

## FAMILY CONCERNS AND INTER-GENERATIONAL SOLIDARITY

MARGARET S. ARCHER

This paper will explore three issues. What is the importance today of the family to people in Britain? What is it about these people that makes the family important to them? What are the implications of attaching importance to the family for inter-generational solidarity? It will do so with reference to two on-going investigations about the emergence of different modes of personal reflexivity, which are intertwined with these issues – one of the general population and the other of students entering University. In answering the first question, it will be assumed that people are ‘strong evaluators’ (Taylor 1985: 65-8) in their own lives rather than just maximising their utilities. In dealing with the second question, it is accepted that situations are objectively shaped for agents, but that their causal efficacy is mediated through their subjective evaluation by agents, rather than them constituting irresistible pushes and pulls upon people. In addressing the third question, it is presumed that we are dealing with active agents whose self-monitoring contributes to making things happen, rather than passive agents to whom things just happen. This underlying model of the human person who is also a social agent (Archer 2000) is at variance with much of the sociological tradition in family analysis.

### *Preliminary Considerations*

‘Generations’ can be defined very differently, depending upon the purpose in hand. At one extreme the definition is subjective in nature; at the other it is objective. The first type is illustrated by Edmunds and Turner for whom a ‘generation’ can be defined as a cohort that for some special reason such as a major event (war, pestilence, civil conflict or natural catastrophe such as an earthquake) develops a collective con-

sciousness that permits that generation to intervene significantly in social change (2002: ix).

Thus they refer to the 'post-war generation' (shaped by the Cold War), the 'anti-globalization generation' (the response of the Islamic diaspora to globalization), the 'September generation' (created by the events of 9/11) and even the 'missing generation' (defined by its absence before the fall of Communism). These are necessarily subjective groupings because they depend upon 'collective consciousness', that is the fact that 'an age cohort comes to have social significance by virtue of constituting itself as cultural identity' (2002: 7). The referent is to people's subjectivity, the presumption made is that 'generation units' (see Mannheim [1952] 1997) share something of the same mind-set and also that it is possible to distinguish several 'generations' that are co-terminous in time but largely separated in space (such as the 'September generation' and the 'anti-globalization' generation').

In itself, this type of definition is unobjectionable, so long as these assumptions are warranted. Whether or not they can be is an empirical matter, which the authors accept (2002: 16), as is the assertion that such collectively shared subjectivity permits a 'generation to intervene significantly in social change'. In any case, I do not intend to conceptualise generations in this way, nor in terms of the polar opposite type of objective definition.

At the other extreme, 'generations' are objectively because chronologically defined, their referents being to some actuarially (constant or variable) time span. Such conceptions permit statements of the kind that 'less than one hundred generations have passed since the Romans invaded Britain', which may be of utility if the aim is to study, for example, the persistence or elimination of certain genetic characteristics or the diffusion and syncretism of cultural beliefs, artefacts or practices.

Like all others, my own conceptualisation is governed by the problem in hand and the constraints of the research design adopted. It lies between the objective and the subjective. Objectively, 'generations' represent positions within a continuum of descent. They are the 'parental' (or 'grandparental') 'generations' of the subjects investigated – or the 'generations' of their children (or grandchildren). Because such 'generations' are (objectively) relational to the subject, this means that they are roughly similar in their chronology for the Student sample because of the predominance of 18 to 19 year olds among first year entrants to University. This is not the case for the General sample, which was stratified into four age groups: the 16 year old girl and 80 year old woman can refer to grandparents who may be more than 60 years apart in age and belong to 'culturally different' cohorts with different life-chances etc.

The subjective component consisted in allowing respondents themselves to define who constituted members of their families. Such definitions were very varied; these variations exceeded the distinction between the nuclear and the extended family (for example, there were horizontal differences in whether or not 'cousins' were included); and such variations were to prove highly significant and non-random. They were so in relation to manifestations of 'inter-generational solidarity'. Again, it is important to be clear about the kinds of activities which are taken here to be indicative of such solidarity – or its absence.

'Inter-generational solidarity' can be conceptualised in different ways, at different levels and refer to completely different types of agents and actions. Thus at the most macro-level, 'solidarity' (or its opposite) could refer to the consideration or indifference (perhaps unknowingly) that a given generation displays towards the future of the human race, in terms, for example, of the environmental conservation or depredation transmitted to future generations. At the regional and/or national levels, 'solidarity' could well refer to the equity with which finite public resources are distributed between the extant chronological generations. Recently there have been growing concerns about the Western tendency for the older (and still older) generations being the highest users of public services and recipients of public benefits (Esping-Anderson 1998). This is held to be fuelling inter-generational conflict with the younger active population (Vincent 1999: 103; Chauvel 1998), whose new entrants are now told to fund their own private pension schemes. At the meso-level, attention might focus upon a particular social institution or organised activity, with the question being how far participation is indifferent to age and thus promotive of 'solidarity' (as with football matches or Church attendance). At the micro-level, attention would shift to inter-personal relations and to the multifarious ways in which a given generation may or may not be supportive of older or younger ones.

