

FAMILY PATTERNS IN THE 1980's:
A PROFESSIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Olive Stevenson
University of Keele

The subject which I have chosen to speak about is likely to arouse powerful emotions, and one that is therefore likely to be misunderstood. For powerful emotions and objective intellectual analysis do not sit easily together. Whilst I was preparing this paper, and seeking to up-date my knowledge of research findings, I found time and time again that I was trying to find fault with the research whose findings did not appeal to me emotionally or fit with my preconceived notions. It takes great intellectual effort to be converted by facts.

What we think and believe about the family and child care matters because it is directly translated into action at all sorts of levels; in our responses as individuals within a family; as 'men in the street' looking at, and often making moral judgements about, other people's families; as citizens who, through elected representatives, are ultimately responsible for innumerable decisions reflected in policies and in the law; and as professionals involved in seeking to help families. My focus in this talk is upon the professional perspective. But it is well to remind ourselves that we are no more exempt from the powerful emotions the subject arouses than anyone else. And we have a particular responsibility to seek to understand the ways these feelings may set up resistances to an objective assessment of the status of the evidence.

It is therefore worth spending a little while to consider reasons which underlie these powerful emotions. Since family experiences are for most people the most intense and significant in childhood, since childhood is in any case a time when feelings are strong, even naked, it is not surprising that it is a topic which arouses immediate interest in most people. How often it is the early part of autobiographies dealing with childhood that really 'take off' - the reader is there with the child, the recollections are sharp and focused, vivid fragments of everyday life are captured.

Yet such memories are highly selective; much pain is suppressed or repressed and, also, strangely, though less commonly perhaps, happiness too if often suppressed, possibly when a child feels that such emotions

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are inappropriate in the presence of unhappy adults. Thus we are all perched on a volcano of fiery emotions, only some of which we can consciously recapture. Small wonder that these interfere with our adult perceptions of family life - our own and other people's.

For most of us, the family provided the greatest area of personal security. Consequently, for many of us, anything which suggests that the family is disintegrating raises fears which go deep into the roots of earlier experiences. This is relevant for any debate about changes in our family structure at the present time and in particular about the implications of the rising divorce and remarriage rate. Whatever moral or scientific arguments are adduced for and against divorce and remarriage, behind them lie other personal reactions about the family as a unit of security. Can that security be preserved within changing family structures? That is a question all of us ask, but each with a unique personal perspective. Yet equally deep emotions are aroused at the idea of children who suffer at the hands of their parents and, perhaps to a lesser extent, adults who suffer through their marital relationship. Thus we can see in our society's responses an emotional double bind: on the one hand, 'preserve the family' - such sentiments will always get a round of applause at a conventional meeting; on the other hand, we are deeply uncertain and ambivalent about the point at which we say - enough is enough, this family must be broken.

Just because the idea of the family is so powerful, it raises strong negative feelings as well. There are two strands to this: one concerns the hypocrisy which underlies much talk about family life. Marx pointed out forcefully how little family life meant at a time of mass exploitation of working class labour, women and children included. English upper middle class parents spent a great deal of money and effort keeping their children away from them in the nursery or at school. And so on. There has been sentimental talk about family life. It is particularly irritating when present day arbiters of our morals idealise the past and paint a rosy picture of family life which at best existed for a small minority of our population. Hypocrisy about our present day family life is

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perhaps most clearly seen in those commercial advertisements for baby commodities, which show the bonny baby and the radiant mother and never the other side of the coin. The impact of this on unhappy, insecure mothers was tellingly shown in the film 'Breaking Point', which concerned non-accidental injury to children.

So then, some of the negative feelings represent a reaction against the idealisation of family life. It may spring in part from our need to deny pain and suffering, but these emotions collude with the unscrupulous use of the family as a political slogan or a commercial target.

Others attack, not a fantasy of family life, but aspects of the reality. In particular, attention has been drawn to the rigidity with which roles for men, women, boys and girls, have been set and the way in which norms have been fixed as to what constitutes 'good' family life. The women's movement has rightly been concerned to show how these fixed notions of 'good' family life have limited the development of women's potential in areas outside the family and have over-structured her role within it. The Rapoport's¹ survey interestingly illustrates the impact of the so-called experts on child care practice. They conclude:

'By and large, the picture that has emerged is one on which there was an authoritative set of formulations in the period following the second World War that idealised a conception of the nuclear conjugal family, with relatively standardised composition, division of labour, and life cycle timetable. This conception, with its expectation that 'normal' 'mature' men should be the economic providers, 'normal' 'mature' women should be housewives and mothers has been bolstered by clinical psychology, medicine, sociology, and by professionals in law, education and social work.

