The authors examine recent changes in family relationships in Britain and other countries in Western Europe. To begin with, the authors focus on demographic change, in particular the increased diversity in people's partnership behavior. In considering theoretical accounts that have been given for these changes, the authors explore the ways in which the character of partnership commitment is altering. Particular attention is paid to the growth of cohabitation and the effect this has on cultural understandings of marital commitment. The implications for wider kinship solidarities of changing practices around partnership commitment are discussed. A key theme within this concerns the diversity and complexity of the manner in which family and kinship are negotiated and constructed.

Family Diversity and Change
in Britain and Western Europe

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Throughout much of the 20th century, trends in family and household composition in Britain and many other European countries followed a relatively predictable trajectory. Changes occurred, but they did so in ways that outside wartime were generally consistent. For example, in Britain between 1900 and 1970, the rate of marriage for single women increased from 45 per 1,000 unmarried women to 60 per 1,000, age at first marriage declined from 25.4 to 23.2 for men and from 24.0 to 21.3 for women, divorce rates remained relatively low, the number of children born within the average marriage declined from about four to less than two, and relatively few children were brought up by single parents (Coleman, 2000; *Marriage and Divorce Statistics*, 1990). Similarly, there was a degree of consistency in the demographic changes occurring in other European countries, although the specifics of the changes differed dependent in part on religious and welfare policies.

Two sociological features characterized the period. First, family scholars could organize analysis of family relationships in terms of concepts such as *family cycle*; there was a consistency in the routine family pathways or *careers* that were constructed. It was a highly conventional period in family terms; most people's experiences followed a broadly similar route. People married, had and raised children, and then lived as a couple until one spouse died. Second, there was a clear moral and empirical connection between sex, marriage, and childbearing (Kiernan, Land, & Lewis, 1998). Indeed, the relation between these three elements served as the cornerstone of what constituted family life. What was understood as their inherent connection symbolized and framed the ordering of proper family organization.

In the late 20th century, these patterns, rooted in what family was previously taken to be, began to change, raising a host of intriguing conceptual and theoretical issues for analysts and policy makers concerned with understanding contemporary patterns of family life (Jensen, 1998; Schoenmaeckers & Lodewijckx, 1999). As in the United States, a common model of family experience could no longer be assumed (Murphy & Wang, 1999). Where there had previously been predictability, now there was increasing diversity. The old patterns could no longer be taken for granted, and the diverse patterns that were emerging could not be explained as a consequence of subcultural behavior associated with distinct religious, ethnic, or economical groups. Instead, a sea change was occurring throughout society, albeit influencing patterns of sexual and familial behavior in different ways for different groups (Berrington, 1994).

The first and most obvious change concerned divorce rates. Divorce remained morally charged and comparatively rare throughout most of Western Europe until the last quarter of the 20th century, at least outside of Scandinavia. Marriage was defined as a lifelong institution that conferred social, economic, and legal rights on individuals but that in return committed them—again socially, economically, and legally—to one another. In this sense, marriage was highly institutionalized, with spouses' responsibilities and obligations to one another being governed by relatively rigid rules, sanctioned through religious and social codes that informed appropriate behavior. Gradually, this changed. Rather than being defined popularly within an institutional framework, marriage came to be seen as an essentially negotiated partnership given special legal recognition and privilege. In Britain, this shift from what Farber (1973) termed a *natural-family paradigm* to a *legal-family paradigm* was explicitly captured in the 1967 Divorce Reform Act. Prior to this legislation, divorce was only available if one spouse could demonstrate that the other had broken the mar-

riage contract through adultery, desertion, or unreasonable behavior. Legally, the quality of the marital tie was of no consequence. In contrast, the 1967 legislation placed prime emphasis on relationship quality, emphasizing irretrievable breakdown of the marriage as the key criterion for divorce. Adultery, desertion, and unreasonable behavior were still to be used as indicators of breakdown but so too was a period spent living apart, effectively making divorce a matter of individual or joint choice.