No one level of analysis has precedence over another in terms of its causal influence. That again is an empirical question; moreover, because of the properties and powers pertaining to them, all levels are operative simultaneously. Again, the same agents can be actively involved in each of these levels at the same time. In consequence, a complete account of inter-generational solidarity would have to embrace all of these levels and the relations between them.

My aim in this paper is much more modest. It focuses upon the micro-level of interpersonal relations, identifies those kinds of voluntary actions which promote or demote inter-generational solidarity amongst family

members (which is where the self-definition of 'the family' by subjects becomes important) and therefore at most contributes to an account of *the aggregate effects of individual actions*. On the whole, and with exceptions to which I will return, these (potentially powerful) aggregate effects are not 'everything' but have tended to be treated as closer to 'nothing' in the post-1945 sociological tradition. This is part of the general and imperialistic tendency to regard all action as 'social action' (Campbell 1996). In consequence, the personal promptings and restraints to action are subtracted from the individual and credited in one way or another to the social. Individuals are the executive agency of society – as *träger*, over-socialised beings or mouthpieces of hegemonic discourses. In all of this, the properties and powers of individual people shrink progressively as the capacity to conceive of and conduct courses of action is increasingly withheld from them (see, for example, Harré and Gillett 1994). On such an over-social account, the level of inter-personal activities that I am examining would be epiphenomenal to the issue of inter-generational solidarity. Reduced to the mere echo of higher-level structural or cultural influences, such individual doings could make no independent aggregative contribution because they lack the autonomy to do so. All of this spells a drift to a diffuse form of social determinism under the banner of social constructionism.

#### PART 1. TRADITIONAL CONCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL CONDITIONING AND OF PERSONAL MOTIVATION IN RELATION TO THE FAMILY

##### *Social Hydraulics and Family Forms*

Yet, determinism does not work in relation to this problem and it is impossible to point to any area where it does work – which is why there are few if any self-proclaimed sociological determinists around. Instead, what is vaunted is strong social conditioning. Even there, the human material has to be granted to be of such a kind that it is amenable to being conditioned (Sayer 1992: 121) – it has to be granted this property if no other. Equally importantly, a social conditional influence has to condition *something* and in this case the something has to be some form of intentionality to treat various family members in various ways – however diffuse and inchoate such intentions or inclinations may be. Since conditional influences are often quite properly conceptualised as constraints and enablements, then a constraint logically has to constrain something, just as an

enablement must enable something. These are transitive verbs and there is no such thing as a constraint or an enablement *tout court*. In other words, no conditional influence operates as a hydraulic pressure which simply pushes and pulls human agents around, the latter fundamentally being conceived of as 'indeterminate material'. All social influences have to be mediated by and through people – who have the personal powers to respond to them in very different ways, according to who they are, where they are placed and, specifically what personal projects they entertain.

Indeed to attempt to nullify such personal powers and to privilege the power of social forms always produces defective explanations. At most, in the domain of family relations, this yields correlations (between, for example, socio-occupational status and inter-generational cohabitation, geographical contiguity or quotidian contact). At best, these tell us what 'most of the people do most of the time' and quite often sociologists settle for second best – merely that a statistically significant portion of the population do 'x' rather than 'y'. But the correlation coefficient is only an empirical generalisation (a methodological expression of Hume's 'constant conjunctions') (Bhaskar 1989). What no correlation can tell us is *why* people do what they do in fact do (be this following the trend which generates a high coefficient or deviating from it); and correlations are always less than perfect.

Efficient causality depends upon the motives, intentions and courses of action which are conceived of and implemented by agents themselves, whether or not they are mediating structural or cultural factors when deciding precisely what to do. Instead of investigating what does move different agents, too frequently investigators have covertly inserted their own assumptions about what motivates them: people are presumed to act in their own best interests, to pursue objective advantages, to accede plastically to social inducements or discouragements. This approach is resisted here because it turns all agents into instrumental rationalists in their familial relations. It disallows that the value rationality (the *Wertrational*) of many people means that family solidarity is an end in itself to them and not an instrumentally rational (*Zwekrational*) way of becoming 'better off' in terms of some hypothetical 'utiles'. In short, the family can be something we care about for its own sake, for the internal rather than the external good(s) it supplies (McIntyre 1987: 181-203), as I hope to demonstrate in Part 2.

However, to resist the social hydraulics that are secreted by the quest for empirical generalisations is to swim against the historical tide in the sociology of the family. Perhaps the oldest and best entrenched of such generalisations, still celebrated in introductory textbooks, is the correlation

between the rise of industrialisation and the advent of the nuclear family. A brief inspection of the stages of this argument about the demise of the extended family serves to lay bare its reliance upon the imputation of instrumental rationality.

The first stage of the argument goes as follows. In various ways the process of industrialisation engendered considerable population movement, particularly from rural to urban areas, thus disrupting the old stability of family location, which had spelt the geographical contiguity of generations and encouraged practices of solidarity amongst them (from cradle to grave in terms of the transmission of knowledge, role induction and informal apprenticeship, the valuation of long-acquired expertise and the extension of mutual care over the generations). Not only was it the young, active and able-bodied who first flocked towards urban, industrial employment but industrialisation itself placed a premium on *The Migratory Elite* (Musgrove 1963). Those who were willing to make successive geographical moves towards new occupational openings also reaped the benefits of social mobility. And those most able to do were those literally carrying the lightest family baggage – by leaving the oldest generation behind. As these two-generational units became increasingly well-off, the more readily could they substitute out-sourcing for services previously supplied by extended family members (replacing them by maids, child nurses, nannies, grooms and gardeners). They also found themselves in a position to make financial provisions for their parents, relieving the threat of both the Workhouse and the Pauper's burial. Thus callousness did not have to taint the instrumental rationality through obedience to which the middle class nuclear family was born.