In the current decade, this model of family life has been increasingly questioned within each of the disciplines. The contemporary predicament of the family - for parents as well as authorities ... involves searching for new models.'

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This phrase, 'searching for new models' is important. For it suggests, rightly, I believe, the fluidity, uncertainty, and insecurity which surround our discussion of family life today. Thus, a glance at the chapter headings or sub-headings of certain common and influential texts gives a flavour of this uncertainty surrounding the notions of the family. Chapter Three of the Rapoport's' book has sections on: divorce; infertile and childless marriages; one parent families; adoption and fostering; communes and experimental living; dual worker families and step-families. Morgan² in Social Theory and the Family devotes chapters to R. D. Laing's critique of the family as an institution, to the position of women in the family related to class structure.

Any one of these topics could take the whole lecture. In this paper, I have to be selective (and even then superficial). I shall reveal some of my own prejudices, of course, as well as the gaps in my reading. And I shall also deliberately introduce some aspects of family life which have not yet been the subject of much systematic study and research but which I believe to be of importance. My choice is guided by three considerations: first, that this is a paper for a professional audience which wants to intervene in various ways, hopefully to the benefit of our community well-being, either directly through forms of social work or indirectly through influencing social policies; secondly, I shall spend some time on matters which I believe have been insufficiently aired; thirdly, I am, at your request, not concentrating upon substitute care, your primary concern, although at various points I shall seek to relate it to what I am arguing.

Let us first turn to certain economic and social factors and trends which any consideration of social policy for families in the 1980's must take into account.

There has been in the past few weeks much attention focused upon Townsend's³ monumental study, Poverty in the United Kingdom. There is

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much to be debated about definitions of poverty, of deprivation and of inequality. But that is the stuff of an academic seminar, not a professional paper. What Townsend has put together, even taking the most conservative and conventional measures, must be profoundly disturbing to everyone here. Much of it is in no sense 'news'; what makes the impact is the detail of the analysis across all groupings in society. The essential point for us here today is that from the late 50's onwards.

'there has been an increase in the numbers and proportions of the population in poverty or on the margins of poverty as defined by the government, despite the introduction of new ameliorative measures by successive administrations.'

Using only the most conservative set of statistics, which takes 'Supplementary Benefits' rates as the yardstick, 6% of the population were in poverty, whilst nearly 22% were 'on the margins of poverty' using the same criteria. This means that nearly 12 million out of 55 are in poverty or on the margins of it. The two main groups are the elderly living alone, or with spouses, and families with three or more children. Using a slightly different definition from the Finer Committee,⁴ one parent families were found to be one of the poorest groups in the whole population, roughly 50% of one parent families, as compared with 26% of two parent families, were in poverty on these criteria.

It is all too easy to use figures for a debate which avoids the central issue, which is that we ought to be profoundly ashamed of ourselves, humiliated by the facts which, though Townsend presents them cogently, have been persistently pointed out by authors since Titmuss and by pressure groups such as CPAG and Age Concern.

What makes the reminder so depressing this time is that there appears to be a strong probability that the poor will become relatively poorer, given the political and economic climate in which we now find ourselves. A colleague, Roger Fuller, and I have recently completed a study for the

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SSRC of the impact of certain social policies upon the so-called, and now unfashionable, 'cycle of deprivation'. The issue has lost some of its steam since Sir Keith announced he had made a mistake and there wasn't one. Joking apart, the work of Rutter and Madge⁵ analysed the evidence for a cycle of deprivation in inter-generational terms and found much of it wanting. Roger Fuller and I, however, have examined the evidence concerning the effects of certain social policies designed to ameliorate deprivation - widely defined and not restricted to the inter-generational or 'cyclical' argument. Our report, shortly to be available, deals with policies such as social security, compensatory education, community development, social work with families and substitute care. In our final chapter, stealing shamelessly from, amongst others, your director's wife⁶, we have analysed the effects of certain policies from three points of view, that of legitimation, feasibility, and support. We conclude gloomily:

'It is hard to avoid the conclusion that at present the gains for government lie in ignoring the deprived rather than in promoting policies for their benefit, and stressing the ethic of individual effort has throughout modern history tended to create an unsympathetic climate for those who do not get on the first rung of the ladder.'