These changes in legislation and social climate facilitated a significant rise in divorce rates. The numbers of divorces in England and Wales increased from approximately 6,000 in 1938 to more than 45,000 in 1968. Between 1968 and 1998, they increased to more than 145,000 a year, from 3.7 per 1,000 marriages to more than 12.9 per 1,000 marriages (*Marriage, Divorce and Adoption Statistics*, 2000; *Marriage and Divorce Statistics*, 1990). Although the British divorce rate is among the highest in Europe, increases also are evident in other countries (Coleman & Chandola, 1999). Between 1970 and 1990, the divorce rate trebled in France and Holland and doubled in Belgium (Goode, 1993). It has been estimated that throughout Northern Europe, approximately 1 in 3 marriages will end in divorce (Prinz, 1995). The divorce rates in predominantly Roman Catholic countries are less but are nonetheless rising.

One consequence of increasing rates of marital separation and divorce has been a growth in single-parent households. In Britain, the numbers of such households increased from 570,000 in 1971 to 1,600,000 in 1996 (Haskey, 1998). Importantly, this rise was not just a consequence of divorce; it reflects a much broader change in social and moral constructions of appropriate reproductive behavior and the interests of children. Thus, as well as marital breakdown leading to increasing numbers of single-parent households, there has been a particularly marked rise in the number of unmarried (although not necessarily unpartnered) mothers. In 1976, 54,000 children were born out of wedlock (9.2% of all births); by 1998, this had increased to more than 240,000 (37.8% of all births) (*Birth Statistics*, 1978, 1999). Changing patterns of young motherhood are particularly striking in Britain, with nearly 90% of teenage mothers now being unmarried. Numbers of single-parent families have been increasing in other European countries too, although not to the level occurring in Britain (Coleman & Chandola, 1999; Kiernan, 1999a). In France, for example, the number of single-parent families increased from fewer than 750,000 in 1966 to more than 1.2 million in 1990 (Lefaucheur & Martin, 1997), whereas Ireland saw a threefold increase in the decade between 1981 and 1991 (Lewis, 1997; McLaughlin & Rodgers, 1997).

Although these figures clearly indicate that social understandings of the relationship between marriage and childbirth have altered, they are part of a broader transformation in marital behavior. In many European countries, there has been a noticeable decline in the popularity of marriage (Jensen, 1998; Pinnelli, 1995). In part, this is a result of later marriage (Kuijsten & Strohmeier, 1997)—in England and Wales, mean age at first marriage increased from 22.4 to 27.0 for women and from 24.4 to 28.9 for men between 1970 and 1998 (*Marriage, Divorce and Adoption Statistics*, 2000; *Marriage and Divorce Statistics*, 1990)—but it is also a consequence of more people choosing not to get married. Thus, again using England and Wales as an example, only 87% of women and 80% of men age 40 had ever been married in 1998, compared to 95% and 91% in 1975.

Equally significant has been the rapid rise in cohabitation as a form of partnership. Initially most common in Britain among those who had been divorced (and gay couples), over the past 20 years it has become a normal, routine mode of living for many people (Haskey, 1999; Manting, 1996). Although still opposed by some ethnic and religious groups, the personal and institutional stigma once attached to "living in sin" has almost entirely dissipated. In other European countries with stronger Catholic traditions, the change has been less rapid, but it is nonetheless developing in the same direction (Kiernan, 1999b). In Britain, a period of cohabitation has become the dominant form of engagement among couples planning to marry. More recently, increasing numbers of couples are choosing cohabitation rather than legal marriage as the most appropriate mode of constructing their relationship, even after the birth of children (Berrington, 2001; Ermisch & Francesconi, 2000).

The more couples there are who choose cohabitation over marriage as the appropriate form of partnership for them, the more pressure there is for legal recognition to be given to cohabitation as a mode of commitment. As with gay couples, issues concerning property distribution on separation, pension entitlements, and inheritance rights need legal resolution, thereby requiring formal regulation, the absence of which was initially part of the attraction of cohabitation for many. In turn, the growth of cohabitation as a marriage alternative influences changing cultural understandings of marriage. In particular, the perception of cohabitation as a lifestyle choice rather than a relationship premised on legal contract effectively fosters the view that marriage is also a lifestyle choice, a perception that consequently fuels the belief that marriage too should only be sustained for as long as it provides satisfaction. Clearly both marriage and longer term cohabitation involve the couple in forms of mutual emotional and material

commitments that are often complex to dissolve (Jamieson, 1998; Smart & Neale, 1999). It is interesting that as cohabitation becomes more established, so marriage and (longer term) cohabitation appear to be moving toward one another as forms of relationship, both being a lifestyle choice with no guarantee of permanence and both requiring regulation for the protection of individual rights.