The second stage of the argument concerns the working class, whose poverty sustained their reliance upon services rendered by the extended family throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Negatively this pattern was reinforced by the absence of any form of extra-familial care for the old – beyond the dreaded Workhouse where aged couples were usually separated into male and female dormitories. What then served to universalise the nuclear family amongst those (the majority) who remained beneficiaries of the extended family form?

The argument continues that as democratic politics increasingly became bourgeois politics, the heirs and successors of the old 'migratory elite' progressively institutionalised the extra-familial provision of services for the family. As this process intensified throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, public provisions gradually replaced both servants and the services of the extended family: by the development of universal school-

ing and formal vocational training, of orphanages, asylums and hospitals, and eventually of pensions, sickness benefits and public geriatric care. In short, the nuclear family became the norm because the family itself had reduced tasks to perform. This was the thesis concisely stated by William F. Ogburn that the modern family was 'losing its functions' (1934).

This thesis formed the keystone of the post-war sociological consensus on the family. As William Goode, the sixties doyen on family research (Goode 1963), summarised the situation:

Family research in the post-World War II period has documented one gross empirical regularity ... that in all parts of the world and for the first time in world history all social systems are moving fast or slowly toward some form of the conjugal family system and also toward industrialization. In agreement with the intuition of social analysts for over a century is the finding that with industrialization the traditional family systems – usually, extended or joint family systems ... are breaking down (Goode 1964: 108).

Although Goode himself contested both the uni-factoral premise that industrialisation was alone responsible and also resisted empirical generalisations about the co-incidence of industrial and family change being elevated to the status of a 'theory', empiricism nonetheless ruled. What empiricists missed and persisted in neglecting into the next millennium is Goode's following and acute observation:

No nuclear family *system* exists, if by that we mean a system in which most families maintain few or no relations with their more extended kin. All contemporary studies in the most industrialized countries – Great Britain and the U.S. – show that in fact each family unit maintains contact with a wide range of relatives, and that the largest single category of 'recreation' is 'visiting with relatives' (1964: 51).

Instead, official statistics and calculations, like those of Marvin Sussman for the U.S. (1974: 38), showing 75% of the population living in nuclear or conjugal families, with (once married) single-parent families in second place at 15%, and experimental forms lying third at 6% together served to underline the demise of the extended family (2%) and of households made up of kin networks (again 2%). Theory mirrored the empiricist consensus. This was strongly signalled in the fifties as Parsons unequivocally assigned the family to 'system maintenance' functions rather than those of 'task performance'. Equally importantly, his *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process* (Parsons 1955) highlighted the new focus of concern with the psychodynamics of family relations *inside* the nuclear unit.

The final stage in the argument, fuelled jointly by latter day feminism and the much vaunted 'individualism' induced by the imperatives of flexibility in the new labour market (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), presents a scenario in which people are progressively unfitted for stable long-term relationships. In turn, whilst this endorses the previous demise of solidarity with the 'third generation', it now views 'two generational' solidarity as threatened. Significantly, the factors held responsible are largely an intensification of those earlier said to be accountable for stripping the family of its functions. For example,

individualization means that people are linked into the institutions of the labour market and welfare state, educational system, legal system, state bureaucracy, and so on, which have emerged together with modern society. These institutions produce various regulations – demands, instructions, entitlements – that are typically addressed to individuals rather than the family as a whole. And the crucial feature of these new regulations is that they enjoin the individual to lead a life of his or her own beyond any ties to the family or other groups – or sometimes even to shake off such ties (Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

The only new ingredient is the reinforcement supplied by the women's movement, representing the family as the lynch-pin of engendered exploitation and patriarchal repression.

Together these factors are considered by such authors to raise the following questions. Firstly, why have children at all? After all, despite young women's protestations that they desire them, less do have them. Thus, in Britain, 'according to official government forecasts at least 20 per cent of women born in the 1960s will not have children, rising to nearly one quarter of those who were born in the 1970s' (Franks 1999: 197-8). And the German trend has reached almost one third amongst the same cohort. Secondly, why have children so early and in such numbers? After all, one child can assuage the maternal urge; one perfect child, thanks to medical screening and genetic engineering obviates any need for risk-spreading over several; and intensive investment in one perfect child optimises his or her social life-chances. Thirdly, why not have a child without a family? Today the life-long, heterosexual and domiciliary based unit of birth parents and their child(ren) is only one of a proliferating list of experimental options on offer – including (sometimes profitable) surrogate motherhood. Such is the problematisation of the 'post-familial family'.

