

The three pillars of the new family

Michael Young

Phil. Trans. R. Soc. Lond. B 1997 **352**, 1857-1859
doi: 10.1098/rstb.1997.0171

Email alerting service

Receive free email alerts when new articles cite this article - sign up in the box at the top right-hand corner of the article or click [here](#)

To subscribe to *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. Lond. B* go to: <http://rstb.royalsocietypublishing.org/subscriptions>

The three pillars of the new family

MICHAEL YOUNG

Institute of Community Studies, 18 Victoria Park Square, Bethnal Green, London E2 9PF, UK

SUMMARY

Children are the chief sufferers from the growing fragility of marriages and partnerships. They may also suffer from their mothers going out to paid work unless satisfactory alternative arrangements are made for their care, for instance, by bringing in grandparents to look after their grandchildren when the mothers are not at home. Grandparents may also have an important role when parents separate. There is a dearth of facts about what actually happens. The part played by grandparents has been touched on, but nothing more, in the course of studies in baby care and baby-sitting and the repercussions of the illness of the mother.

A Grandparent Commission is proposed to set in motion some of the necessary research and to review official policy as it affects grandparents. If grandparents already do a lot for children, and could do more, a measure of optimism about the future of the family could succeed the prevailing pessimism.

1. INTRODUCTION

'Labour's national childcare strategy will plan provision to match the requirements of the modern labour market and help parents, especially women, to balance family and working life'

Labour Manifesto 1997

Cassandra is the leader of the national debate on ageing and everything else to do with the family. Samuel Butler said that the question of whether to get married is just a question of whether to ruin your life one way or another. People are choosing to ruin it less often the marriage way, and are expected to desert marriage on an ever larger scale in the next century. UK divorce rates are already the highest in Europe and could go higher. What matters more than that is whether or not parents, married or cohabiting, are staying together long enough to provide stability for their children when they are young. The stock answer is that children have been the chief sufferers from their parents breaking up, and that in the future there are going to be more family breakdowns and more suffering children, suffering more.

2. FAMILY PROBLEMS

Cassandra, on the same general theme, is also talking woe about one of the most remarkable social and economic changes of the century. This is the trend for more women to go out to paid work in addition to the unpaid work they do in the home. However, where they have children, especially under school age, they are more likely, if they go out to work at all, to choose part-time jobs. In the last 30 years, the labour market participation rate of women with children of dependent

age has risen from 30 to 70% of all such women, and the trend is still upwards.

What effect has this had, and will have, on the well-being of their children? Cassandra will have no doubt about the answer.

But any doomster who talks in that vein has not reckoned with one of the chief child-protecting adaptations which the family has made to these changes. The usual assumption in the debate about children has continued to be that 'the family' is a nuclear family, consisting of a parent or parents and a child or children, and that alone; that in urban, if not in rural, areas, children remain with their own parents only while they are still dependent and that the extended family which once had such a large place in social life has largely vanished away. My main purpose is to challenge that assumption.

3. THREE-GENERATION FAMILY

My belief, the other way round, is that the three-generation extended family has gained a new importance in caring for the nation's children and a role that could be enlarged in the future. Of course its character has been altered.

As Laslett has said about the decline in fertility and the rise in the proportions of older people, 'The family, in the sense of a network of kin connections, is perpetually attenuating, getting narrower in its sideways spread but at the same time elongating over the generations' (Laslett 1990). In other words, there are fewer siblings but more grandparents around retiring earlier and remaining in the 'third age' for longer and having the priceless asset of more time. The 'third age' has been portrayed as an era of personal fulfilment. My argument is that for many

people the fulfilment takes the form of a second parenthood—grandparenthood—supplementing in a sometimes vital way the care that parents on their own can give to their children.

I say many—not of course all. Not all grandparents get on well with their children or want to look after their grandchildren. For them one-off parenthood with all its trials was enough. Others are only too glad to repeat the experience of parenthood or, if the first experience was wanting, make up for it when they have a second chance.

4. DEARTH OF FACTS

Unfortunately, there is rather a dearth of facts about what actually happens at present. I suppose because so many social researchers, in and out of the government employ, share the conventional illusion that the extended family is a thing of the past, very little research has been done on the role of grandparents in looking after their grandchildren and how it relates to, or conflicts with, another role they may have of looking after great-grandparents when they are in need of care. There is a very strong case for more social research which will find out more about the part that grandparents play. If the facts were in, they could influence public policy in a whole variety of ways.

5. PARTIAL EVIDENCE

There is far less British research on the subject than US. But interest has never died away completely. The functions of grandparents have been touched on in a number of enquiries. For instance in a study by Daniel, among 2400 mothers who had recently had a baby who went back to work, and whose babies were cared for by someone else, a majority of those who took over were grandmothers (Daniel 1980). An official report on day care for children in 1994 (Meltzer 1994) relied for information on mothers rather than grandparents themselves. Mothers were in general very satisfied with the care that their children received from their grandparents. Over a third of the children regularly looked after by grandparents had been with them for at least three quarters of their lives. Mothers chose grandparents (or accepted an offer from them) because (for 76% of children) they thought that the children would be safe, secure and well looked after with them. Other reasons were that they enabled the mother to go to work or work longer hours (30% of children). Nine out of ten grandchildren were looked after in the grandparent's home.