It is against this background of economic hardship of many families that some of our discussion must be founded. And we must remind ourselves that, even on the most moderate view of hardship, we cannot only talk of income, of cash - we must also think of services, whether they be meals on wheels for the elderly or play groups for children, facilities for which the better off can pay.

What I see and dislike in our society today, is the seeming indifference of the quite well off for the badly off. In a sense, I mind more about that than the occasional tales of luxury and extravagance, from grouse slaughter to Elizabeth Taylor's yacht. Because I feel (I cannot know) that we who are quite well off are in an ungenerous mood. And yet, if we open our eyes and look about us, we can see poverty and hardship. We have not the excuse of the moat surrounding the baronial castle.

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However, I have always stoutly maintained that one insults the poor if one only cares about their poverty and implicitly denies them the possibility of the range of social and emotional problems common to us all. So I turn now to other significant trends, concerning separation, divorce and remarriage. First, one parent families.

The number of one parent families has greatly increased in the past 25 years, although, of course, a large number of these will only be temporarily 'one parent'. The latest figures show that one parent families now make up about one-tenth of all families with dependent children, a percentage increase of about one-third since 1971. There are now about three-quarter million of such families, an increase of nearly a quarter since the Finer Committee reported in 1971. We must beware of generalising about them. It may be, for example, that the children of many mothers from the West Indies who now find themselves in difficulties were able within their own social context to forge close emotional links with other adults. In any case, research in our own country does not suggest that children of such families are obviously emotionally or intellectually disadvantaged⁷. (Such studies would, however, to be carried through into adulthood and the next generation of family life to be wholly convincing).

What has been established beyond reasonable doubt, as I have already said, is that one parent families are seriously disadvantaged in terms of material well-being and living standards. It follows, therefore, that in at least one significant area, that of relationships with peers at school, the children do suffer, since material equality is very important to latency age children. Furthermore, we do not need empirical proof of the fact that parents, usually the mothers, will be under strain. Yet although we do not need proof of a general observation, we would benefit from more detailed knowledge of the cumulative effects on women of this 'dual role'. Brown's⁸ authoritative study on depression in women is one important source on which we can draw. In a masterly piece of research he has shown that:

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'if a married woman does not have an intimate tie, someone such as a husband or a boyfriend, that she can trust and confide in, she is much more likely to break down in the presence of a severe event or major difficulty. Similarly, she is more at risk if she has three or more children under 14 at home ...'

(Interestingly, he adds: 'and if she has lost her mother before the age of 11' - a finding which has further implications in view of the lack of current support for the one mother family which this would imply). Brown's study further shows that employment outside the home 'halves the risk of depression amongst those who have experienced some event which might provoke depression but have no confiding tie with a husband or boyfriend'. There are wide implications for social policy in such findings.

What of divorce and remarriage?⁹ Between 1951 and 1976, the number of divorces has risen from 31 to 136 thousand and the rate per thousand of the married population has risen from 2 to 10. Over 60% of our divorcing couples have children under 16. Although there was a sharp increase in divorce following legislation in 1969, it is not correct to attribute the rise solely to this fact. There is evidence, including that from other European countries, to indicate that the upward trend would have taken place, albeit perhaps more slowly, without new legislation.

Remarriage is also very popular. In 1976, nearly one-third of all marriages were remarriages for one or both partners. And divorce rates amongst remarried couples are much higher than for those married once only. In any case, such figures leave out separation and stable cohabitation which substantially alters the picture of family life in our country today.

From these facts, we know that many, many children are going to grow up with a step-parent or without one parent (usually a father) in the home. What can we say about this without falling into the familiar trap of assuming that this is in some way definition 'worse' than the conventional intact family or the defiant alternative, equally unreasoned position.

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We can make some reasonably objective observations on the basis of research and knowledge.