Nevertheless, people (very various) *increasingly* go to extraordinary lengths in order to reproduce (the other face of bio-medical possibilities),

young people, especially in Mediterranean countries, tend to live much longer with their parents whilst completing education (Hakim 2003), and in Eastern Europe the endless 'make do' and inter-generational mix in the sharing and re-sharing of apartments, movement of money between bank accounts to cover down-payments, and the 'pass the parcel' of child-care and granny-care are not diminishing. In short, even the facts of European life cast the above scenario in the light of selective perception.

Its script writers are not unaware nor without a response. Late modernity promotes not only individualisation but also a lonely longing for inter-personal ties. Thus, the endurance of the family (be it re-partnered and amalgamated) was already presented in the 1970s as a 'haven in a heartless world' (Lasch 1977). Even Beck-Gernsheim's 'post-familial family'

will be the expansion of the nuclear family and its extension over time; it will be the alliance between individuals that it represents; and it will be glorified largely because it represents an image of refuge in the chilly environment of our affluent, impersonal, uncertain society, which has been stripped of its traditions and exposed to all kinds of risk (2002: 8).

But there is a condition attached to this endurance of the nuclear family and it is the same one attaching to the growing need for care amongst the oldest generation, because of its longevity. The provision of care across any generation has been an almost exclusively female preserve – and continues to be so. Yet, with women's increasing employment in the public domain, their labour capacity is now a scarce resource in relation to inter-generational caring. The proviso, therefore, is a redistribution of domestic labour away from women and towards men: 'the future contract between the generations will depend on the success of a new contract between the sexes' (Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 85).

### *Instrumental Rationality and Family Relationships*

Those are the terms for granting a provisional future to the family in the West. Conversely, and in direct succession from the assumption of instrumental rationality which underlay the traditional sociological analyses of changes in family forms, is the contribution of Gary Becker (1991). His *Treatise on the Family* proffers a means of eliminating the above proviso about the necessary redistribution of domestic labour; an answer to why people will continue to have children, though in smaller numbers, and the source of an enduring bond between the second and third generation. Such

guarantees are supplied by instrumental rationality itself. If we focus steadily upon the investment patterns and pay-offs of rational men and women, then cause for concern largely evaporates. That is, of course, if Becker can convince us that family relations are indeed approached like other commodities in a person's overall investment portfolio.

Becker himself begins by disposing of the proviso that the frail bonds of inter-generational solidarity depend for reinforcement upon a more equitable distribution of domestic labour:

even if a husband and wife are intrinsically identical, they gain from a division of labour between market and household activities, with one of them specializing in more in market activities and the other specializing more in household activities. The gain comes from increasing returns to investments in sector-specific human capital that raise productivity in either the market or the non-market sectors. Therefore, even small differences between men and women – presumably related at least partially to the advantages of women in the birth and rearing of children – would cause a division of labor by gender, with wives more specialized to household activities and husbands more specialized to other work (Becker 1993: 3-4).

This may be the case in terms of objective financial pay-offs, but what justifies Becker in assuming that this is the 'currency' used by couples, an 'external' good, a means to being materially better-off, rather than the alternative currencies of intrinsic satisfaction, stimulation and self-fulfilment? Indeed, he concedes as much for the quotation continues:

The degree of specialization in a marriage would be less extreme if one of the sectors, perhaps housework, were considered more boring and less worthwhile.

In other words, 'personal boredom' and well as 'material gain' has to be factored-in, but what hidden-hand ensures that this translates directly into a more equitable sharing of the 'boring', what is the common currency that enables 'boredom' to be offset against 'gain', and why should this satisficing adjustment in domestic activities prevail within a relationship of unequal conjugal power?

The same problem attaches to Becker's account of altruism within the family; over many generations this is biologically selected for because of its survival advantages for young and old alike, yet, in any one generation, it has to be worked at. Why should people live and work in this way? Again because they will all become 'better-off'. Thus family life is a matter of cost-benefit analysis. Becker advocates an 'investment in guilt', by which parents

financially promote the acquisition of 'merit goods' in their offspring with the intention of inducing sufficient guilt in their children that they themselves are cared for in return in their later years. (Archer and Tritter 2000: 41f.) Yet, this assumes that parents are actuated by investment considerations, rather than caring for their children's well-being as an end in itself. It also presumes that guilt will actuate these children later on to assume responsibility for their elderly parents needs. In all of this, emotions like love and caring within the family have been disallowed as ends in themselves. Instead, they have been subordinated to cost-benefit calculations which will eventually be cashed-in to everyone's (material) advantage.

But in terms of such instrumental rationality why do the benefiting offspring not just cut and run with their 'merit goods', rather than engaging in a reciprocity with the third generation? Becker himself

recognises that frequent contact among family members often raises the degree of altruism. That is to say, altruism may well have some of the properties of an addictive taste that is fostered by consumption of the good involved. We believe that addictive aspects of altruism better explain the apparently larger bequests by parents to children who visit them more frequently than does the view that parents use bequests to 'buy' visits (Becker 1993: 365).

So, a new variable, 'frequency of contact' has been introduced to explain reciprocal solidarity. However, to explain this frequency itself, we are presented with two stark alternatives: either these contacts are matters of irrational addiction (Elster 1999) – the preferred explanation – or they are again commodified purchases. Here it is rather easy to see why Becker rejects the second alternative because why should granny and grandpa 'buy' a visit, unless they value it for itself, since the only further benefit to which it could lead is 'further visits', which raise the same problem.

