main or full-time carers of children after divorce, it is unsurprising that they are often economically more disadvantaged than men (see Maclean, 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). This continues to be the case despite women's increased rates of participation in the labour market, and despite the continuing financial obligations some men have to their 'first' families at the same time as they are contributing to the maintenance of 'second' ones. This disparity sometimes becomes problematic in relation to inheritance when each partner has children from a previous partnership whose interests they are keen to uphold.

These tensions are highlighted in the following passage in which Charlie Summers gives a detailed description of how his and his partner's ideas on inheritance gradually shifted over time. Each had the interests of three adult children from a previous marriage to consider:

'We struggled to find a way of making a will which would respect the proportions we were each bringing in (laughs). We were going to try and ensure that the children would get those disproportionate amounts. And we realised really that there were so many different stages in relation to our accumulated, shared wealth, that it actually wasn't feasible to do it. And for whatever reason, money, and who's spending it, is not an issue between us. And in effect, we changed our position. Maybe it's our confidence in each other. So we decided to just have a will in which we would leave everything to each other, trusting the other to behave responsibly. And our expectations of each other are that the one who survives will have a will which leaves it equally between our six children' (Charlie Summers, aged fifty-three).

This passage articulates the different and more complex facets of fairness which may have to be considered in the context of stepfamilies and inheritance. Not only must

fairness among children be considered, the compounding factor of fairness between partners must also be addressed. In the search for shareable interpretations of responsibility (Walker, 1989: 20), their concept of fairness has shifted quite dramatically. This highlights how the principle of fairness cannot be conceived in rigid or static terms. Here, fairness is flexible and evolving, sensitive to the changes of context in which it is to be operationalised. Thus, what is particularly striking about this passage is the way in which it charts the shifts which may occur in people's thinking.

In addition, as stated above, it demonstrates the salience of Giddens' (1991, 1992) concepts of trust and risk as crucial factors in intimate relationships. As the above passage indicates – and this is endorsed by many other respondents – no less are these important factors when it comes to matters of inheritance. Given the emphasis in law on testamentary freedom, a second spouse can of course dispose of her or his property without obligation to any stepchildren (Finch, 1994: 8). People's decisions on how to handle inheritance may change alongside their altered perceptions and expectations of their relationships with partners.

In the case of Charlie Summers, above, the perceived risks – namely, that if he dies his new partner may not honour his wishes – are outweighed by the trust which has developed between them. Further, as the balance between 'risk' and 'trust' shifts, a different outcome ensues, one in which the emphasis is less on a need to honour the disproportionate amounts of wealth each partner brought into the relationship, than on the equal and ongoing commitment each perceives the other to be bringing to that relationship now. Interestingly, for Charlie Summers and his partner, as for others in their position, this equality of commitment appears to imply an 'equal shares' approach to the division of assets after their deaths. A similar approach is shown by Joan Harker who has two biological children from her first marriage and three stepchildren from her second one:

'So the money was mine that we set up with, but obviously as the relationship goes on, the gap gets narrower between what you both put in...So we decided that what we would do would be to split it equally

between the five children, whatever our estate was, even though I'd put more into it' (Joan Harker, aged forty-eight).

In addition, it is worth noting the points of similarity between the career and relationship trajectories of Charlie Summers and his partner and those of other couples, including Joan Harker and her husband, for whom tensions also surfaced in this regard. First, they were 'middle-class' in terms of their consumption and occupation. For example, all were in professional occupations; all of them had been home owners; all were car owners. Second, they had all moved into their current relationship at the age of fifty years or above. Third, by this age they had each reached what they considered to be their maximum earning potential and had each accumulated what they considered to be fairly substantial assets (through a combination of savings, redeemed mortgages, and wealth inherited from their own parents). Fourth, in addition to these personal characteristics, they usually had adult step- and biological children who were no longer living at home and who were geographically distant. This meant that the shared history between these stepparents and stepchildren had been brief or virtually non-existent.

Given, as was argued in the previous chapter, that the quality and duration of shared history plays a significant role in determining the extent to which people are included or excluded as close family members, it is not surprising that these combined biographical factors create more uncertainties about inheritance than amongst those with longer histories and less accumulated wealth. Finally, in some cases where parents brought disparate amounts of wealth into their relationship, they decided to make *unequal* distributions amongst their children. These examples are explored in the final section on unequal outcomes.

Confounding factors and unintended consequences

Before considering unequal outcomes, there are two aspects of inheritance in stepfamilies which, given the different histories and different 'family assets' each partner and their children bring to the new family arrangement, make *wholly* equal outcomes undesirable or unlikely. They are therefore ambiguous and fit uneasily into

either of the broad categories of fairness. The first relates to personal possessions; the second relates to the possibility that any child in a stepfamily may also inherit from a non-resident biological parent. Thus, although many parents emphasise the importance of equal treatment for children, these aspects confound parents' intentions so that equal outcomes or distributions cannot be guaranteed.

Personal possessions

The two most common items to be mentioned in this context were photograph albums and jewellery, which in most cases had strong links with the respondents' previous relationship history. For this reason, these items also had strong links with any children from that relationship. It was therefore, to those children, that is, to respondents' biological children that these items would be passed on – either as a lifetime gift or, more frequently, in a will. In the following passage, Linda Townsend summarises what many people felt about the continuing significance of photograph albums associated with a previous family history:

'What we've done since Tom and me met, is we've got our own photo album of us two and our family as it is now. And Becky (respondent's three year old stepdaughter) has got a photo album with her Mum, and my two have got one with me and them and their Dad in it...And they'll have it one day...that's part of their life, and I think they would want to see themselves as they were growing up. And although you want them to think that this is our little family as it is now, I don't really want them to forget that they did have another one too...You do *know* they have got another history. As we both have a history, Tom and me' (Linda Townsend, aged thirty-five, emphasis in original).

Occasionally – and this followed from how inclusive or exclusive people had been in whom they counted as 'close family' – personal items were willed to members of their *former partner's* family, as occurs in the following example:

'I suppose (long pause) it makes some sort of sense all round if things like jewellery went to Lizzie. I would like to put Lizzie in the will, because she is my niece. By marriage she's my niece. I know I'm no longer married to Alan but I still think of her as my niece. So I would like to give her an amount of money anyway, but also things like jewellery, she would be the person to give them to' (Marion Hughes, aged thirty-three).

It is possible, although entirely speculative, that one of the reasons Marion Hughes intends to bequeath her jewellery to her niece derives from the fact that she herself has two sons but no daughters. An additional significant factor may be the close relationship Marion Hughes has continued to share with Lizzie's mother, her first husband's sister. This friendship has continued through Marion's separation, divorce and remarriage, despite pressures from her former husband to end it. Her insistence that Lizzie is still her niece is interesting, given that Lizzie's mother, in legal terms, is now an 'out-law', an 'ex' sister-in-law. If Marion Hughes' approach supports the view that individuality, diversity and choice are key features of English kinship (see Chapter 2), it also seriously challenges some of the key assumptions about family and kinship which lie behind inheritance law.

It should be noted, however, that while jewellery was most often willed by female respondents to female relatives, possibly indicating gendered practices in bequeathing, there were exceptions to this. In the following example, Carol Thompson discusses what she intends to do with her jewellery. She has two biological sons, Dean and Gary, from her first marriage, and one biological son, Ryan, together with three adult stepchildren from her current one:

'Dean and Gary have both picked a ring each. Ryan will get my engagement ring because it's his father who gave it to me. These boys are mine, whereas the stepchildren are all much older. If they'd been young, too, then I couldn't discriminate. I would have to give them all the same because they're my husband's children. But they're adults and

they've got their own lives and we haven't been part of them. So it's different' (Carol Thompson, aged thirty-five).

In another example, Jamie Singleton, who has an eight year old biological son as well as being a stepfather to two year old triplets and an eight year old stepson, thinks about what he may do with some of his personal possessions:

'I haven't made a will yet, but I have thought about that. It's purely sort of personal things. There are things (pause) that I suppose I would like certain people to have...I've got this, my granddad's wedding ring and I've got a solid silver hand-engraved one put away upstairs. And I've been thinking about who...So, the two older boys (his step- and his biological son) it's a case of each of them can have either' (Jamie Singleton, aged thirty).

In addition to illustrating how jewellery is sometimes passed from female to male relatives as well as from male to male, the above passages are important, too, for their indication that the quality of relationship, as much as the genealogical position of beneficiaries, is a significant factor in people's decisions about inheritance. Thus, in the same way 'blood' relatives did not automatically assume a greater or lesser significance than step-relatives in people's definitions of 'close family' (see chapter 6), so, too, in relation to inheritance, no such automatic assumptions can be made. As the example of Jamie Singleton demonstrates, together with a number of others in these data, stepchildren are also singled out to be the recipients of personal possessions, particularly in the context of long and/or close association with that child.

In addition to jewellery and photograph albums, 'house contents' and items of furniture were also mentioned as items that would be bequeathed to parents' biological children. Again, this decision was often explained in terms of family history. This is brought out in the following passage in which Joan Harker, who had used her own money to set up home in the initial stages of the relationship with her new partner, nonetheless decides to divide hers and her partner's estate equally among their five children:

‘And it would be balanced by my children getting contents, because really it was their home. Now really, what difference contents makes is not that much. But, they are five equal children. And I think the difference would be that Helen (respondent’s biological daughter) would get my jewellery, and the contents would be split between her and Nicholas (respondent’s biological son)’ (Joan Harker, aged forty-eight).

Non-resident biological parents: an unknown factor in the equation

Only a small minority of parents raised, unprompted, the possibility or probability that their stepchildren would inherit too from a non-resident biological parent. In all other cases, the question was asked of parents whether that possibility had occurred to them, and whether, in the light of their response, it would make any difference to what they had decided to do. In both situations, parents were unanimous and unequivocal. The following emphatic response by a father with one step- and one biological son summarises parents’ positions well:

‘No, I hadn’t thought about that. But that wouldn’t affect what we would do. We would treat that as totally separate. It wouldn’t affect us at all. And anyway, we don’t know what Alan would do. But I don’t think you *could* let it affect you...As far as I’m concerned we’d treat them both the same because we don’t see any difference between them. I couldn’t justify changing what we’ve done for Joseph in our will just because Alan might do something...It’s not as if Alan and Joe had a life together. I think it just wouldn’t be right at all’ (Dave Hughes, aged twenty-seven, emphasis in original).