The first is that children will mourn the loss of a parent from the home. We know a good deal now about the processes of grieving in loss and in bereavement¹⁰. Even when strongly negative feelings have been experienced towards the 'lost person', grieving still takes place. In fact it is a kind of double grieving, for it is for what you have never had as well as for what you have had. Of course, many divorced parents make arrangements so that the child does not lose the parent completely. But it is hard to accept that this is more than a palliative. For what is lost is the daily presence of the adult and daily routines, repeated endlessly, of meals, baths, bedtimes, which are the foundations on which children build secure relationships.

The second consequence of the facts is that many children will be required to make new relationships with a step-parent. Again, we have to struggle against easy assumptions that this is 'unnatural' and therefore bound to be problematic. Yet it seems clear that deep fears and powerful feelings about step-parents are common to many cultures. The Rapoport¹¹ comment on this. They report that examples of the cruel stepmother are 'in the folklore of countries as far apart as India, Hawaii, Indonesia and Iceland'. Variants of Cinderella crop up all across the world. They point out that the image of the cruel step-parent can be traced to the peculiar ambiguity of the situation with which the step-parent can be faced, following death or divorce of the natural parent, and that the usual perspective has been 'through the eyes of the child'. This child's eye view may be deeply wounding to the large numbers of well-intentioned step-parents. The point is that we are dealing with raw, primitive, and often unconscious feelings in children which may, on occasion, rouse similar feelings in the adults, feelings which they did not know they had until they were faced with them in the children.

I do not have to tell an audience such as this that there are many elements in such conflicts. In the process of maturation, all children have to accept a parent as a real person and in so doing accept the reality of

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their mixed feelings about them. They learn that love and anger are not incompatible. Step-parents are ideal vehicles for the splitting of such emotions. They do not have to be brought together; one can be all good, another all bad.

All 'remade' families are involved in processes of emotional adjustment when a new partner enters the home. These adjustments are delicate and profound: they are expressed in every aspect of family living, who does what in the home and with whom? Who exercises discipline, and so on? Young children do not relish much change, unless it is ritualised in the form of the annual holiday or a party. (All of us have been censured when attempting to change a bedtime story). Repetition is a very important element in childhood security. Therefore, we do not run ahead of the evidence if we assume that 'exit parent, enter step-parent' into the relatively closed circle of our family life will present a major threat to a child's emotional equilibrium. This may be different for children in family structures of other cultures which from the beginning offer a child a wider network of significant relationships with adults as part of their daily living. In the complex interaction within the whole family in our culture, the threat to the child's emotional equilibrium has a powerful effect on everyone else, and sets off chain reactions.

As I indicated earlier, there is a sense in which telling you this is like telling my grandmother how to suck eggs. And yet, in an odd way, to which I shall return later, the knowledge you have of the processes involved in a successful graft of a child into a family is not available to the thousands of step and half parents who grapple daily with the problems. And, as the Rapoport¹² point out, two people who are attracted and wish to marry each other, are not necessarily motivated, as are prospective foster or adoptive parents, by the need for a child in their family. The children, let's face it, may be an unoptional extra!

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'What is really hard on the marriage, I think, is the lack of privacy in the mind. The children are always present. The marriage never has a chance to exist as a concept of just two people ...'

So there is much for us to ponder upon and search for ways of helping without unwelcome interference. Some of you would have much to contribute.

So far, aspects of single parenthood, separation, divorce and remarriage have been cited to point up a few of the effects which they may be confidently expected to have. This is not to deny the beneficial effects which may also accrue; fewer people trapped in marital misery; successful second marriages, and so on. But those in the helping professions, or who are involved in shaping social policy, must look squarely at the negatives, or potential negatives, and ask - what are the implications for the support of these families now?

The examples may serve to illustrate how hard we have to work intellectually to base our 'social treatment' upon the best available evidence of the time and not upon our fantasies and mythologies about what is best for families. Women in employment is a particularly powerful example; there was a great deal of criticism of the working mother in the period following the last war. ('Latch key mothers' was a term of abuse). Brown's study, to which I have referred, is only one, albeit one of the best documented, to challenge that. In any case, the women ignored the pundits. As Parker¹⁴ points out, 'in the age band 35 - 54, the economic activity rates for married women have risen from 25% in 1951 to 62% in the last general household survey.' Such figures would be much higher if we could count more accurately women in part-time and casual employment. (Of course, not all women have children, but the age band 35 - 54 makes it probable that many will have). Such facts should be linked to the evidence of growing and persistent unemployment in certain sectors of the male population; the implications for changing sex roles within the family are clear.