Of course, if addiction is truly irrational it is withdrawn from the ambit of Rational Choice Theory; we cannot even ask the question why grandparents become addicts to visits from their families rather than becoming geriatric gamblers or hitting the bottle. Instead, Becker wants to make such grandparental altruism (bequests) explicable as the dependent variable. Upon what does it depend – upon the 'frequency of visits' itself, which now become the *explanans*: 'the degree of altruism is not fixed but often responds to the frequency and intensity of contacts with beneficiaries' (Becker 1993: 375).

This leads us back to Goode's observation (see p. 8) about the *recreational* importance of visits to relatives because leisure activities are usually

regarded as voluntary – being matters neither of irrational addition nor calculative instrumentalism. It also links forward to one aspect of my own ongoing research project where the quantity and quality of intra-familial contact is found to be one of the main causes of *who* we become as people and of what we then *do* because of what we most care about – and the moral commitments these concerns reflect, considered as being ends in themselves.

## PART 2. INTER-GENERATIONAL RELATIONS AND OUR ULTIMATE CONCERNS

Let us begin from a different starting point, namely that *who* people are derives from their ultimate concerns which are expressive of their identities and therefore are *not* a means to some further end. Ends like these to which we are morally committed are those things that we care about most. When our ultimate concerns are matters of family relations, these are not for any agent the ‘means to his flourishing but its constituents’ (Hollis 1989: 174). Here, there is no sense in asking why it pays someone to give their child a birthday present or to help their parents out; for these actions are expressive of their relationship, not matters of investment and *quid pro quo*. Moral commitment of this kind is neither calculative nor socialised, yet it is both reasoned and social, for our relations to these significant others are the expression of who we are and where we belong.

An ‘agent’s ultimate reference group cannot be himself alone. He needs some group to identify with in relationships whose flourishing is a measure of his flourishing’ (Hollis 1989: 174). By necessity this has to be authentic because when another’s interests are part of one’s own, short-cuts which simply give the appearance of belonging and of caring are self-defeating to a person whose real need is really to belong. What this implies is that Weber’s *Wertrationalität* remains part of our lifeworld, which cannot be reduced to a bargain-hunter’s bazaar. As Frankfurt puts it, a

person who cares about something is, as it were, invested in it. He *identifies* himself with what he cares about in the sense that he makes himself vulnerable to losses and susceptible to benefits depending upon whether what he cares about is diminished or enhanced (1988: 83).

When explaining what such agents decide to do, then it is their commitments which supply their own ‘weights and measures’. Without a knowledge of what is moving them we simply do not know what *counts* to them as a cost or a benefit or how strongly it counts.

Now the rational choice theorist would presumably object here that committed people are still acting with instrumental rationality, it is simply that we have dug a bit deeper into their preferences. This would be mistaken because with a commitment, means and ends are not separate: the things we care about profoundly affect *how* we honour our commitments. Commitments are a way of life 'in the round' which affect means as well as ends. We will not understand the precise means selected unless we comprehend the *relationship* which a person sees between their goals and means, and this is something which can only be understood in expressive and not calculative terms. When we care for our children by giving time to play with them, this is expressive of our relationship with them, it is not a means of gaining their affection, nor is it conformity to the norms of good parenting, which are just as well satisfied by leaving them at a play-group. Instead, and especially with respect to those we love and with respect to our ideals, we are liable to be bound by necessities which have less to do with our adherence to the principles of morality than with integrity and consistency of a more personal kind. These necessities constrain us from betraying the things we care about most and with which, accordingly, we are most closely identified. In a sense which a strictly ethical analysis cannot make clear, what they keep us from violating are not our duties and obligations but ourselves (Frankfurt 1988: 91).

There is no doubt that the family matters to the British population and even some evidence from my current research project that it is the 'ultimate concern' of the general population investigated. The data gathered about the family were not the central point of interest, since the project is concerned with the development of human reflexivity. Nevertheless, from the pilot investigation it appeared that family relations played a significant role in the type of reflexivity developed. Therefore data were collected which can be used to assess the role of the family in people's 'main concerns in life'. The project involves two samples. Firstly, there is a sample of the general population resident in Coventry (n=128), stratified by gender and into four age groups and four occupational categories. Secondly, there is the population of all students entering the University of Warwick to study Sociology (as Single or Joint Honours students or those taking it as an external option: n=130). They were examined during their first week as undergraduates in 2003 and form part of a longitudinal study over three years. In both studies it is the long qualitative interviews (approximately 1 in 3), now underway, which lie at the heart of the project, but the quantitative findings seemed interesting enough in themselves to present here.

Specifically, both sets of respondents were asked on the questionnaire, 'In general, what are the three most important areas of your life now – those that you care about deeply'. They were given three numbered spaces for responses, asked to list the most important first, but responses were open-ended and therefore provided in the subjects' own words. In quantitative terms, this seems a reasonable way of measuring people's 'ultimate concerns', although we must beware of assuming that use of the same word, such as 'family' means the same thing to different subjects – a matter to which I will return because of the availability of certain internal checks upon this.