Again, another stepfather, for whom this possibility had not occurred and for whom it appeared to come as a shock, made similar points:

‘Can’t see it’d make any difference at all (long pause). Don’t bear any relevance to anything I’d do...I mean, what you trying to say? Are you

saying that because Paul's getting some off his biological parent, I should dock some of his? Should I say Sallie should get his share?' (Martin Hunt, aged thirty-one).

There is a sense in what Martin Hunt says that, while he knows what he intends to do, he is unsure about what, if any, expectations exist of him in this respect. What emerges forcefully from both these examples is the point made earlier that will writing is an important means of moral self-representation, a final statement on how parents view their relationships with their children. It is therefore entirely appropriate that what action other people may take has little impact on what parents have decided they will do.

Fair means unequal outcomes

It was far less common, occurring with only two couples in different and very specific circumstances, that decisions about what was fair could not be identified with equality of outcome for their children. In the first, this decision derived from consideration of the different economic resources each partner had brought, and continued to bring, into the relationship. In the second and more ambiguous example, it emerged following careful consideration of the interests of a former partner who had died.

Fairness between current partners

In the interests of what was deemed fair to each other as well as to their children, Deb Casson and her partner decided that the different amounts of accumulated wealth each one had brought, and indeed continues to bring, into the relationship should be reflected in similarly disproportionate bequests to their six adult children (Deb had two children; John had four). She describes the processes leading up to that decision:

'We thought about it, what would happen, say if I died. Would John have my share of the house and all my things and what would happen to my children? And the same for him...What would happen to his money

and his share of the house and things? So we tried to face that, have a look, even then, and I mean it's difficult. It's different from when you marry the first time and you just accept that if you died, all your money and things would go to your husband or whatever. The conventions are there to deal with it...Everything felt joint then and it was. You go into your second partnership with very different ideas. It's utterly different. You can't pretend that things go on for ever' (Deb Casson, aged forty-seven).

Here, the reluctant recognition that things do not go on forever forces them to confront the financial 'risks' they take if they 'pretend' otherwise. What is crucial for Deb Casson and her partner is that the 'risks' at stake are not solely the financial and material interests of their respective children, but also those of themselves, too. Given the possibility that their relationship of eleven years standing may, as with each of their previous marriages, end in divorce rather than death, they are keen to maintain their separate financial interests. As Deb Casson indicates, this is not easy to acknowledge, particularly as there are no conventions for dealing with the situation. Unlike the situation described by Charlie Summers where the trajectory of his new relationship – and in particular the development of trust within it – led to the view that certain financial 'risks' could be taken and their disproportionate amounts of accumulated wealth be discounted, Deb and John Casson reach the opposite conclusion:

'The house is jointly owned by both of us, but if anything happened to either of us, the other one would have a lifetime's interest in the share of the one who had died. And the goods and things would go to the surviving one, too. When the other one dies, the possessions would be divided among the six children, my things going to my children, John's things to his. But John's money, half of it would go to his four children. And the other half would go to my two daughters and to me. So I would get less than half his money. We discussed it and came up with that' (Deb Casson, aged forty-seven)

Deb and John Casson's concept of fairness frames what Benhabib (1992) terms a contextually sensitive ethic, one with a 'shape' which can accommodate their different family histories and do justice to the 'different ideas' they now have about what the future may hold. Again, that John Casson's children were adult when he remarried meant that the shared history between Deb Casson and them had been brief, with no day-to-day contact of 'living as a family'. For Deb Casson, this was an important (and in some ways regrettable) feature of their shared biographies, one to which she attributed not only their decisions about inheritance, but also those concerning other financial arrangements, too.

The situation facing Deb and John Casson is one addressed by a number of legal commentators. For example, Prime (1986) describes how second marriages can raise particular problems. He suggests that because in such situations, one or both partners may have children from a former partnership, the financial commitment of the partners to each other may be less. The survivor may then have inadequate means to provide alone for his or her needs. If the surviving spouse then applied to the court for provision, the deceased may be seen as having a moral responsibility to both the applicant spouse and the beneficiary children under the will. If the estate is large, these conflicting demands can be met. If it is modest, as is often the case, it is more difficult.

Following the example of judgement in case law, Prime suggests a strict life-interest in the marital property as the optimum solution. In his view this achieves a fairer balance between the competing claims of the stepparent and stepchildren (Prime, 1986). It is interesting that, without prior legal help or advice, Deb and John Casson had reflected on precisely these issues – fairness and the parameters of moral responsibility to their own and each other's children – and had reached the same conclusion themselves regarding the optimum solution.

Fairness to a former partner who has died

The sensitivity of the issues surrounding new partners' disparate amounts of wealth are compounded, it seems, when a first or former partner of one of them has died. This is particularly so in relation to what in matrimonial property law is referred to as 'family

assets'. While the exact meaning of this term is the subject of some dispute, it is generally agreed that it refers to the 'matrimonial aggregate' (Kahn-Freund, 1955) or, more simply, to those things acquired by one or both parties to a marriage, with the intention that they should provide continuing support for them and their children during their joint lives (Ross Martyn, 1985: 4-9).

Where a first marriage ends in death rather than divorce, it can be difficult, when it comes to making a will, for a remarried, surviving spouse to distinguish between the financial assets derived from the first marriage and those from the second. Where, for both partners a previous marriage has ended in divorce, these distinctions are not usually a pressing issue because the 'family assets' of the previous marriage are (with rare exception) dealt with and divided at the point of divorce. Again, it is the interests of any children of those former marriages which are at stake here. Arguably, these potential difficulties apply as much to cohabiting partners, and may in fact be exacerbated by the comparative lack of legal precedent for dealing with them.

For Mary and George Gallagher, who had married seven years after Mary's divorce and one year after the death of George's first wife, making these distinctions was an essential part of working out what was fair for themselves and their five adult children. As stated at the beginning of this section, this is an ambiguous example of unequal outcomes, one which in some respects could be classified as equal outcomes. Mary Gallagher gives some insights into this process:

'We've gone into this in a great deal of detail...We were trying to work it out, to make sure everything was just right, for my girls and for his girls. Because obviously some of the money that had been tied up in George's house before we moved here was Pamela's, his first wife's, money...So we decided, after a lot of thought, that with the money George got from selling his and Pamela's house, we would give something to his three girls in recognition of Pamela. I mean it wasn't the full amount, because we couldn't afford to do that at that point. But it was what we felt we wanted to do at that time, before we bought this house. So we've done Pamela's side of things, because she wouldn't have wanted her money to

come to me or my girls. And what's left we feel is George's and mine. I also want some of my money from selling my house to go to my girls now...But whatever's left after we've both gone will then be divided equally between the five girls...apart from things like our wedding rings and George has got some chairs (Mary Gallagher, aged fifty).

Unequal outcomes are somewhat obscured here by George and Mary's decisions to make substantial lifetime gifts to their respective daughters, and then to divide 'whatever's left' after their deaths equally between the five girls. In this way, the substantial disparity between the 'family assets' each derived from their first marriage is maintained, while at the same time attempts are made to convey to the five girls that they are equal. George Gallagher made it clear in his interview that he had worked out very carefully the amount his three daughters would have received from his first wife's share of the marital home and had informed them that their lifetime gifts of several thousand pounds represented part of that inheritance. He also added that while the fact of these bequests was known to his stepdaughters, the precise amounts were not. This suggests there were tensions between the principle of fairness as it applied to the interests of George's deceased wife, Pamela, and fairness as it applied to Mary and George's 'new family' with 'five children'.

Conclusion

It is clear that for most people in this study, a will is, in Hekman's terms (1995: 24) an important means of moral self representation, an unequivocal and final statement on the quality of their relationships with their children. There is the concern – shared by many – that if they fail to make a will or fail to make detailed provisions in one, then the law will dispose of their assets in a way which would offer people the *wrong* insights into how they view their relationships with their biological and step- children. Contrary to the basis on which family provision law operates, fairness, as shown above, is indeed the fundamental principle on which they operate. In addition, on the basis of these data at least, that the children of a former marriage should not 'lose out' is a major concern for all parents.

In working out what is fair, parents create a concept of fairness which is sensitive to the specificities of their own family arrangements. As suggested in Chapter 2, this is in keeping with key features of English kinship – individuality, choice and diversity. In this, it is clear that legal discourses on inheritance, assuming as they do a model of the family with one couple and a single line of descent, prove especially unhelpful in meeting their requirements in this regard. That this is so raises the question of how far current inheritance law, with its (increasingly) unrepresentative model of ‘the family’, can be said to reject, rather than reflect, the wishes of an ‘average testator’. It also indicates that in the way parents are left to work out for themselves the handling of these complex situations – not only with regard to inheritance but also contact and family relationships more widely – certain skills and resources are required. It is to consideration of how these may develop to which the following chapter turns.

Chapter 8

Stepfamilies of Origin: A Resource for Contemporary Family Relationships

'I was six at the time Ken came. I referred to him as my stepdad then. But as the years have gone on (long pause) and I know a bit more now than what I did then, I refer to him as my dad. I suppose I was quite rebellious against him when I was younger. But now I've got older, I look back and I see that he was always *there* for me (pause). Whereas my biological father *wasn't*. And I do feel guilty of what I used to do, that I was bad...And as a parent yourself, you look at it, and I mean I can see some things now in Jason (respondent's stepson) that used to be in me. He rebels against things I used to rebel against. And that's why I sort of deal with that differently, because I, I realise what I used to do' (Martin Hunt, aged thirty-one, emphasis in original).