Paralleling some of these changes, there also has been a significant increase in stepfamilies, although precise estimates of the trends in this are more difficult to obtain, partly because of definitional problems over what really counts as a stepfamily. As with single parenthood, the issue is whether the definition of stepfamily is taken as having a household or family frame. Haskey (1994) estimated that approximately one in eight children lived in a household with a stepparent for some period of time. Many others living in single-parent households will be involved to differing degrees in stepfamily ties as a result of their nonresidential parent's new partnership. In addition, some children will have had serial stepparents as a result of their parents' various partnerships, although it would appear rare for children to continue to have active relationships with their parents' ex-partners. As modes of cohabitation become more common and with increasing legal and social encouragement for the continuation of parent-child involvement after separation, what constitutes stepparenthood becomes increasingly complex. Certainly, stepparenthood can no longer be understood as replacement parenting in any simple manner.

Various other changes have also occurred in the demographic fashioning of the familial/domestic realm. For example, there has been an increase in the number and the acceptance of gay households and families. The extent to which this has occurred varies both within and across the countries of Western Europe, but the trend overall is one of more openness and tolerance. Nonetheless, many gay individuals and couples continue to experience stigma and abuse in their personal lives. There has also been a general increase in the number of single-person households, partly as a result of divorce and widowhood but also as a consequence of choice (Hall, Ogden, & Hill, 1999). Similarly, more young people than previously now live in shared housing. So too there has been an increase in the number of couples "living apart together" (Lesthaeghe, 1995). These are couples who are committed to one another but who live separately, usually for some period each week. Although often a result of employment constraints, for some it is a decision aimed at sustaining a degree of independence while still recognizing a shared commitment. Such patterns seem most common among the middle class in Northern European countries,

especially Scandinavia, but given the changes already occurring in other countries, they are likely to become a more common experience throughout Europe.

Another level of diversity in family patterns has been added by the increasing levels of migration into European societies from countries and regions with quite distinct religious and ethnic traditions. The migration process, which often involves some family members moving a considerable time before others, can itself generate disrupted family and household patterns (Ballard, 1994). The movement of people with different cultural and religious traditions into the countries of Western Europe has further diversified the modes of family and household organization that are seen as morally appropriate. Although forms of adaptation can modify later generations' commitment to traditional ways, the maintenance of familial standards, whether these concern sexual relationships outside marriage, partner selection, care of elderly people, common residence, or the breadth of kinship solidarities, are often of concern in defining and protecting a valued cultural heritage and affirming the moral standing of those involved.

What all these developments represent is a far greater degree of diversity in family and domestic arrangements than existed throughout most of the 20th century. As a result, notions such as family and household can no longer be understood in as simple a manner as they once were. The whole question of who is a family member now raises substantial issues that were of minor consequence two generations ago. For example, when does a cohabiting partner become a member of your family, and when does he or she become a member of your children's, your parents,' or your siblings' families? Is this on marriage, or has the rise in and legitimacy of cohabitation altered this? When does a stepfamily become socially recognized as such? Is this a household determination (i.e., a matter decided by domestic living arrangements) or is it a family matter (i.e., one based on notions of a common kinship)? With increasing separation and divorce, complicated further by repartnering, it is evident that many parents and children have different families in ways that were uncommon two generations ago. So too, the term *household* contains a range of elements that makes it necessary to recognize the permeability of household boundaries rather than assume membership can be categorized in an unproblematic way. Indeed, people may be thought of as members of different households for different activities or alternatively, be members or partial members of households for some periods of the day or week but not others (Allan & Crow, 2001; Morgan, 1996).