To begin with the general population, the overwhelming and perhaps surprising finding was the importance of the 'family',<sup>1</sup> with only ten respondents failing to list it amongst their three main concerns in life. Even more striking is the fact that if the first listed concern can legitimately be taken as representing respondents ultimate concern, then over three-quarters (78%)<sup>2</sup> of this sample designated it as such.<sup>3</sup> This showed no substantive difference for gender; the percentage for males being 77% and for females 79%. For those currently married or in a partnership of at least two years duration, the proportion putting the 'family' first rose to 83% (Again gender differences were small, with males at 85% and females at 81%). For those with children, regardless of their marital or partnership status, it rose again to 84% (Once more this finding is not a heavily engendered one, standing at 81% for men and 87% for women).

What such strong findings tell us is that the 'family' matters, that it matters more than anything else to 78% of the sample and is amongst the main concerns of 92% of the sample – which attempted to be representative of gender, age and socio-economic group. What these findings do not tell us is *who* is being referred to as 'family' and therefore *who matters*; nor can they reveal anything about inter-generational solidarity. We will have to work slowly into this, using biographical data collected on each subject and the qualitative evidence collected from interviews in the original and Pilot investigations.

To begin with, it is clear that different respondents do indeed mean different things by the 'family' and that the general population used it to

<sup>1</sup> Here the open-ended responses given by subjects were grouped into the following categories and then aggregated: 'family' (81.2%), 'partner/relationship (singular)' (1.6%), and 'family and friends' (9.4%), together totalling 92.2%.

<sup>2</sup> Henceforth all percentages are rounded up or down to the nearest whole number.

<sup>3</sup> As defined in footnote 1.

include 'partnerships of at least two years duration' (incorporating two avowedly gay partnerships); re-partnering (which may or may not have involved marriage); having children (whether the subject was of widowed, divorced, separated or single-parent status); the amalgamated family, with step-children, sometimes from both sides; and having living parents and relatives, when respondents were never married, not in a partnership and childless. In other words, to say that the 'family' is of tremendous importance to the general population does not mean that the referent is to the traditional family.

In fact, the referent is probably closer to 'those I care about a great deal in my personal relationships'. This can be checked indirectly by reference to a question asked of all subjects and to which they could respond in one of seven categories from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. The question was 'So long as I know those I care about are OK, nothing else really matters to me at all'. Obviously this is a much stronger statement because it is exclusive of other concerns, whereas subjects listing (their definition of) the 'family' as their ultimate concern, had two more opportunities to list other concerns. Nevertheless, over half were in agreement (58%) with the above question, 13% opted for the median (or uncertain category) and 29% disagreed with the statement. Clearly, close personal relationships are of great importance if they are of exclusive importance to half of this population. Further substantiation of this proposition comes from answers to the following question: 'Most of my satisfaction comes from belonging to a close-knit family, friendship or work group'. This is a weaker statement, because it talks about 'most' rather than 'all' and also broadens out personal relationships to include friends and fellow workers. Over three-quarters of subjects were in agreement and only 13% in disagreement. So far, the data have only enabled it to be shown that the 'family' matters, under their own descriptions, as the ultimate concern of members of the general population and that this is probably related to the significance attached to close interpersonal relations. As such, it is compatible with the 'haven in a harsh world' interpretation of the durability of the family – often under new and increasingly unconventional forms.

However, as yet, these findings reveal nothing about inter-generational solidarity. In order for them to do so, in conjunction with the student survey, I will have to make use of my preliminary study (Archer 2003) and of the Pilot investigation of 32 subjects. This qualitative material, based upon in-depth interviews, which often lasted more than three hours, goes to the core of the project and can provide a hinge between the two on-going studies.

It does so because it establishes the crucial and *mutually reinforcing* connection *between contacts and concerns* with and over the three generations. Firstly, the following factors, in combination, appeared to be necessary but not sufficient conditions for promoting inter-generational solidarity, that is the frequency, intensity and importance attaching to relations between the three generations. (i) Geo-localism: stability of residence fostering an uninterrupted friendship network for the youngest generation. (ii) Progression through compulsory schooling with the same neighbourhood age cohort, uninterrupted by changes of school or attending boarding school. (iii) Continuity of the natal family, undisturbed by death, marital breakdown, re-partnering or the amalgamation of step-siblings. (iv) A transition from school to work assisted by family members and/or accompanied by school friends. These are the quantitative aspects of what I term 'contextual continuity', but they are only the bare bones and need to be associated with warm and congenial relations.

Secondly, the necessary conditions are supplied by the response of the youngest generational subject. He or she needs to be able to identify an occupation, maintain and develop a peer-network, and to initiate his or her first significant (sexual) relationship within the bounds of this natal context. In other words, individuals have to discover that they can form their own *personal modus vivendi* within the same context – and far from all such young people find that they can satisfyingly invest themselves there. For those who can, the family context becomes their own and represents a common social anchorage, sharing the same topography, generating a communality of referents, fostering a pool of shared experiences and under-writing the utility of consultation, assistance and advice between generations.