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The analysis of such trends is extremely complex and, inevitably, the average citizen, even the average professional helper, will feel relatively powerless in responding to them. And yet it seems of vital importance that we all enter the debate reasonably well-informed, because, in the long run, our views will affect policies. Moreover, if correctly reported in the media, our present government would wish to discourage the trend of women going out to work.

However that may be, some of the earlier issues raised in relation to divorce and step-parenting have more direct implications for those who work in the helping professions. There are many troubled parents and children who have no-one to turn to to talk about the problems which arise in the processes of adjustment. Whilst accepting that the efficacy of different forms of therapeutic intervention is not firmly established, there seems little doubt that many people would like at least a chance to share their worries and try and find a way through them with someone outside the immediate circle. Whether this is best done, for example, in self-help groups, by family therapy, or by individual counselling, is for experiment and debate. But responsibility for provision is at present fragmented and its focus uncertain: social services, marriage guidance, the probation service, child guidance clinics, psychiatric services, the voluntary sector, all have a finger in the pie. Diversity is one thing, confusion another. We lack a coherent policy and structure for the provision of family support related to the stresses of divorce and remarriage.

The paucity of work with such families, unless they have associated problems which label them clearly as the administrative concern of a particular agency, illustrates one of the central failures of our post-war social services, namely, the development of preventive work. The word 'preventive' is notoriously difficult to define, and contentious. But it is used here modestly, to describe an attempt to help, not before any problem arises but after a problem has arisen and before it has got worse.

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dramatically in the last 15 years. We cannot put the clock back, we must see what is needed to smooth the passage of these families in transition. It is perhaps easier to pinpoint legal, financial and environmental improvements. But, as a social worker, I would urge also the need for the development of readily available, flexible provision for advice, support and treatment of the 'family in crisis', common crises of the kind I have been describing above, which happen to millions of people but which are unique in their manifestations for the individuals concerned. And I would add a special plea for the children, since we have not advanced very far in the skills of communication with children, in finding ways of helping them to express and work out their feelings in a manner appropriate to their age and stage in development. The child therapists are a drop in the ocean, and social workers have been very slow to move in. There are, of course, some situations to which no child should be asked to adapt, and therefore the only course is to change the situation. This is not the case in many families where divorce and remarriage has taken place, but there is often a pressing need for the child to be helped so that his grief and anger does not overwhelm the family and the struggling adults.

As I said earlier, it is not my intention to discuss the status of the research evidence concerning substitute care, although Roger Fuller and I do so in our report to the SSRC. It is ground too familiar to this audience. But I would like to draw your attention to the difficulties we have in avoiding a kind of 'either/or debate', which I hope is unnecessary in a group such as this. For when one reviews the literature, it is easy to see that, behind careful discussion of research findings, there lie strongly held values which are related to class structure and political beliefs, as well as the impact of personal and professional experience. An example of this is given in Tizard's Adoption - A Second Chance.¹⁵ The publishers' summary on the back of the book states:

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the indiscriminate restitution of children to their natural parents. She argues that it is possible that more children might be successfully adopted from institutions if natural parents were not encouraged to maintain links with their children when there was little chance of their permanently reclaiming them.'

Note the word indiscriminate, which is pejorative. It is like asking, hands up those who are against sin. Of course, every right-minded person would be against indiscriminate restitution. Indiscriminate means 'done without making distinction'. The proper question is, upon what criteria and for what reasons should children be returned home, or not? And, on this, opinions which use evidence differently may legitimately differ, as may the implications to be drawn from Tizard's book.

As the outline suggests, it demonstrates fairly conclusively, in relation to a small number of children, all of whom had been in a residential nursery, that a group of older adopted children do better on certain measurable indices than do the children restored to their parents (usually mothers only or mother and stepfather). Tizard acknowledges that the prospective adopters received a good deal more help in the process of receiving the child into their home than did the natural parents, but it is unlikely that this alone would be a significant factor. However, at the very end of the book, in the chapter on policy implications, there are these few lines:

'The most important contribution to the welfare of both natural parents and children would be greatly improved support services for the families; readier contraception and abortion would prevent a great deal of suffering; adequate accommodation, a realistic children's allowance, higher wages for women, and day nurseries for working mothers, would obviate the need for many children to come into care.'