ACCOUNTING FOR CHANGE

A key question that all of these related changes in the domestic and family realm raises is why they came about when they did. What has been happening socially and economically that has led to these radical transformations in the relations between sex, marriage, and childbearing? How is the greater diversity emergent in family and household patterns to be explained? One of the more influential lines of theorizing here focuses on the process of individualization within late modernity. Associated in particular with the writings of Ulrich Beck (1992, 1997) and Anthony Giddens (1991, 1992), this approach is concerned with the ways in which developments within industrial and commercial economies have altered the character of the dependencies within which people are embedded. For example, the shifting requirements of a global economy, the increased involvement of women with children in paid labor, the growth of a citizenship somewhat free of gender stereotypes, and the greater control of reproductive behavior have all contributed to women experiencing fewer economic and social constraints than previously. In particular, the nature of their dependence on men as partners and husbands has altered in ways that have profoundly influenced the patterns of couple, family, and household solidarities.

In his work with Beck-Gernsheim (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), Beck held that increased labor market participation together with control over fertility has resulted in women being less economically dependent on men than previously. With alternative sources of income, state benefits as well as employment, and increasing opportunities for social participation, women are less trapped in the traditional domestic division of labor than previous generations were. As a consequence, marriage and the standard nuclear model of family structure and domestic organization become less a matter of routine, constrained practice and more a matter of lifestyle choice. From this viewpoint, contemporary social and economic organization allows women to be increasingly active in constructing and negotiating their personal lives, their partnership commitments, and the forms of domestic organization in which they are involved. Although gender differentials clearly continue be of consequence, there is a degree of choice over these matters that was largely absent for their grandmothers if not their mothers.

Similarly, Giddens (1991, 1992) argued that there has been a growth in pure relationships based on confluent love. Unlike romantic love, which is understood to involve a lifetime commitment, confluent love is far more contingent. Instead of the lifelong commitment associated with traditional

marriage, it is rooted far more firmly in the continuing emotional satisfactions and pleasures that the relationship provides. As with Beck, Giddens saw this new form of commitment as emerging from shifts in women's dependencies on men, which in turn relate to broader economic, social, and technological change. In particular, he highlighted the pervasive labor market restructuring of the past 30 years, the growth of women's control over reproduction, and increased rights of citizenship. Whereas in earlier periods the division of labor inside and outside the home resulted in women being dependent on their husbands, with marriage representing both a form of protection and a site of oppression, under contemporary conditions, the structural framing of partnership has shifted.

As a result, a new mode of pure relationship emerges, sustained less by economic constraint or social convention and more through choice and intrinsic satisfaction. These relationships are highly expressive, in theory negotiated and structured to suit each individual's needs and desires as they develop. They embody a different relational morality than was dominant in earlier eras and are not expected to continue if, for whatever reason, they cease to deliver the satisfactions desired by one or both partners. Although there is a sense that established relationships should not be jettisoned too readily, equally there is little value placed on staying in relationships that provide little or no intrinsic satisfaction. From the pure relationship/ confluent love perspective, the individual is free and morally right to leave a relationship that is no longer rewarding. It is better to seek a different relationship or live alone than to stay trapped in one that has become moribund.

Thus, it can be argued that processes of individualization have had a significant effect on sexual and domestic partnerships (Lesthaeghe, 1995; Schoenmaeckers & Lodewijckx, 1999). Whether credence is given to the detailed theorizing of writers such as Giddens and Beck, especially concerning gender equality in the expression and practice of intimacy (see Jamieson, 1999, for a powerful critique of Giddens's claims), the types of demographic transformation outlined earlier in this article appear compatible with the idea that new forms of sexual, domestic, and familial commitment are developing. There can be little doubt that people now experience greater freedom and choice over the construction of their personal worlds and are less willing than in the past to tolerate the continuation of what have become unsatisfactory marital or cohabiting relationships. There is a higher level of reflexivity about these relationships and a stronger sense that they should be intrinsically rewarding. Culturally too, there is more tolerance of diversity in personal life and less acceptance of a single normative model as inherently better than others, although some still

believe strongly that personal life should be governed by particular religious injunctions. For many, however, these issues are seen as matters of lifestyle choice rather than moral imperative. Indeed, as states adapt policies in recognition of increased cohabitation, as births outside marriage become socially legitimated, and as the stigma of divorce disappears, traditional ways, including marriage itself, lose their moral force. What were once matters requiring public regulation have become transformed into private issues.