Take thirty-seven year old Angie, a secretary whose biography shares all the above features; brought up in what she describes as a 'loving environment', meeting her closest friend at the age of two, replicating the precise occupational position of her mother; Aunt and many family friends and extending her friendship network through Secretarial college and her two main jobs to date. Angie displays considerable satisfaction with her *modus vivendi*. What is significant about it for present purposes is the intense amount of interpersonal contact involved. The environment in which she grew up continues to be her environment. It reaches forward and backward, *reinforcing its continuity by the frequency and intensity of interpersonal contact*.

I see my Mum about twice a week I suppose, and I see my Auntie about once a month, and then cousins ... I see my uncles probably once a month. It just depends what's going on. I don't tend to speak

to them on the phone – my relatives – as much as my friends, but I speak to my Mum, not every day, but certainly every other day I'm on the phone.

Other subjects, both of whose parents and grandparents are alive, incorporate them into their pattern of regular contacts, with older subjects often finding small jobs for their parents. For younger subjects, dense familial contact is smoothly interwoven into a busy social agenda with friends, boyfriends and girlfriends. An important feature of this density and intensity of contact is that it insulates against external 'intrusions' and supplies a continuous contextual running commentary upon the conduct of these subjects own lives. In brief, the various generations, members of the extended family, friends and colleagues share the same lifeworld and contribute to its current protection and projection over time.

Contrast the above pattern with fifty-seven year old Eliot, who runs his antiquarian book business from home as a sole trader. His biography is almost the reverse. His father died when he was very young and his mother remarried, presenting him with two step-brothers. This also entailed three geographical moves around the country, and Eliot's changing schools and boarding from the age of eleven. His earliest friends date from University. Eliot eventually married an equally migratory University lecturer and their two sons were born in a house chosen for occupational convenience and far away from both natal families. To accommodate to the occupational demands of this dual-career couple, weekly boarding was chosen for the children's secondary education. Significantly, it is his work rather than his family which Eliot nominates as his 'ultimate concern', although home-life occupies second place for him. As he talks about the latter, it is clear that he himself is an individualist, that he expects his wife to have her own autonomous concerns and his children to grow up to be independent adults, going their own ways.

The relationships that I have in my own house matter, but not in the way that most other people would assume they matter. But they do rest on respect for other people's priorities within the home ... I think I have to say that either I have a very understanding wife or a wife whose behaviour is as akin to mine as I'm likely ever to find on earth ... As a bookseller ... I normally come around to thinking, no, it isn't that into which I would have happily sent my sons. I wouldn't like to have committed them to following in my footsteps.

Relationships are governed by an 'ethic of responsibility', hammered out between the individuals in question because there are no 'contextual

rules' for them to follow and no 'contextual commentary' to which their definitions are offered-up for communal approval. The importance of the contrast with Angie is that for Eliot and his wife, inter-generational solidarity is largely confined to 'visiting'. As far as the oldest generation is concerned, the 'ethics of responsibility' require that good quality care is ensured for their failing parents, but by out-sourcing, and that personal relations are maintained by regular though rather infrequent 'visits'. Equally irregularly, the boys, one of whom now lives abroad, return home for their own 'visits'. When the elder son started his own business after graduation, the 'ethic of responsibility' required that both Eliot and his wife independently offered him financial assistance, but as someone 'rightfully in charge of his own affairs', these offers were properly declined. What is important for defining the contours of inter-personal relations within this family is that *concerns and contacts are no longer mutually reinforcing*.

In turn, what this indicates is that the biggest threat to inter-generational solidarity, considered at the micro-level, is *a rupture in the dialectics of concerns and contact*. Where there is an absence of 'contextual continuity' in which the individual can become embedded in the first place or a lack of concerns which can be endorsed within this context, these factors together promote the 'responsible family' rather than the 'solidary' geo-local family.

In Britain over the last ten years, the single biggest force disrupting natal contextualisation and rupturing the mutual reinforcement of 'concerns and contact' for young adults is the expansion of University education. Currently the Government's target is that 50% of school leavers should enter University and well over a third are already doing so. Since those taking up these provisions are young people who have failed to locate an occupational outlet within their natal context in which they can invest themselves and because attendance for the majority entails moving away from their home towns, then both the development of concerns and the maintenance of close contact become matters determined outside the natal context.

This is where a connection can now be made with the longitudinal student study. These, it will be recalled, are young people, the vast majority of whom are in their first week of living away from home. Of the population in question, only 11% of these students lived in towns, suburbs and villages surrounding the University. All the students have not only been selected for entrance, they are also self-selected. None of them were content to remain and train within their natal context. Certainly they are disproportionately middle class, (72.3% having fathers in, or who used to be in, managerial and professional occupations and 52% of those whose

mothers work also have or had the same occupational status). But nearly all of these have opted for a high-status University rather than for one near home, which would have been possible for the majority. Interviews confirm that the standing of the University was a prime consideration – outweighing proximity to parents, even for those few who had considered this factor to be of importance.