6. PROXIMITY

Proximity mattered a great deal. Mothers were most satisfied when the child was collected and brought back on foot by the grandmother (as it usually was, rather than by the grandfather) and when the grandparent's house was within a ten minutes' walk. The longer the journey, the less the satisfaction. Eighty-six per cent of children were looked after by grandparents for free. Among the remaining 14%, about two-thirds of

grandparents were paid cash, the remaining third being paid in kind. Overall, mothers of almost 90% of children looked after by grandparents were very satisfied with it.

In another study (Willmott 1987), in a suburb, Willmott asked people in his sample whom they would 'first look to for help' if a child 'had a fairly serious illness', doctors being excluded. Nearly two-thirds of people cited relatives, with mothers and mothers-in-law being dominant.

Mum, of course. She'd be the first one (working-class woman)

That would be the mother-in-law. She would certainly help; she has done so a great deal in the past (middle-class man)

Altogether two-thirds of the grandparents were maternal grandmothers. This finding echoes those of earlier local studies in Bethnal Green (Young & Willmott 1957) and Woodford (Willmott & Young 1960).

Asked a further question about baby-sitting, mothers and mothers-in-law (or often parents or parents-in-law as couples) were to the fore, and again mainly on the wife's side.

I take Danny up to my mother's

We take them to Grandma's (parents-in-law) and they stay the night

Still more recently the Children's Society survey of eight to 15-year-olds showed that 78% of children considered their grandparents as important figures in their lives (Ghate & Daniels 1997).

7. GRANDPARENT COMMISSION

These all point to the importance of grandparents, but the information is distinctly patchy. Something much more comprehensive is needed. My hope is that a Grandparent Commission will be set up and that its first task will be to set on foot some of the necessary research on such issues as those listed below, before preparing the first ever policy for the three and four-generation family.

1. How do mothers and fathers working full-time or part-time manage the care of dependent children of different ages, with special reference to the help given by grandparents?
2. Likewise for the part played by grandparents when there is a family breakdown. How often do grandparents become substitute parents or give vital support to the parent who has the custody of the children? How often does the breakdown deprive the grandparents of access to their grandchildren?
3. The degree to which there is a conflict between the needs of grandchildren and the needs of older relatives in the 'fourth age', and how the conflict is resolved if it is.

4. The age relationships which are compatible and those that are not, one crucial age being that when grandparents retire from work. At present the mean age of retirement for men is 59 and for women 57. So in general any grandchild born in the ten years or even 20 years after that is of an age when grandparents could be of help. But much will depend on proximity and, even more, on the health of the grandparents and the extent to which health sets limits to the care that people are capable of.

I expect that, after the facts have been gathered, it will make much more sense to talk of a government policy on grandparents. Meanwhile, there are some rather obvious steps that need to be taken.

8. OFFICIAL POLICY

Present policy is also patchy. The Children Act of 1989 recognized that grandparents are 'family' and plenty of children who would otherwise be institutionalized in homes have been placed with grandparents instead. But a recent report from the Grandparents' Federation (itself a new phenomenon, along with the Foster Grandparents scheme of Age Concern) showed how much variation there is between local authorities. Official policy needs recasting.

The 700 000 families with dependent children claiming Family Credit can get an allowance for child care but only for a registered child-minder or nursery. Grandparents are not deemed 'professional' child carers. There are many other anomalies in the exclusion of grandparents. Why, for instance, should grandparents be unable to get help with travel expenses to visit grandchildren in prison when a host of other relatives are eligible?

The most important point to make about policy is again about proximity. Grandparents cannot support parents effectively unless they live near each other. To facilitate this has never been part of housing policy. The policy in future should surely be that local authorities and housing associations give a priority to sons and daughters with children of their own and, along with them, to grandparents who want to live near to each other.

If some of the discrimination against grandparents were removed, here would be the beginning of a grandparent-friendly policy. Its declaration could serve the same sort of purpose as the original Family Allowance Act which by providing that the payment was to be to mothers, not fathers, recognized, in a symbolic as well as a practical way, that mothers did not always get as much out of the ordinary 'family income' as they should. A Grandparents Commission could be responsible for the policy recommendations which will follow from the research.

9. OPTIMISM

If that happened the Cassandras, while not silenced, could be faced up to. The future of the family, if it is only the nuclear family, may not look all that rosy. But in a three-generation family the whole picture can change. The most important function of the 'third age' may be parenthood or, more ordinarily, the support of parents. If the family were thought of as the extended family, and general awareness of how much grandparents could do was improved, a measure of optimism about the future of the family could succeed the prevailing pessimism. 'I called the New World into existence to redress the balance of the Old', said Canning. Turn that round and it could support a very different prospect for the family.

REFERENCES

- Daniel, W. W. 1980 *Maternity rights: the importance of women*. London: Policy Studies Institute.
- Ghate, D. & Daniels, A. 1997 *Talking about my generation*. London: National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.
- Laslett, P. 1990 Introduction. In *An aging world* (ed. J. M. Eekelaar & D. Paul). Oxford: Clarendon.
- Meltzer, H. 1994 *Daycare services for children*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.
- Willmott, P. 1987 *Friendship networks and social support*. London: Policy Studies Institute.
- Willmott, P. & Young, M. 1960 *Family and class in a London suburb*. London: Routledge.
- Young, M. & Willmott, P. 1957 *Family and kinship in east London*. London: Routledge.

BIOLOGICAL
SCIENCES



THE ROYAL
SOCIETY

PHILOSOPHICAL
TRANSACTIONS
OF

BIOLOGICAL
SCIENCES



THE ROYAL
SOCIETY

PHILOSOPHICAL
TRANSACTIONS
OF