Introduction

It was suggested in the preceding chapter that in the morally reflexive act of writing a will, parents in this study are not only, or even primarily, making a statement about their wishes and intentions in relation to material assets. They are, too, making a statement about certain values – fairness, equality, trust or commitment – and how these inform many aspects of their stepfamily relationships, in particular those with their children. Thus, a central consideration in writing a will was the potential impact and long-term implications of any distinctions they chose to make between their biological and step-children, and how these may subsequently be interpreted. Safeguarding children's interests emerged as a preoccupying concern, as indeed it did in relation to contact

(Chapter 6) and the handling of other post-divorce family relationships (Chapter 5). In other words, some parents recognise that in addition to the material assets they bequeath, they also leave other legacies – moral, emotional, and psychological.

It is of course the moral, emotional and psychological legacies of separation and divorce which remain the focus of much academic and political concern. It has been argued at a number of points in this thesis that many discourses on ‘the family’ tend still to promote the so-called traditional, nuclear, intact family as the desirable cultural norm, both morally and socially (Dennis and Erdos; 1993; Morgan, 1995; Phillips, 1997). This model, as many writers agree (VanEvery, 1991/2; Walker, 1992a, 1992b; Rogers, 1996; Bourdieu, 1996; Smart and Neale, 1999), is the standard against which all other family forms have been measured. And, as much of the research in this area has been quick to point out, these ‘other’ family forms have been found wanting (see for example, Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1989; Segalman and Marsland, 1989). Similarly, the research literature on repartnering and the transition of children into stepfamily life has little to say that is optimistic (see Kiernan, 1992; Cockett and Tripp, 1994). Yet, as Walker (1992a) rightly asks, how helpful is it to measure the psychological health and well-being of post-divorce families against that model (1992: 28)?

In addition, any grounds for optimism regarding stepfamily life are likely to be further undermined by myths about stepfamilies, which run alongside and feed into these other forms of discourse. Giving myth the broad inclusive meaning currently used by a number of oral historians (Samuel and Thompson, 1990; Tonkin, 1990; Thompson, 1990), it may be understood not as a purely fictitious narrative, but as any narrative which has fictitious elements or is treated as if it were wholly true. As Samuel and Thompson (1990) go on to say – and they cite the myth of ‘wicked stepmothers’ and ‘abusing stepfathers’ as a prime example – in all cases figures of myth are creatures of excess. They are either idealised or demonised. Splitting the world into images of absolute good or evil, he notes, is a classic way of handling our own fears about ourselves. Thus, while we might not be ‘ideal’ parents, at least we are not as bad as *stepparents*. In the public arena, these stereotypes are often much more absolute. This in part explains their grip on our imagination. For these reasons, Samuel and Thompson

argue, myth remains a potent force in our collective unconscious, a fundamental constituent of human experience. (Samuel and Thompson, 1990:1-16).

In the light of so much that is negative, it is, then, surprising how often these experiences are more positively represented by parents in this study. It is clear that for some respondents, individual experience acts as a modifier of the absolutes of public myth and a qualifier of the cast-iron certainties of research findings, a means through which negative stereotypes lose some of their hold or purchase. There is evidence of this in Martin Hunt's comment at the beginning of this chapter. Of particular interest in this respect was the discovery during interview that ten out of thirty people had, in addition to their current experience of stepfamily life, lived too in a stepfamily of origin. In addition, a further two respondents had 'gained' a stepparent in the year prior to interview.

In what must necessarily be a tentative analysis – given it is based almost entirely on a sample of ten – this chapter explores parents' perceptions of these key life events and transitions. Looking first at experiences of separation and divorce, it moves then to their reflections on the steprelationship, focusing particularly on that between stepparent and stepchild. It links these representations with other, more recent research into these processes, whose findings similarly suggest a more varied picture of their effects.

Separation and divorce as knowledge and resource

As indicated above, a number of influential studies in psychology and sociology (see also Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980; Lamb, 1982; Hetherington et al, 1982; Allison and Furstenberg, 1989; Goodyer, 1990) conclude that for the children with experience of parental separation and repartnering, their life chances in educational, social and psychological terms are below average or worse. In particular, it has been argued that these children are perceived as being at a greater 'risk' of reproducing these experiences in their own adult lives. Experiences of separation, divorce and repartnering are discursively constituted in terms of family *dysfunction* or *breakdown* and personal *inadequacy, failure* or even, *psychopathology* (see Goodyer, 1990; Hewitt, 1996). As

stated in Chapter 2, rarely in the research literature – apart from notable exceptions (Stacey, 1991; Giddens, 1992; Morgan, 1996; Smart and Neale, 1999) – are these changes in ‘family practices’ (Morgan, 1996) framed in potentially more positive terms. Thus, Giddens (1992) suggests, one must turn to the ‘self-help’ manuals and therapeutic literature for more positive representations. However, that these texts, too, are explicitly aimed at an *individual* reader in personal *crisis* (see for example, Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1989) obscures the fact, as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) point out that these experiences are routinely present in many societies and on a massive scale. As argued in Chapter 2, in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (1995) terms, separation, divorce and repartnering are an inescapable feature of the ‘contradictions of modernity’, in which men’s and women’s expectations of (amongst other things) their intimate relationships are at odds, not only with each other, but with the possibilities realistically available to them.

Arguably, from this perspective, relationship change can more usefully be characterised as a *function* of the priorities and choices we have to make, and the ‘opportunities’ and ‘risks’ associated with them. Notwithstanding the hopes, commitments and resolve people bring into relationships, relationship change is, then, a fundamental feature of contemporary intimacy. As argued in Chapters 4 and 6, it is increasingly likely (although not of course inevitable) that these experiences will form a significant part of each person’s biography. That these shifts are discernible in both discourse and practice is evident in how one respondent, Marjorie Phillips, describes her own experience of divorce some thirty years ago:

‘I mean I *did* feel I was a failure then...I don’t feel like that *now*. But you see, this was all those years ago. It was dreadful when Keith left ‘cos divorces weren’t so frequent then. You didn’t get divorced then, that’s the thing...I mean, you just never heard of it. I just didn’t know *how* I was going to tell my *parents*. I mean I didn’t tell them to start with, even though my husband had gone. I just couldn’t and I felt *awful*...Because I thought, ‘we’ve never had a divorce in the family, *never*’...Now it happens all the time. So you see, things *do* change, you change...(Marjorie Phillips, aged fifty-six, emphasis in original).

There is the suggestion here, as well as in the data more widely, that the increased prevalence of divorce is an important factor in effecting a shift in the meanings individuals are able to attach to these experiences. That divorce ‘happens all the time now’ allows Marjorie Phillips to move from a position in which she views divorce – and *herself* – as ‘failure’, to one in which both are framed in wider, social change. This shift is critical. As Linde (1993), a contemporary writer on life stories argues, re-working key life events is an essential process in making our life stories ‘coherent’ and ‘acceptable’ (1993: 3). Coherence, in that it provides an understanding of who we are and how we got there, is a particularly important feature of life stories. And since, culturally, these stories are ‘social units’ based on expectations of exchange, coherence is both a social and personal demand made on them. It is this quality in them which makes us ‘acceptable’ both to ourselves and others, and makes us appear as ‘competent members of our culture’ (Linde, 1993: 3-16).

These ideas are supported in what Marjorie Phillips says above. She has had to ‘re-work’ certain parts of her life story in order to make coherent sense of them and integrate them comfortably into her biography. She has been married to Ken, her third husband, for twenty-five years. Ken is stepfather to her two sons, Roger and Martin (whose comments open this chapter). Her first husband died in a road accident when she was aged twenty. Her second husband left her when their two sons were aged six and two. Yet, as she has stated earlier (see her comments in Chapter 4), ‘death is something you can understand’. For her, as for others in this study, it is the process of separation and divorce which proves a major stumbling-block to the achievement of coherence.

Moreover, contrary to what one may expect, it does not follow – at least on the basis of these data – that those with more *recent* experience of relationship change are automatically able to view it in these wider, more positive terms from the outset. Another respondent, Linda Townsend, was married for twelve years. She separated in 1994 and divorced in 1996. In the following passage, she recalls how she felt in those early months:

'It does change you, the divorce and everything, makes you better equipped. But there was a time when it wasn't so easy, when you think you can't get through all this. I didn't imagine anything like that would happen to me, and I did feel uncomfortable at the beginning if I'm totally honest (laughs). It was hard on the street and telling our parents. I often used to wonder 'What must people be thinking?' I really felt on show...People must've been wondering what was going on. And then when Tom moved in, I didn't know anyone else who was cohabiting (laughter). I felt I was doing something very different. Obviously it's got better. Even before I met Tom, I was already OK, I was calm' (Linda Townsend, aged thirty-five).

For both Linda Townsend and Marjorie Phillips, separation and divorce were experiences which, in their initial impact, seriously threatened to engulf them or overwhelm their basic trust and sense of security – what Giddens describes as our 'ontological security' (Giddens, 1991). It was, as Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) found in their research, only some considerable time 'after the event' that equilibrium returned and some form of resolution ensued. However, while a period of twenty-five years divides their experiences, an important factor which unites them is the complete absence of separation and divorce in their families of origin (that is, at the time they themselves were going through them). While they both make some connection between this factor and their own difficulties, its significance is not made explicit as it is by Deb Casson in the following extract:

'My first marriage ended about 1981 and we were together for about ten years. I didn't really think that divorce was something you could do, that *I* could do. Because I hadn't got any divorce in my family *at all*, it didn't really occur to me that that was something you *could* do. So it took me quite a time to realise or to think that's what I'm going to do. It was quite a hard decision to reach; I had to work really hard at thinking that through...And I'm sure my mother had some jealousy that I was able to leave my first marriage and that I decided to do that, a slight sense of envy, that I was privileged. She was just so lovely, but very restricted in

her life, not just because of my father but because of the conventions'
(Deb Casson, aged forty-seven, emphasis in original).