It will be recalled that 78% of the Coventry population listed the ‘family’ (as defined in Footnote 1) as their first concern in life, with this proportion rising for both those currently in a relationship and also for those with children, regardless of their having a relationship or not. Of course, the Coventry population is different, being made up of those aged from 16 to 80 plus. However, amongst the Coventry residents, the youngest age group of the 16-24 year olds was not substantially different from the older respondents, since 69% of them listed the ‘family’ first (versus 71% for those aged 25 plus), if they are allowed to include their ‘partners’ (as were older subjects, if they used this term).<sup>4</sup>

When the student population is compared with the Coventry 16-24 year olds, large differences immediately surface for their first concerns. Whilst 53% of the Coventry youth strictly listed the ‘family’ first, only 30% of the students did so. If we now add in listing a partner as the first concern, then the student total rises to 43% compared with 69% for Coventry youth. Interestingly, no differences in social class were found for the latter, when the two upper and two lower occupational categories were compared. Of course, it is true that many of these student ‘relationships’, which seem so important to them at the time, will probably prove ephemeral, but this is also likely to be the case for some of their Coventry peers.

Nevertheless, it is also important to take into consideration that the average age of students was 19.7 years, compared with 21.5 for Coventry youth. This may seem a small gap but then again, these are precisely the years during which partnerships stabilise and engagements are contracted. This may well be important because 44% of the Coventry young people stated that they were in a relationship of at least two years duration which vastly outnumbered students in the same position. The significance of this derives from the fact that being in a stable relationship was associated with a rise in the importance attached to the ‘family’ by the Coventry population in general.

<sup>4</sup> Note that this is a more restrictive definition because it excludes ‘friends and family’ in order to concentrate upon family members.

So far, our findings show that when first or ultimate concerns are examined, the 'family' (as defined above) is the dominant concern of Coventry young people, but not of students. What then if we take all their three listed concerns together, remembering that in one's first week at University the demands of work and apprehensions about fitting in will be particularly salient? This seems undoubtedly to be the case. Students' top overall concern was about University work (23%), rising to 28% if 'University social life' is added in and to 34% if 'University in general' is included. The contrast here is perhaps with Coventry young people's second concern with 'work/career' which accounted for 19% of their valid listings. Most importantly, for the Coventry youth, the 'family' retains its pride of place, accounting for 30% of their choices, which is only slightly lower than the 33% accorded to it by the Coventry population in general. Again, those in the Coventry 16-24 age cohort are much more like the older residents of the city than they are like the students.

### *Conclusion*

Despite drawbacks in the comparability of the data, it is hard to resist the conclusion that the family, under their own descriptions, matters more for young people in the general population (some of whom are themselves graduates) than it does for our University entrants. This is entirely in line with the hypothesis deriving from my earlier study (Archer 2003) that *contextual discontinuity*, represented here by the 'great break' that University constitutes for the majority of students, entails a major and often irreparable caesura with the 'solidary' and geo-local family.

Certainly, the importance attached to the family, under their own definitions, seems likely to rise for our students over time and indeed in the short-run. It is highly probable that it will do so, firstly, as many form durable partnerships over the next three years (and all of those interviewed hoped for this). Secondly, the importance attaching to the family will in all likelihood increase again as they have children, something that nearly all of the students interviewed were very clear that they wanted, although they deferred this until approximately ten years further on. (It should be noted that this second increase should also be registered among the Coventry sample of young people, all of whom were childless at the time of interview).

However, because of the 'great break', which has already cut through the students' dense enmeshment in their familial context and because of their uniformly stated desires for satisfying careers, whose locations will

in all likelihood cement their departure from their natal context, they will not tend to form 'solidary' geo-local families even amongst those who came from them. Instead, the 'responsible family' is more likely to be the form that the majority develop. At its core will lie a dual-career partnership, for even though most of the women undergraduates envisaged some interruption of work whilst their children were very young, all intended to resume working. As far as their parents are concerned, it seems unlikely that many of them will find homes with their graduate children in their old age, but attention to and investment in high-quality care will be an ethical responsibility assumed on their behalf. As far as the youngest generation is concerned, the expectation would be that autonomous parents will also be punctilious about the quality of child-care and education selected, but that they would expect their children to 'go their own way' and would view it as a dereliction of their responsibilities not to see their own offspring through University or advanced training – thus fostering the reproduction of this form of family.

What our British students seem set to do is to reproduce the 'family' as a 'responsible partnership' rather than in its more traditional 'solidary' form. If the 'ethics of responsibility' seem to some to represent a diminution in inter-generational concern, this is probably indeed the case at the level of inter-personal relationships. However, I would invite such interpreters to return to consider the various levels at which contributions to inter-generational solidarity can be made, as discussed at the start of this paper, because of a further finding from the British undergraduates. On interview, very few are materialistic, what they seek from work is a comfortable income, not the means for an expensive lifestyle, and what they want above all from their future careers is the moral ability to make a small difference for good. If some would find greater self-fulfilment and social usefulness in working for 'Age Concern', caring for the homeless or in health administration rather than taking personal care of their own parents, and if some would find it in teaching, work with young offenders or with development agencies, then their contribution to inter-generational solidarity will have jumped a level, rather than having disappeared. Only at the end of the longitudinal student study will it be possible to assess how far these early aspirations have become a reality in terms of the careers finally adopted. Meanwhile, in relation to the rest of Europe, one of the biggest differences in the proximate future of different family forms appears to hinge on the proportion of those going to University for whom this entails moving away from home.

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