New Structures, New Agency: The Dynamics of Child-Parent Relationships after Divorce

Bren Neale and Jennifer Flowerdew
University of Leeds UK

Introduction

This paper explores how young people ‘work out’ (Finch 1989) their relationships with their parents across space and time, drawing on a study of the long term experiences of young people living with divorced or separated parents in the UK. As in other post-industrial societies, levels of divorce have grown considerably in England and Wales since the 1950s and although the rate of increase has slowed, divorce (or separation) is now a common experience in families. The familiarity of divorce suggests that fundamental and widespread changes are occurring in the way people conduct their personal lives and relationships and this in turn has necessitated the search for new ways to conceptualise and understand the complexities of contemporary family life (e.g. Smart and Neale, 1999).

The research reported in this paper was informed by theoretical and methodological developments in the field of divorce and childhood research, which are reviewed below.

The Dynamics of Divorce

There has long been a concern for the welfare of children whose parents separate, resulting in a substantial body of research on this topic (reviewed in Pryor and Rodgers 2001). As divorce has become more widespread, the framing of this phenomenon as a social problem has become a less dominant and indeed less acceptable theme within the research literature. If divorce in the 1950s was unusual and overtly stigmatizing this is no longer the case. Pathological models of family change (those that compare and contrast marriage as a social good, with divorce as a social ill) have begun to give way to a new mode of social enquiry that acknowledges the diversity and fluidity of family patterns and seeks
to understand how and why these different patterns occur. From a policy perspective, understanding how ‘ordinary’ divorced families manage the changes in their lives has become just as important as understanding what happens in the 10 percent of families who seek professional help. The development of this **processual** approach acknowledges the negotiated character of family relationships, both within and across the generations, and seeks to understand fluidity and change as integral features of family life (Finch 1989).

This dynamic thinking means that it is no longer necessary to see divorce as a ‘one off’ event which forever defines (and brands) the key protagonists. It can be viewed instead as part of an ongoing process that is played out in a complex variety of ways and with differential effects for those involved (Pryor and Rodgers 2001; Ribbens McCarthy *et al.* 2003). This has enabled more refined questions to be asked about post divorce family life, such as what enables parents and children to ‘move on’ (psychologically speaking) from the divorce and flourish both within and beyond their families and, conversely, what is it that might inhibit or disrupt these processes.

**Sociological Perspectives on Childhood**

These developments in divorce research were in part informed by new sociological understandings of childhood which emerged during the 1980s (James and Prout 1997). As part of these developments it has become possible to ‘see’ children in a new way, not simply as welfare dependants who need care and protection, but as young citizens who are entitled to respect and participation. The differences between these two ways of conceptualizing young lives has been explored elsewhere (Neale 2002, 2004) but it is worth drawing out some salient points here:

**Children as Welfare Dependents**

- Children are Dependents
- Children are incompetent and vulnerable
- Children need care, protection and control
- Children’s childhoods are determined by adults

**Children as Young Citizens**

- Children are People
- Children have strengths and competencies
- Children need recognition, respect and participation
- Children influence their own childhoods