The crucial connection which Deb Casson makes is that the whole process of separation and divorce, in particular the decision-making process, would have been less arduous if it had already been 'familiar'. Quite simply, *because* there had never been any divorce in her own family, it didn't really occur to her that it was something she could do. Further, as Marjorie Phillips and Linda Townsend make plain, it is not only, or even primarily, the practical aspects of divorce which are most daunting. The moral dimensions of divorce – its impact and repercussions for children, for wider family, and even neighbours and outsiders, are a preoccupying concern. For these three women, and indeed for Deb Casson's mother, the absence of separation and divorce in their families of origin is regarded not as *enabling* (as many would argue and suppose), but as *disabling* when it comes to making decisions about their own adult relationships.

The observations of these three women are endorsed by other respondents who share similar backgrounds (see also Chapter 4). With no blueprint, no prior knowledge – moral, practical, financial or emotional – to fall back on, they perceived themselves to be ill-equipped for the situation confronting them. In particular, evaluating the potential, both positive and negative, of separation and divorce was 'hard'. If it is the case, as Linda Townsend claims, that one is 'better equipped' as a *result* of this process, there is the implication, too, that if the experience had been 'familiar', one would have been 'better equipped' to deal with it in the first place.

In the light of these observations, it is unsurprising that in those cases where separation or divorce had featured in a person's family of origin, the issue of its unfamiliarity never arose. In other words, it obviously did occur to these people that this was something 'you could do' in adult life should the circumstances require it. It is notable too that concerns about people 'finding out' – friends, neighbours and even family – were absent in all instances. That this is so suggests that prior, familial experience of divorce rendered its occurrence in their own lives in *some* way as unremarkable. This is not to suggest that the process of relationship change was experienced as straightforward or painless. Nor is it to imply that it was a course of action embarked on easily or without

regret. But it may in part explain why these respondents did not talk about feeling 'different' or stigmatised, or further, why divorce and relationship change were never articulated in terms of individual failure.

These contrasts are nicely captured in the following passage where Rachel Cunningham talks about divorce and the ending of her first marriage. Important for the way it highlights the very different context in which her decisions were made, it is quoted at some length:

'I was married in 1988 for five years...It was through my first husband that I gained much more confidence, and that seems a bit unfair because in the end that convinced me it wasn't the right thing for me...In a funny sort of way, there's a kind of subculture of divorce in my family. Because my grandparents were also remarried through divorce which was more unusual for that generation. And my Aunt Ellen, my mother's stepsister, was married twice...And she was married to her first husband for a short time. And in fact there's a pattern in all these relationships - my grandparents and uncles and aunts who were divorced, my brother and myself, all marry young for about five years, then remarry quickly and live with another partner for the rest of their lives. It's strange but it's *exactly* the same in *all* the cases...My parents *weren't* divorced, so they were the exception in the family. They were regarded as *odd* for not being divorced' (laughter). (Rachel Cunningham, aged thirty-two, emphasis in original).

Here, relationship change and the transitions associated with it are discursively constituted in very different ways from how they appear in much of the research literature or in some of the examples given earlier. It is not only *after* the occurrence of these 'events' that Rachel Cunningham is 'better equipped'. She is better equipped *from the outset*. The 'familiarity' of separation and divorce enables her to view relationship change as both possible and positive, a move which is undertaken from a position of confidence and self-esteem, not personal inadequacy or failure. As with Marjorie Phillips and Linda Townsend, some of this confidence derives from the

difficulties encountered and overcome in connection with her first marriage, that is, from her personal experience. Arguably, some of it derives from her educational resources and other forms of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1984). But crucially, some of it comes from the knowledge she already has of how relationship change has been handled on many occasions in her own family. For Rachel Cunningham, these experiences already 'make sense'. They already have that personal and social coherence which Linde (1993) regards as the hallmark of an 'acceptable' life story, one which makes us appear – to ourselves and others – as competent members of our culture.

From this perspective, the 'familiarity' of these experiences and the foresight it offers is useful, a resource on which she can draw. Unlike the pernicious 'cycle of deprivation' discourse, where relationship change and a range of evils associated with it are handed down through the generations, negatively predetermining each person's actions and life chances, the concept of resource implies something to be used, tapped and drawn upon as required. The experience of parental separation is something which is taken and shaped – reflexively – for the purposes of the user, not something which imposes itself on that person in any predetermined form. Importantly, as Kier and Lewis (forthcoming) have also noted, more recent research studies in this area (Amato and Keith, 1991; Kurdek, 1991; Olson and Haynes, 1993; Harding, 1993) are similarly questioning long-standing assumptions that parental separation *per se* has wholly and uniformly negative effects. Rather, they, too, point to the diversity of post-separation or post-divorce experience and a range of contingent factors important in shaping or influencing this.

Moreover, as a number of respondents indicated, their experience is a resource available not only to themselves, but to others, too. Typically, these included friends and adult siblings. On two occasions, it included respondents' parents who were in the process of remarrying following the death of a spouse. Difficulties associated with the divorce process, the transition into stepfamily life, and the handling of inheritance were mentioned as the issue or context in which help or advice was sought and provided. In addition, as the next section illustrates, separation and divorce in one's family of origin is a useful resource when it comes to clarifying or reformulating ideas about family relationships in the light of personal experience of these transitions.

Familial influences on handling post-separation and post-divorce relationships

Another pattern which emerges among those with separation and divorce in their families of origin is the tendency to reflect critically on how their parents or other close relatives handled their family relationships after these transitions. The emphasis in what respondents say is on the importance of 'keeping things open' or flexible. For example, Rachel Cunningham, who continues to include her former partner as a close family member (see Chapter 6), implicitly acknowledges the significance of her mother's influence in this respect:

'My brother divorced as well. And my mother's a very loyal person so she's still quite close to his first wife. She wouldn't just drop someone. So the fact that they got divorced...nevertheless, she felt she was part of the family, so that relationship would have to continue even though the marriage hadn't...Yes, and she keeps in touch with my first husband as well. He goes to stay with her and brings his new partner too. They're quite close. Mike (respondent's current partner) thinks that's *very* odd. But my mother considers that once someone is part of the family, then they *are*, for *good*, whatever happens ' (Rachel Cunningham, aged 32, emphasis in original).

It has been noted in the preceding section how Rachel Cunningham regards divorce in positive terms, as some kind of 'subculture' in her family. In the above passage, too, there is a similarly positive acknowledgement of how her mother handles certain post-divorce relationships, in this case those with her 'ex' son-in-law and 'ex' daughter-in-law. This situation illustrates the ways in which certain values – in this case loyalty and commitment – can be reformulated in ways appropriate to people's changing family structures. At the same time, as Stacey (1991) noted in her study of families in California, this may encourage the growth of what some may regard as 'odd branches' of relatives in divorce-extended families (Stacey, 1991: 61-89). And indeed, 'very odd' is the way Rachel Cunningham's second husband, Mike, describes this approach. He also thinks it 'odd' that Rachel maintains some form of relationship with her ex-husband who continues to be a significant person in her life.

Viewing the issue of loyalty and post-separation relationships from a very different perspective is Steve Thompson. As a young boy, he lost contact with his biological father not long after his parents divorced. Soon after that, he lost contact with all other family members except his mother:

'Loyalty is very, very important, with family and with friends...I haven't had a normal life. I've been in and out of prison right up until I met Carol (his third wife)...It's seven years I've been with her, the longest I've ever been with anyone. All my life, from the age of eight, when I was shoved in council care because I was unruly and unmanageable. Then approved school, then Borstal, then prison sentences...I've spent a good twenty-three years in prison...Loads of people leave you, don't stick by you...That's why *now* I've got to get it, do it right' (Steve Thompson, aged fifty-one, emphasis in original).

Here, it is the recollection of events of 'negative significance' (Morgan, 1996) in his family of origin which influence Steve Thompson's handling of his current (step)family relationships. Although he, too, lost contact with his three children from his first marriage when he went back into prison, that contact has now been re-established during his third marriage. And indeed, it was shown in chapter 5 how the impact of these different experiences is now a motivating factor in 'doing it' and 'getting it right' with regard to his *stepsons'* contact with their non-resident biological father. He and his current partner aim for – and achieve – contact arrangements which have a high level of openness and flexibility.

However, as the above example also shows, there is no easy or direct route between past events of negative significance and the building of current experiences which are more positive. The experience of loss of contact with his own father did not make Steve Thompson automatically 'better equipped' to deal with the issue of contact when his first marriage ended. Only some years later was that satisfactorily resolved. As argued in Chapter 5, a crucial factor in keeping contact arrangements open and flexible is the ability and willingness of all parties to co-operate in attaining that objective, often over a period of years. Tom O'Hare is another respondent who is also keen to keep contact

arrangements open and flexible, those between himself and his biological daughter as well as those between his three stepchildren and their non-resident, biological father. Again, he relates some of his motivation for doing this to what happened in his family of origin:

‘About things being open. It’s because I’ve experienced something similar...I mean my dad had been married before and he has a daughter by his first marriage. In fact she was here this week...But at the point my mum and dad got together, Dad had almost got custody of Helen. But his family, sort of his mum and sister, talked him out of it. And then, he had nothing to do with her for a number of years. But they did become reconnected again because I can remember going on holiday to Butlin’s with Helen and her daughters. And they used to come and stay with us. We used to play together...But I guess that was because of my mum. She must have been, she must have *accepted* Helen’ (Tom O’Hare, aged thirty-three, emphasis in original).

There is the suggestion in this passage that Tom O’Hare believes his father was ‘wrong’ to have lost all contact with his daughter Helen for a number of years. Nonetheless, in his own case, too, despite the importance Tom O’Hare attaches to contact, he himself has found this difficult to achieve in connection with his own biological daughter, aged two years. Although his daughter stays with him and his new partner (and her three children) every weekend, contact between them is currently subject to a court order. At the same time, he does remark – and this applies to a number of respondents – that his and his former partner’s ability to co-operate has increased over time.

By contrast, contact arrangements between his three stepchildren and their non-resident biological father have been open and flexible from the outset (see Chapter 5). And although he recognises that the ‘easygoing nature’ of his current partner is a key factor in facilitating this, he also states that contact arrangements are something ‘you all have to work at’. Simply to regard contact as ‘important’ is not enough. This, he claims, is the ‘mistake’ his father made some years earlier. Finally, given the context of this discussion, it is interesting to note that in the case of both Steve Thompson and Tom O’

Hare's father, it is the new partner, the 'wicked stepmother' of public myth, who is instrumental in 'reconnecting' father and adult child.