What a package - what policy implications! Yet this has not been perceived as the message of the book, which is widely canvassed by those who want to promote adoption.

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One of our difficulties here is in distinguishing between longer term policy objectives and the needs of particular children at a given time. I would argue that our longer term objectives should be to provide the structures and services of the kind referred to in Tizard's paragraph to support those parents who want to look after their children but who labour under difficulties. This can be defended on both moral and practical grounds.

As to moral grounds, parents have not got rights to their children as to property and there is a sense in which parents have to earn the right by the quality of their care. But in any society we may create or exacerbate conditions in which we make it extraordinarily difficult for parents to fulfil their obligations. There is plenty of evidence to show that a substantial number of parents are living in such conditions. The Finer Committee advanced powerful and responsible evidence showing the many aspects of the legal, social and economic difficulties of one parent families. There are also subtler difficulties for parents of children in care. For example, when children, received into care temporarily, are then placed at such a distance that parents have difficulty in visiting, or in homes where the parents are made to feel unwelcome. There are so many ways in which we can load the dice against the parent. And, indeed, the dice for some may have been loaded since the day they were conceived.

Our primary task, therefore, must be to battle against the 'diswelfares', to use Titmuss's phrase, created by certain social and economic processes, and to respond sensitively to those trends in family life which are likely, left unheeded, to produce a new crop of problems. This is not simply a moral imperative, however: it is severely practical when we consider the difficulties that there are in providing the quality of substitute child care which we could consider acceptable.

Certain children, of course, will be served best by substitute care, especially adoption. Given the educational, social and material status of many adopters, it is not surprising that many of these 'do well' on

the usual criteria. But evidence of such success should not be used as an argument for promoting adoption at the expense of, or instead of, the development of support services for natural parents.

Finally, and referring back to the title of my talk - 'Family Patterns in the 1980's' - may I bring in one other social trend which I believe to be of great importance and which has been little discussed. I refer to the increasing numbers, absolutely and proportionately, of the elderly in our society. Some of you will know that I am Vice-Chairman of Age Concern and I have been asked to speak later this month in the last stages of the International Year of the Child, about the role of grandparents. There is no time to develop the theme here but obviously, as I have been preparing this paper, my mind has been running, as it were, along two tracks, all too often kept parallel and never allowed to merge.

Any picture of family patterns in the 1980's would be incomplete without a reference to three generations. For we have to bring in grandparents. Many will be in late middle age when their children's marriages break up. What role do we want them to have in helping children and grandchildren, leaving aside their own need for help in coping with such stresses when new relationships develop and old ones have to be reviewed. Then we have to face the fact that many parents will be coping with the normal stresses of teenage children and at the same time beginning to assume greater responsibility for the care of their ageing parents. Such demands can create considerable conflict.

What this reminds us - and as professionals, I think we need reminding - is that the familiar jargon about nuclear and extended families needs to be scrapped. In a useful introduction to a revised edition of Kinship and Casework, Leichter and Mitchell¹⁶ comment:

'On examining the family, through the lens of concepts about kinship, it became evident that family diagnosis and treatment, if it merely replaced individual diagnosis

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and treatment by considering the nuclear family as if it were a bounded and isolated unit, was making the same error that had plagued individual diagnosis - i.e. the failure to look closely enough at external influences.'

Of course, this opens a huge new subject: kinship is much more than a straight three generational line. But the thesis of the authors' - that professionals should be more aware of their own value stance regarding kinship ties, and of their importance in strengthening or weakening family life and more interested in them as part of intervention, is one upon which we should all ponder. Morgan¹⁷ throws considerable light upon this and gives us the phrase 'modified extended family' as an alternative to the platitudinous and misleading 'nuclear family'.

There is a trendy phrase at present - 'getting it all together'. I am not sure what it means and if it's really rude, I apologise. But, this is, in a sense, what I have been trying to do in this paper: to give you an overview, a framework within which to put some of your specific concerns and to say, as an ex-Child Care Officer with the warmest memories of 'my' foster parents and as an aunt and cousin of four adopted children, that all of us need to put the issues of alternative and substitute care, on occasions, in a wider perspective and to ask - what are we doing to and for the natural families in our midst?