COMMITMENT: PARTNERSHIPS AND FAMILIES

There is a resonance between Giddens's analysis of shifts in understandings of intimacy and contemporary partnership behavior. Commitment is no longer organized in the standard ways it was—dating, followed by engagement, followed by marriage. Cohabitation now enters into this process at different stages for different couples, effectively rendering the construction of commitment less formal (Manting, 1996). Noticeably, we lack ritual and ceremony to mark cohabitation in the way that engagement and marriage are celebrated. Indeed, the beginning of cohabitation is often private and sometimes gradual, occurring without much social reporting or recognition unless it overlaps with an announcement of engagement. For some couples, the start of cohabitation signifies a long-term commitment. As with engagement, this represents for them a relationship that they hope and expect to last, ideally for the rest of their lives. For other couples, cohabitation is defined as a relationship for now, one to be enjoyed and valued, but not one seen as signifying a long-term commitment.

However, whatever the sense of commitment at the beginning of a long-term relationship, it is clear that increasingly, promises about the future are being interpreted as desires, hopes, ambitions, and aims but not—and this is the crucial change—as inevitably binding in the way they were in earlier periods. Increasingly, younger couples are recognizing the potential instability of the unions they are forming. There is a recognition that no matter what they feel and believe now, circumstances change. There can be no certainty that their dreams will come to fruition. Precisely because the relationship they are constructing is predominantly founded on issues of continuing self-fulfillment, happiness, and mutual reward, there can be no guarantee as to its future. Happiness and self-fulfillment are not issues that are understood as being simply a matter of will. They are states that are emergent within the relationship dependent on its quality. Moreover, it is not just new couples that are generating these understandings of partnership. These cultural shifts infuse longer term relation-

ships too, reframing the way they are understood and the tolerances individuals have for different levels of dissatisfaction (Allan & Harrison, in press).

In these regards, there can be little doubt that contemporary cultural constructions of partnership commitment are, in Giddens's sense, more contingent than in earlier eras. Importantly, however, the degree to which these developing ideologies of partnership are embraced varies between social groups and across countries in Western Europe. The changes have been evident most in Scandinavia, with other countries in Northern Europe following behind. Only recently do countries such as Ireland, Spain, Greece, and Italy, with their stronger Catholic/Orthodox religious heritage, appear to be experiencing similar shifts. Their rates of cohabitation, divorce, and single-parent households have only recently begun to increase.

Although understandings of partnership commitment have been altering, the breaking up of established relationships is still usually problematic. There may be more acceptance of it as a solution to relationship problems, but it nonetheless frequently generates major emotional, practical, social, economic, and legal difficulties for those involved. Of course, the extent to which this happens depends on the nature of the relationship. Those that were always defined as short term and in which there was relatively little shared investment are easier to end without recrimination or rancor. But ties established over time that involve shared property, imagined futures, and a deep emotional commitment are rarely ended without sometimes prolonged disharmony, pain, and friction. Such difficulties are clearly exacerbated when children, especially dependent children, are involved. Despite changes, separation and divorce remain traumatic for most people, usually involving a powerful sense of loss. What this indicates is that although the character of partnership commitment has altered with individualization and associated structural changes, commitment continues to bind people socially, materially, and emotionally.

In other words, when people form partnerships they become enmeshed and embedded in modes of living that inevitably are constraining. At times, it appeared that Giddens saw confluent love as able to escape such enmeshment. All that matters is each individual's self-fulfillment and emotional satisfaction. Clearly, however, relationships come to involve far more than this over time so that ending them involves processes of disembedding and demeshing lives that had, to a degree, become "as one" (Jamieson, 1998). Research into the domestic economy of long-term cohabitation is sparse throughout Europe, but analyses of separation processes are notably absent (Haskey, 1999). However, there is little reason to

think that the issues involved are radically different for those who have co-habited longer term than they are for married couples that are separating. Indeed, some issues are more complex through the absence of a legal framework regulating the separation. However, this is an area about which we have little knowledge.