Relationships between siblings in stepfamilies

In addition to the issue of contact between father and child, Tom O'Hare's comments in the above passage suggest there is a second major issue over which he feels 'morally resentful' (Pritchard, 1991) towards his father. Not only did his father lose contact with a daughter, but in doing this he also deprived Tom of a fuller shared history with his half-sister. Implicit in this extract is the recognition that it was only through the efforts of Tom's mother, that is, Helen's stepmother, that some form of regular contact was maintained. This account of a thwarted relationship between half-siblings closely resembles that of another respondent whose (biological) father also lost contact with a child from a first marriage:

'I've got a half-brother, Nick, on my dad's side...And I managed to find him again and tried to sort of get to know him...With him being a blood relative, I thought, well, I've got to...It felt like that particular relationship was important, with there being such a long break in the relationship on my dad's side...Nick never came to our house. There'd been no contact at all (Jamie Singleton, aged thirty).

Again, there is a clear indication that the loss of contact between father and son is regrettable not only for its own sake, but also because it meant foreclosure on any relationship between the two *sons*. It is notable that among those whose families of origin were stepfamilies, the relationship between half-siblings consistently emerges as something of positive significance. Thus, if the above examples highlight the loss of this potentially rewarding relationship, there are others in which the potential is realised and its benefits affirmed. In the following passage, Lesley Morrison talks enthusiastically about her relationship with her half-sister with whom she continues to have a full and close relationship:

'Mary Jo's my younger sister, my (pause) *half*-sister. Like, she's got the same mum but a different dad. But I'm *very* close to her. Well, we're like two peas in a pod...I was eight when she was born. It was nice. She lives with my mum, just across the road there. And like last night, Mary Jo had Amy (respondent's daughter, aged two) while me and Dave went out. And she comes down here about eight o'clock and she sleeps here if we've been out...But she doesn't like taking money off me. But I think she *should* take money off me, know what I mean, 'cos I'm taking her time up. She's Amy's godmother anyway' (Lesley Morrison, aged twenty-one, emphasis in original).

These sentiments are echoed in other examples in which 'half-' sisters or brothers feature as close family members in the same way as 'full' siblings do. A similar finding emerged in Natasha Burchardt's (1990) analysis of life story interviews with people who had experience of living in a stepfamily. There, too, there were instances where people reported that no distinctions were made between the two sets of children within families (Burchardt, 1990: 245). This supports what has been found many times in this study, namely, that a full shared history is for many people as significant as a 'full' blood tie when it comes to defining 'close' family.

These examples also testify to the kinds of commitments and responsibilities built up over time. In the same way these are developed within intact families (Finch, 1989; Finch and Mason, 1990; Finch and Mason, 1993), they develop, too, in stepfamilies. As was shown in Chapter 6, these commitments are an important factor in people's decisions about whom they include as close family. That this is so has a number of implications concerning who takes part in negotiations about family responsibilities, and who plays a major role in fulfilling them. On the basis of these data, it is likely that stepparents and adult stepchildren will increasingly play a major role in these kinds of family discussions. This point is well illustrated in another example in which Keith Chandler talks about his adopted daughter, now adult, from his first marriage. In the following extract he provides some of the background to his and his first wife's decision to adopt the grandchild of one of his half-sisters:

'Actually, Linda's our adopted daughter. She's the granddaughter of Dorothy, one of my stepsisters. It was a case of Dorothy's daughter having this baby, and she didn't want to keep it. The baby was only a few weeks old. So it was put to us, and we said 'Yes, we would adopt her'...My mother was married twice. Her first husband died. But it's strange, I never really thought of it as being a stepfamily. You just thought 'She's my sister'. But really you know, she's a stepsister...I was the youngest of ten, the scrapings you might say, what with all the nine that had gone before me...Was it ten children or did my mother have twelve...No, that's right, four in her first marriage and four in her second. And she lost two, so that was ten...And I knew aunts who I used to visit regularly, sisters of my mother's first husband...They were just family, a family that grew and grew (laughter)' (Keith Chandler, aged sixty-eight).

In his somewhat uncertain calculations of how many children his mother had and how many siblings he therefore had, there is no sense of unease or tension. Quite simply, as he says, 'they were just family that grew and grew'. Elsewhere in his interview, Keith Chandler warmly recalled family gatherings in his childhood when the 'house would be full' of relations of all ages from several different families. He also indicates that he and his first wife were fortunate to be able to adopt Linda because they themselves had no prospect of having children, and several others among his 'stepsisters' and cousins had been ready and willing to adopt her, too. But again, there was no evidence of tension in recalling these negotiations. Technically, of course, those whom Keith Chandler describes as 'step'-sisters are in fact his *half* sisters (given that they share the same biological mother). Interestingly, this error occurred in several interviews. The following extract provides another illustration of this:

'I've just realised (laughter) that I've forgotten to put Helen on (chart). She's my stepsister. I never *think* of her as my stepsister. Always my *sister*. I'm just saying that to you, just to clarify the fact that she *is* my stepsister' (Martin Hunt, aged thirty-one, emphasis in original).

In fact, Helen is Martin's half-sister, the daughter of his biological mother and stepfather. From this example and what people say elsewhere, this error occurs precisely because, as Keith Chandler says, 'you just thought, she's my sister'. For many, these technicalities are thus irrelevant or redundant. On the other hand, as De'Ath (1992b) complains, since these terms are clearly distinguished and set out in dictionaries, 'there is no excuse' for their misuse when this occurs - as it does - in public statements or policy documents (De'Ath, 1992b: 10).

From this discussion of some of the more positive effects of relationship change, a number of important points emerge. First, it must be emphasised that no essentialist or simplistic claims are being made that separation or divorce is inherently a 'good thing'. While these examples do suggest – and this is supported by what has emerged elsewhere in this study – that the experience of separation, divorce and repartnering *can* be something which 'changes things' or 'changes your expectations' in useful and positive ways and 'makes you better equipped', they do not deny the very real difficulties associated with negotiating these transitions and reaching some degree of resolution. This is evidenced in the way these experiences elicited contradictory and ambivalent responses in all cases. Second, and this relates to my first point, there is nothing in these examples (as there was nothing in the illustrative examples given in Chapter 4) which lends support to Bauman's claims that people enter marriage or other significant relationships *anticipating* separation and divorce, and that they regard these experiences as 'just a game' (Bauman, 1995).

Third, it appears that the extent to which these experiences are already 'familiar' is an important factor in how people come to terms with, or make 'coherent' sense (Linde, 1993) of them when confronted with them in their own lives. Drawing again on Hekman's (1995) analogy of the 'toolbox' (a concept she borrows and develops from Wittgenstein and Foucault; see also Chapter 4), it may be argued that those who have none of these experiences in their families of origin have fewer discursive 'tools' available to them, fewer ways in which to frame or shape the changes they must undertake. By contrast, those who do have them have a broader range of tools at their disposal. *Some of these they will wish to use; some they will wish to reject.* This knowledge – derived both from their parents' experience as well as their own – is a

resource on which they can draw, an aid in crafting discourses and practices which better fit the familial arrangements they are currently building. These ideas are carried into the following section where it is shown further how those whose families of origin were stepfamilies can use this broader picture of relationship change as a valuable resource in modelling their own versions of stepfamily life.

With the benefit of foresight: the stepchild as stepparent

It has been shown in earlier chapters that the legal, practical and financial implications of separation and divorce – contact, dual households and the movement of children between households – means that stepfamily life is structured differently from how it is in other families. Often, this occurs in ways which are not of parents' or children's choosing. Parents in stepfamilies therefore have to reformulate certain key concepts relating to family life, including, it has been seen, the concepts of responsibility, stability, and fairness. Given the different histories and resources people bring to their new family arrangements, and the different points in the life course at which they enter them, working out what to do in specific contexts may require complex and sensitive negotiating skills – not only among members of 'new' families, but between members of 'new' and 'old' families, too. It was suggested that in doing this, parents in stepfamilies have few, if any, guidelines.

However, while this may be so for many parents in this study, a different picture emerges for those brought up in stepfamilies. These parents do have a working model which they can take and shape for the particular set of family arrangements they are building. For while these 'second generation' stepfamilies may *structurally* resemble the stepfamilies grew up in, they may diverge from them in the kinds of 'family practices' (Morgan, 1996) they exhibit or which they wish to promote. Again, particularly apposite in this context is Morgan's point that family practices can hold a 'negative significance' for people. It will be seen that respondents utilise both positive and negative experiences from their stepfamilies of origin when it comes to handling those aspects of stepfamily life which most perplex or preoccupy them now.

Relationships between stepparents and stepchildren

As stated in the introduction, myths are potent. In their tendencies to idealise or demonise, they exert powerful influences on our lives. More than that, as Burchardt (1990) points out and as my review of the research literature showed, a number of writers believe that these negative images of stepfamily life have the power *to shape the experience* of those who live in that context (Maddox, 1980; see also Robinson, 1980). In other words, myths which demonise stepmothers and stepfathers or depict stepfamilies as ‘troublesome places’ (Collins, 1990), may lead people to regard ‘trouble’ as an essential or inescapable feature of the steprelationship. As a consequence, people may contemplate or enter stepfamily life ‘fearing the worst’.

Arguably, if this promotes relationships which are excessively defensive, myth is not only a powerful form of discourse, it is a destructive one, too. As Giddens’ (1991; 1992) arguments imply, foreclosure on the risks of relationship means foreclosure on its opportunities. Expectation of ‘trouble’ can create the conditions for its own existence. From this perspective, myth becomes reality, a self-fulfilling prophecy. While not denying that ‘trouble’ may be a prominent feature of some steprelationships (as indeed it may be of *any* family relationship), it is clear from what has emerged so far that important qualifications and counterclaims to this position can be made and defended.

In this context, those whose lives have embodied the role of both stepchild and stepparent have an important role to play. Those whose families of origin were stepfamilies and who are now stepparents themselves can use that experience to disrupt and destabilise these negative stereotypes and craft for themselves – and others – more congenial narratives of stepfamily life. In doing this, in rejecting wholly negative ‘scripts’ and authorising more balanced or positive versions of stepfamily life, they not only use that experience as a valuable tool or resource, but they engage too in those acts of ‘discursive resistance’ (Hekman, 1995) fundamental to human or moral agency (see Chapter 4).

For a number of respondents, the process of becoming adults and stepparents themselves provided them with valuable insights into the difficulties and ambiguities their own stepparents may have experienced in that role as well as the ongoing

commitment they brought to it. On a number of occasions this led to a new appreciation of the steprelationship and increased closeness between stepparent and adult stepchild. Part of this process is traced in the following passage, in which Lesley Morrison, now aged twenty-one, reflects on the changing nature of the relationship between herself and her stepfather, whom she calls 'Dad'. Her biological father died when she was four; her stepfather came onto the scene when she was seven:

'I used to hate my dad. I used to slag him off no end and say 'You'll *never* be my dad'. I'd tell my mum he'd hit me and she'd go off her head at him (laughter)...I *really* disliked him. And I remember when we all first got together, we was all walking by the canal. And my older sister was making out she didn't want to walk near my dad either. And she moved that far away from him that she fell in the canal. Then there was a right 'to-do'...How he put up with staying in that sort of family life, I don't know. Because he came into a family with three kids that weren't his, which I think for *any* man is extraordinary. But I didn't sort of think of that until I got to be about eighteen. I mean it's only been in the last three years that I've actually thought: He's my dad and I love him...And he says to me now 'You used to *really* treat me bad'. And I says 'Yeah, I know, but I was at that *age*, wasn't I'...But like now, if he and my mum have a row, he comes down here for a fag and a brew. And like if I have a row with Dave, it's the same, I go up the road to my dad' (Lesley Morrison, aged twenty-one, emphasis in original).

It is impossible to capture in one extract the various factors which over the years have led Lesley Morrison to regard her 'dad' in the way she now does. Of particular significance in this respect has been his continuing support to her - financial, practical and emotional - during her pregnancy at the age of eighteen, and beyond. Important to both of them is her dad's new role as 'granddad' to her daughter. In addition, Lesley Morrison and her stepfather share a singular interest in stock car racing. The combination of these qualitatively different interests has allowed the development of a close, day-to-day, shared history, something which in earlier years seemed less accessible to them. Again, there is evidence here of how commitments and

responsibilities between stepparents and stepchildren develop and deepen over time as they do between biological parents and children.

As Lesley Morrison goes on to say, these changes have also made her reflect on how best to approach related issues in her own family, specifically her new partner's involvement in bringing up her daughter, and her own involvement in helping to bring up his children. She acknowledges similar difficulties to those her own mother experienced in this respect:

'It's really hard, getting that balance, knowing *what* to say and *when* to say it with other people's kids...And like Dave says about his two when they're playing up 'My kids, they're bloody awful sometimes aren't they'. And like I remember how I was and I says 'They're only *kids*, Dave...They've had *enough*. Have a bit of patience' (Lesley Morrison, aged twenty-one, emphasis in original).

As this passage indicates, not only is it hard for parents to find the right balance in sharing responsibility for each other's children, it is also difficult to know what expectations they may legitimately have about their children's capacities to adjust to new family arrangements. Here, it is her own memory of movement into the role of stepchild at the age of seven which enables her now, in her role as part-time stepparent to her partner's two children (aged seven and five years), to reverse perspective (Benhabib, 1992) and see things from their point of view. In this, Lesley Morrison's reflections on these issues have many features in common with the concerns expressed by Martin Hunt (see again his opening comment to this chapter). In particular, the most striking – and important – resemblance between these two accounts is their authors' ease of movement from the perspective of stepparent to that of stepchild, and back again. For both Lesley Morrison and Martin Hunt, it is their own experience of being a stepchild which elicits a thoughtful and perceptive reversal of perspective. It is these memories, together with the insights they offer, which lead them to deal with 'rebellious' behaviour in their own stepchildren 'differently' from how they might otherwise have done.

A second concern these respondents share is their desire as adults to 'make things up' with their stepfathers. This is apparent in how Martin Hunt continues:

'Yeah, I remember being terrible towards him. But as I say, it was not till I grew up that I recognised the fact that I shouldn't have done those things, said those things...So now I try and make things up to him' (Martin Hunt, aged thirty-one).

Having also interviewed Martin Hunt's stepfather, Ken Phillips, it is interesting to note his perceptions of these changes, and how they substantiate his stepson's account. In the following extract, he compares Martin's initial animosity towards him with the easygoing acceptance of his younger brother, Roger. At the same time, he contrasts these initial differences between the two boys with the situation now:

'Martin was older than Roger, and so he'd got attached to his father more, and couldn't accept that he'd *gone* for quite a long time. Their grandfather told me that when their father first went, Martin used to look in all the cupboards for him. And so I can imagine (long pause). Whereas Roger, being that bit younger, not yet two, looked on me like 'Well, he'll do, he's my dad' (laughter)...And so, though I would have said when I *first* got married to their mother that I got on better with Roger than I did with Martin...actually, *now* (pause), I mean Martin is always turning up in his car and saying 'Let's go out for a ride', and he takes me *miles* (laughs). And so *now* I get on as well with him as with Roger' (Ken Phillips, aged fifty-eight, emphasis in original).

Here, as with Lesley Morrison and her stepfather, the discovery of a mutual interest – in this case a passion for driving around the English countryside – acts as a springboard for the development of a close, shared history. Here, too, there is reciprocal recognition on the part of stepchild and stepparent of what has shaped these changes. That is, appreciation of a stepparent's continuing support and commitment is reciprocated by that parent's acknowledgement of the contribution and effort the adult stepchild is now making. Once again, in Ken Phillips' words 'And so I can imagine' is evidence of that

enlarged thinking and reversal of perspective which has emerged in different contexts throughout this study. By attributing the different receptions his two stepsons gave him to their different ages and life experience, Ken Phillips implicitly rejects notions of the innate animosity of the steprelationship.

It should be noted, moreover, that neither Lesley Morrison's nor Martin Hunt's stepfather had prior experience of stepfamily life. This reinforces a similar point made earlier, namely that if being a child in a stepfamily can usefully provide a model for those who are currently stepparenting and can *facilitate* an insightful reversal of perspective with one's own stepchildren, that prior experience is not essential. It has been demonstrated many times on the basis of these data that parents who do not have prior experience of stepfamily life but who are willing to engage in the *practice* (Benhabib, 1992) of reversing perspective, are able to be imaginative about a (step)child's point of view.

These two cases raise another important issue. In these comparatively short extracts, Lesley Morrison and Martin Hunt contrast the quality of past and present relationships with their respective stepfathers in notably stark terms. However, it should not be inferred from this that relationships with their stepfathers were wholly awful for the twenty or thirty years prior to reaching this point, nor that they have been wholly unproblematic since then. On the basis of what they say elsewhere in their interviews, this is clearly not the case. Rather – and here I follow Thompson's (1990) arguments about oral histories in general – it is that memory, like myth, tends to require a simplification of its subject matter (Thompson, 1990: 8). In this way people make sense of disparate and untidy memories from various points in their lives.

Similarly, as another contemporary oral historian, Elizabeth Tonkin (1990) insists, it is vacuous in this context to juxtapose myth against 'real' history or truth against falsehood. Life stories, or what she prefers to call 'representations of pastness', are precisely that. They are accounts of what we *understand* our past experience to have been (Tonkin, 1990:27). As such, they cannot be crudely weighed against some prior 'truth' or 'reality'. As stated in the preceding section, these representations are crucial to making 'coherent' sense (Linde, 1993) of who we are and how we got there. It is

only from the standpoint of the present that Lesley Morrison and Martin Hunt can reach a fuller understanding of their steprelationships in the past. Inevitably, factors such as the temporal constraints of interview and the demand for 'coherence' will mean that untidy or contradictory elements in their narratives are to some extent glossed or simplified. As Thompson (1990) insists, this does not mean that these are false memories.

It has been shown in the preceding section how the handling of relationships between siblings in stepfamilies can influence a person's handling of contact in their own stepfamily situation. Similarly, the way in which relationships between stepparents and stepchildren have been handled can also affect an adult stepchild's approach to the same issue. Here, a respondent's childhood recollections of her stepfather consciously informs the way she handles contact between her two children and their non-resident biological father. In contrast to the experience of Lesley Morrison and Martin Hunt, the relationship between Joan Harker and her stepfather is represented in positive terms from its outset:

'I didn't know my biological father...I lived with who I called 'Dad' from the age of five to about twelve, when I first knew something was amiss...And then it was a year before he went, at Christmas. I had slight contact. He sent me birthday and Christmas presents till I was about fifteen. Then I lost contact with him (long pause). And I don't know why I didn't see him. There might have been the idea that because he was my *stepfather*, the contact wasn't important. And it might not have been to him, you don't know. But I was upset about it. I think that's why I feel so strongly that Jonathan and Clare *ought* to have some relationship with their father (Joan Harker, aged forty-eight, emphasis in original).

What is particularly notable about this passage is the way the relationship between stepparent and stepchild is ascribed a status equal to that between biological parent and child. Joan Harker's seamless identification of these two relationships in terms of their potential significance for children breaches dominant discourses around contact which

focus almost entirely on its importance for biological parents and children. Since, currently, there is no automatic legal relationship between stepparents and stepchildren, the role and responsibilities of stepparents is, at best, ambiguous. And while the Children Act 1989 does provide some rights and duties for stepparents, this is only at the point the stepfamily is actually breaking down (De'Ath, 1992a, 1992b). As the above example demonstrates – and there is evidence to support this more widely – the significance of the steprelationship in relation to stepparents and contact requires closer consideration and evaluation (Masson, 1992; James, 1992; Walker, 1992a, 1992b). Importantly, in terms of myths about stepfathers, Joan Harker's account breaks through the 'mythical frame' (Passerini, 1990) and follows the thread in the other direction, asserting the significance of the steprelationship over that of the 'blood' tie.

However, on turning to the two accounts in this study which contain childhood recollections of a stepmother, it must be owned that the claims of myth appear to be substantiated. Interestingly, these two accounts are taken from interviews with two brothers. In the first of these, Roger Hunt gives a terse summary of his feelings:

'I remember visiting my biological father and his new partner when I was four. I did something and his new partner smacked me. That was it as far as I was concerned. I never went there again' (Roger Hunt, aged twenty-seven, emphasis in original).

Turning to the second account of this relationship by Roger's brother, Martin Hunt, a similar picture of his stepmother emerges:

'I don't like 'er. I don't mind saying it. I can't stand her. I mean she wasn't too bad when I was growing up. I could tolerate her then. But since I've had children, I've only took them over there once, when Katy was very young. And that last time my stepmother made a big song and dance because Katy broke something. And I said 'Well that's it. I'm not going back there again. If that's the way you feel about it, I'll stay away'. My brother had an incident with her when he was very young and he never got over it' (Martin Hunt, aged thirty-one).

Given the coincidence of tone, phraseology and sentiment in these two accounts, it seems likely that the two brothers have conferred with each other on a number of occasions regarding their stepmother. One may speculate that Roger's childhood recollections of his stepmother – which diverge from Martin's more positive ones – have in the light of more recent experience, been rehearsed between them and mutually confirmed. It should be noted, however, that on returning to the subject of his stepmother later in his interview, Martin Hunt says 'she's probably not as bad as what I think she is'. In the light of what he has said earlier about her, his latter remark is evidence that some adult stepchildren reach for an understanding of their stepparents which some would regard as generous. Similarly, Burchardt (1990) speaks of adult stepchildren's ability to 'forgive' their stepparents (1990: 249). Arguably, what is (understandably) odious to Roger and Martin Hunt about their stepmother is less the fact of her steprelationship to them, than the fact that she smacks children on first acquaintance and makes 'a big song and dance' when they break something.

While these different examples support what has been found elsewhere in this study, namely, that relationships between stepparents and stepchildren are likely to be easier when their shared history commences in the child's infancy, they show, as Natasha Burchardt (1990) also found, that there is no simple relationship between age and the quality of steprelationships. A range of factors is important. What they do illustrate is the force of Ochiltree's argument (raised earlier in Chapter 6), that it is unrealistic to expect 'instant love' between stepparents and stepchildren. While a number of therapists and practitioners have found these expectations do exist (see for example Visher and Visher, 1982; Walsh, 1982), data from this study suggest that those who have themselves been stepchildren have more realistic expectations in this regard.

With the benefit of foresight as they move into the role of stepparent, they have a knowledge which enables them to take a long-term view of the steprelationship, not only in terms of what is reasonable to expect from children, but crucially, too, in terms of what kind of 'staying power' may be required of them as parents. For it is this latter quality, the ability to 'stick it out' and always be there, which, if it is present in a stepparent, adult stepchildren in this study most highly value and most readily recall. The importance of this is recognised by Marjorie Phillips in the following, final extract.

Talking about her third husband, Ken Phillips, stepfather to her two sons Roger and Martin Hunt, and the subject of Martin's reflections at the beginning of this chapter, she says:

'When you heard people say in the past 'Oh, stepparents, stepparents', I have *always, always* said 'Well, that doesn't apply to *my* family'...To Ken, Roger and Martin are his *sons* and that's it...It was Ken all the way through. He was the one that encouraged them, came to school meetings with us when they were young. Always him at parents' meetings, cubs, football, training, taking them out...And I think, well, he can't have done such a bad job as a stepparent because both Roger and Martin, they're stepparents themselves now aren't they' (Marjorie Phillips, aged fifty-six, emphasis in original).

In her final sentence, Marjorie Phillips asserts the full potential of the steprelationship for contemporary family relationships. That her two sons chose stepparenthood before biological parenthood is for her significant. That those whose families of origin were stepfamilies are themselves prepared to move into the stepparenting role – with all the complexities and ambiguities it may entail – is not regarded as evidence of inadequacy or failure. Rather it testifies to the stable, dependable force such relationships have proved to be in their own lives.

Conclusion

In contrast to the negative orientation of much research literature in this field, the picture of relationship change which emerges in this chapter shows what Kier and Lewis (forthcoming) describe as a subtle balance of gains and losses. Reflecting a shift in this direction in more recent research findings, these accounts seriously challenge assumptions that separation and divorce can be constituted solely or mainly in terms of negative effects and outcomes. Similarly, more positive representations are evident in respondents' memories of stepfamily life. They show the development of a more balanced and authentic perspective on the steprelationship, one in which it is neither

idealised nor demonised. Together, these accounts show how separation, divorce and the experience of stepfamily life can be constituted as knowledge and resource. In the way this knowledge is passed down from parents to children, across the generations between siblings, and also pooled amongst friends, it feeds into and becomes part of our wider cultural knowledge or ways of life.

Parents in Stepfamilies: Learning New Idioms, Rewriting Scripts

‘This chart, I think doing concentric circles is very good. Because it shows what happens in family relationships. It’s a bit like ripples on a pond. It’s not until years later that you look back on it and you realise that the decisions you take when it comes to family break-up spread a long way out...’ (Sally Cousins, aged forty-three).

Introduction

In this concluding chapter I draw together some of the main themes which have emerged throughout the study, linking them to that wider theoretical universe (Mason, 1996) to which I referred in chapter 3. Taking the opening comment to this chapter as my starting-point, it may be argued that it is not only the ‘private’ or personal decisions which people take that have important consequences and ‘spread a long way out’. Public decisions and stories about separation, divorce and repartnering also have far- and wide-reaching repercussions. Related to this is a second fundamental point. As Schneider (1968) observed some thirty years ago and Finch (1989) reiterated in her review of the research evidence on family relationships, what we *believe* about family and kin relationship is important, not because it is true, but because of the meaning this gives certain relationships. If we *believe* that a certain model of family is ‘natural’ or that blood ties are special, then these beliefs will have real consequences and affect how we view and treat these and other ties (Schneider, 1968; Finch, 1989: 221-2).

Public 'decisions' about stepfamily life

As I argued in the opening chapter to this thesis, public stories and negative images around stepfamilies abound, and in political discourse at least, appear to marry well with certain interpretations of statistical and research evidence on divorce, re-divorce, and their short and long-term effects on children. Political discourse has its own mythical selections or versions of 'family values' which in turn imply a mythical consensus on family life. As argued throughout this study, this tends to construct relationship change in negative terms, as evidence of a moral downturn, instability, irresponsibility and lack of solidarity and commitment. Following a number of writers (Maddox, 1975, 1980; Samuel and Thompson, 1990) I have argued in preceding chapters that the most powerful myths are those which are internalised and passed on consciously or unconsciously to children and kin. From a different perspective Bourdieu (1996) argues that public or state versions of 'family' are the most powerful in this respect.

From his perspective Bourdieu (1996) claims that 'the family' is part of our 'habitus', one of our most fundamental mental categories, a concept to which we are socialised at the individual and collective level. In the ways we describe 'family' or specify certain clusters of relationships as the 'natural' elements of family life, the family as a category is 'realised' and the social order reproduced. State action – the work of statisticians, judges and social workers for example – is particularly important in the ways it constitutes family identity. Taking issue with ethnomethodological claims that the family is 'only a word', he rightly insists that it is not 'only a word', a social fiction. Rather 'words make things' (1996: 19-26). Moreover, as he goes on to say, conformity to the model of the 'intact' family presupposes access to a range of resources and social conditions – income, living space, a partner – which as I have shown in my study are not universally available on demand.

However, the problem with Bourdieu's account is that it renders people curiously passive in how they respond to or act against this 'powerful, performative discourse' (Bourdieu, 1996). I have shown in earlier chapters that this is at odds with findings which emerge from my study. As Giddens (1991, 1992) argues, social activity – including family practices – is susceptible to continuous revision in the light of new

information, knowledge and practice. This revised knowledge in turn becomes a constitutive element of that social activity. As Giddens himself suggests, novel ways of stepparenting can be understood as one example of these processes. From this perspective, the 'doing' of (step)family life – and giving an account of it – also constitutes a performative, if yet less powerful, discourse.

Personal 'decisions' about relationship change and stepfamily life

Arguably, those with the requisite resources to live an 'intact' family life will not be overly concerned with how those whose family arrangements are 'other' resist or internalise negative versions of their lives. While I have distanced myself in preceding chapters from any essentialist ideas that experience of relationship change is inherently a 'good thing', I have on the basis of data generated through my own research, moved towards a position which argues that these experiences can constitute a range of resources – moral, cultural, personal and social – for people to draw on. In this sense, parents craft a 'transgressive' discourse (Hekman, 1995) which rewrites public scripts and versions of their lives. As I have also shown, a similar shift is discernible in the work of a number of contemporary writers in related fields of family studies – sociology, psychology, ethics and moral philosophy. There are a number of ways in which the family practices (Morgan, 1996) of parents in this study are transformative in this respect.

The moral imperative of stepkinship

Most importantly, this was seen in parents' moral thinking around their stepfamily relationships. As a wide range of empirical studies on family relationships have found (see especially Firth *et al*, 1970; Finch, 1989; Finch and Mason, 1993), the single most distinctive feature of family relationships is their 'peculiar inescapable moral quality' (Finch, 1989: 236). Similarly, this is the most striking feature of stepfamily relationships in this study. If, as increasing numbers of writers are arguing, moral practices are inextricably linked to family practices more generally (Benhabib, 1992;

Hekman, 1995; Sevenhuijsen, 1998) then this finding is unsurprising. Moral identity is unlikely to be suddenly and inexplicably suspended (Bauman, 1993, 1995) as a person moves from an 'intact' family into a stepfamily. Rather, as I have argued, there is clear evidence from my study that through the processes of separation, divorce and repartnering, parents are 'forced' to be morally reflexive about a number of issues.

Given the close relationships many stepparents shared with younger and adult stepchildren, it is unsurprising that the moral imperative of their kin relationships was rarely understood in terms of 'given' features of the *blood* relationship. Most often the moral quality of stepkinship was understood to derive from the quality and history of a relationship, specifically from the sense of commitments that had accumulated over time (Finch, 1989; Finch and Mason, 1993). Shared, day-to-day history was perceived to be a key factor in building commitment and 'enduring diffuse solidarity' (Schneider, 1968). This explains in part why people included their stepchildren and their biological children as equally close members of their family, and also why these ties held an equal moral weight in their eyes. For similar reasons, those who included friends as close family were emphatic that these ties were not conditional or contingent.

The moral imperative of stepkinship was carried through and made particularly evident in the ability and willingness of some parents (although not all) to practice that 'reversal of perspective' (Benhabib, 1992) which enabled them to be imaginative about their children's wants, needs and interests in relation to the issue of contact with a non-resident biological parent. Some parents practised this to a degree that many of their friends and/or former partners found unthinkable or 'odd'. As noted in Chapter 2, a similar kind of 'oddness' featured among biological and stepparents in Stacey's (1991) study of post-divorce kinship in California.

On a number of occasions parents in my study told me that although taking a reasonably open, co-operative attitude towards contact had initially been very costly in emotional terms, this 'risk' or 'recklessness' in relation to their children and former partners had 'paid off'. Specifically, it had enhanced their moral reputations and standing, not only in the eyes of their 'new' family members, but also in the eyes of former partners and their families. Unexpectedly, some parents found that they had gradually assumed some

form of a 'moral high ground', even though initially other people had been critical of them for taking this attitude. As one man said, over a period of several months he – and arguably his moral reputation – shifted from being perceived as 'daft' to 'cool'. In these ways as suggested above, the 'doing' or practice of stepkinship can be a performative and transformative discourse.

It was shown that the morally binding nature of parents' relationships with step- and biological children was carried through and reflected in their handling of inheritance. As many of them realised, making a will provided a permanent insight or statement of their relationships with children. More than that, as I argued in Chapter 7, wills are also public documents. In this respect, they document private decisions about the realities of relationship change and stepfamily life in a publicly accessible form. Here too it was seen that parents' decisions transgressed normative assumptions of inheritance law which ascribe overriding significance to blood ties. What emerged as especially striking was their contextually sensitive articulations of the principle of fairness.

In most cases, these contextually sensitive moral practices had as their primary objective (step)children's interests. Specifically equal *treatment* of children in most aspects of family life was regarded as essential – even where parents admitted to unequal *feelings* for them. This was especially marked in relation to younger children. As children became adults, elements of the 'pure relationship' came into play (Giddens, 1991, 1992). In other words, reciprocity and some mutual support were regarded as important in most cases. It was notable that parents who had more than one biological child had more confidence in voicing distinctions between any of their children, biological or step-.

Because these parents had experienced transient feelings of (intense) dislike for a biological child as she or he went, for example, through a trying and difficult adolescence, distinctions in how they felt towards their biological and step- children were understood in similar terms. In other words, emotional closeness and distance (with one exception) were not based on the grounds that one child was a steprelative and one was a blood relative, but on the grounds that the quality of these relationships was

different. This also explains why in some cases parents placed their stepchildren as closer to them than their biological children.

In these different ways and different contexts parents in stepfamilies reformulate a number of familiar concerns. It requires them to take seriously a number of symbolic bases for kinship – blood, shared history, choice and necessity. In so doing they create a moral practice or imperative around kinship which is appropriate to their needs. This, as I have argued in a number of chapters is, according to a number of contemporary moral philosophers (Benhabib, 1992; Bauman, 1993, 1995; Hekman, 1995; Sevenhuijsen, 1998) the hallmark of moral agency.

Time

One of the most important findings to emerge from my study is the significance of time in stepfamily relationships. In Chapter 2, I drew attention to Strathern's point that in kinship idiom, children are future to their parents' past and that stepfamily formation reverses the processes of partner formation and the arrival of children. In doing this parents in stepfamilies are forced to learn another kinship script idiom, one in which they must take on board their stepchildren's histories in a former family life. Often the reality of this other life makes routine intrusions into the 'new' family as its history starts its course. History implies expanses of time and long durations. However, parents in stepfamilies must learn at a run the intricacies of their children's histories - their peculiarities and idiosyncrasies.

It is evident from some accounts in this study that what must be learned at a run by parents can appear to be as quickly undone by their stepchildren. The building work entailed in establishing close ties and solidarities is often obscured from view. Their reality may only be apparent ten or fifteen years after stepfamily formation as stepchildren moving into adulthood recognise or acknowledge the significance of their existence in their lives.

Conclusion

On the basis of data generated through my study, many public decisions about how to understand and re-present relationship change fit awkwardly with the accounts of stepfamily life presented here. The latter fit better with sociological explanations (Stacey, 1991; Giddens 1991, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995) which view these changes as a function of wider social change and, crucially, which allow for individual agency in contributing to that change (Morgan, 1996). Notwithstanding the power of public decisions about what properly constitutes family identity and relationships, what each of us selects and absorbs from these publicly offered stories is influenced and mediated through our individual experience and what we make of it (Samuel and Thompson, 1990). I have argued that parents in this study have shown they have a wide range of 'tools' (Hekman, 1995) with which to reformulate familiar concerns and craft more enabling and authentic versions of stepfamily life relationships.

As the opening comment to this chapter suggests - and my data more widely support - parents in stepfamilies try to understand the upheavals and changes that shape their futures in the light of past experience (Tonkin, 1990). Accounts in this study, in particular those from parents whose families of origin were stepfamilies, suggest that 'familiar' experience of relationship change can be a resource, an enabling factor in dealing with their own stepfamily situations. If Bourdieu is right and 'words make things', then there is a need to re-edit or re-write disabling public scripts of stepfamily life by drawing on transformative narratives and accounts such as those offered by parents in this study.

Appendix A

Interview Schedule

I envisaged four 'sections' to each interview, not necessarily in the order which follows.

Section 1: Household

- 1) Would you begin by telling me who lives in your household?
- 2) Are there any other family members who regularly spend time here? E.g. weekends, school holidays, vacations, Christmas etc.?
- 3) What did you do last Christmas? Did you spend it here? Did you have members of your family visiting?
- 4) Do you imagine next Christmas will be the same?
- 5) Do you have a photograph album?
If so, who keeps it?
If you do, who is in it?
Do you have more than one album?

Section 2: Partnership History

- 1) When we first spoke, you mentioned that this isn't your first marriage/partnership. Could you tell me a little more about your partnership history, that is, previous relationships you regard as significant - whether married, cohabiting, or living separately?
- 2) Can you remember how long you were in those relationships for? (Dates, including periods living without a partner).
- 3) Do you have children from those relationships?
- 4) Do you still have contact with them? (Frequency, duration, location, type, and changes in any of latter) How do you organise it?
- 5) Do you still have contact with your ex-partner? (" ditto ").
- 6) Do you still have contact with your ex-partner's family? (" ditto ").
- 7) Who initiates that contact?

8) How is this done? (When, how often, on what occasions, by 'phone, visits, cards, letters, etc.)?

9) Why do you maintain contact?

10) Does your (current) partner get involved? How does s/he feel about you maintaining contact with your ex-partner and/or her/his family?

11) Have there been any changes in the frequency or type of contact with your ex-partner and/or her/his family?

12) What prompted those changes?

13) Do you have contact with your current partner's family? (Frequency, duration, location, type).

14) Do they consider you to be 'one of them' do you think?

15) Do you describe yourselves or think of yourselves as a 'stepfamily'?

Section 3: Visual Chart (10 concentric circles on A3 paper).

1) Could you use this chart as a way of showing whom you include as your family and relatives? I would like you to include *anyone* you think of as family.

2) If you put yourself at the centre, where would you place each person in terms of how *close* you feel they are to you? You don't need to fill in each circle. You may wish to leave some circles empty if that shows more clearly the different degrees of closeness you feel. Can you tell me what you mean by 'close'?

3) Could you write their names in the circles, and next to each name the way you refer to them or talk about them? For example, if you are introducing your ex-partner's mother to someone, what do you call her?

4) If there is anyone you feel ambiguous about, or unsure about where to place, just write their names down somewhere else on the sheet. You may decide later on that you wish to place them in the circles, or, you may feel you want to leave them as they are. Either way, that's fine.

5) Could you tell me why you found it difficult to place these people?

6) (Where someone has not talked about/written down their ex-partner). So, you would not include your ex-partner as family?

Section 4: Inheritance

- 1) Have you made a will? Have you had any contact with a solicitor or bank in relation to inheritance and making a will? Is this the first time you've made one?
- 2) What prompted you to do it?
- 3) Have you discussed inheritance with your current partner? (Context of)
- 4) Have you decided what you will actually do/write in your will?
- 5) Have you talked about inheritance with other members of your family, e.g your children and/or stepchildren? If yes: What issues did you discuss? What were their views?
- 6) Do you think your stepchildren may inherit from their (biological) parents?
Would this affect your own arrangements?
If so, how?
If not, why not?
- 7) Have you discussed inheritance with your ex-partner and/or her/his family?
- 8) Are there any items in your home which you particularly associate with yours or your partner's previous marriage/partnership/relationship?
- 9) Have you decided what you would like to do with those things?
- 11) Had you decided how you wanted to write your will/bequeath your property before approaching your solicitor, or did you approach your solicitor with a view to seeking her/his advice?
- 12) What has been your experience of solicitors in this respect?
- 13) You said you made your will 'x' number of months/years ago. Has anything happened since that time which has led you to reconsider your will?
- 14) How did you decide who would get what?
- 15) Have you done anything about guardianship?
- 16) Have you made any arrangements, either formal or informal, in relation to that possibility?
- 17) Why did you choose that particular person?

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