Although it can be recognized that the nature of partnership commit-ment has been changing, what about other forms of family commitment, in particular, the commitment between parents and children? Have indi-vidualization and similar macro-level processes also influenced the soli-darities evident between parents and children? More specifically, has the rise in marital and other partnership separation influenced the character of these ties? The picture here is complex and diverse, although some under-lying patterns are evident. Many analysts have pointed to the changes in childhood experience over the 20th century (Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta, & Wintersberger, 1994). Ideologically and practically, parents appear to be focusing more attention than previously and for longer periods on the well-being of their children. More concern is expressed about their emo-tional development, their educational achievement, and the quality of their childhood experiences than at any time in the past. Rooted in legiti-mate and extending economic dependence, children and adolescents are seen as needing nurturing in ways that would have been highly question-able two generations ago. This is apparent in the growth of markets for dif-ferent goods and services catering to children and adolescents. Moreover, in Britain and other European countries, there is now greater diversity than previously in youth transitions (Wallace & Kovatcheva, 1998).

Yet, although it can be argued that dependent children have become in-creasingly significant cultural and economic "projects" for parents, at the same time, demographic trends make this problematic for growing num-bers of parents (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards, & Gillies, 2000). In particu-lar, nonresidential biological parents, predominantly fathers, frequently need to construct relationships with their children that do not mesh well with cultural ideals. Previously in Britain, there was credence given to the idea that children were best served by the same clean break that applied to divorce resolution. The tendency, especially if children were young at the time of parental separation, was for many divorced fathers to play little ef-fective part in their children's lives. Despite the growth of research on single-parent families, estimates of paternal contact are problematic, partly because of sampling difficulties and partly because of problems of adequately measuring concepts such as *effective contact* (Bradshaw & Millar, 1991; Bradshaw, Stimson, Skinner, & Williams, 1999a, 1999b). However, recent social and legal changes in Britain and other European

countries are likely to have had a significant effect on these issues. For ex-
ample, in Britain, the Child Support Act of 1991 introduced a consistent,
although complex, framework for calculating the financial obligations of
nonresidential biological parents. Although not regulated in any way, be-
hind this legislation lay a recognition that biological parenting should in
principle continue even after the marriage/partner relationship ends
(Smart, 1999). There can be little doubt that such policy initiatives both re-
flect and inform contemporary cultural understandings of postseparation
parenting. Exactly how much it has altered the quality and quantity of
nonresidential parenting is difficult to know. This is another area where
more research is badly needed, although for Britain, some evidence of
change is reported in the recent study by Bradshaw et al. (1999a, 1999b).

The growth of repartnering and the formation of residential and non-
residential stepfamilies further complicate these issues. One consequence
of the shifts in cultural and policy constructions of nonresidential
parenting is that the symbolic and physical boundaries around both one-
parent and stepfamily households become more permeable. As the em-
phasis on continued parental involvement is realized, as variants of a
coparenting model develop, so parents are encouraged to sustain a rela-
tionship despite no longer living together or wanting each other involved
in their lives. As Smart and Neale (1999) showed in their study of
parenting following separation in England, this often creates degrees of
tension between the parents that is less liable to occur under the clean
break model. In the case of stepfamilies, it also often diversifies the modes
of parenting, especially fathering, that children experience. As a result,
many children are now incorporated into more complex kinship networks
than previous generations were, with implications for the ways in which
concepts such as family and kinship are understood.

FAMILY AND KINSHIP

Thus, whereas analysts such as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) may
be right in pointing to the ways individualization has encouraged demo-
graphic heterogeneity and diversified the lifestyle options available to
people, the destabilization of traditional family and household patterns
has an effect on the construction of kinship networks and what it is that
people understand their family to be. Importantly, it generates greater di-
versity than previously in the family networks of people who belong to the
same family. This is easiest to see in the case of stepfamilies but applies to
other new family formations too. Consider as an example the case illustra-
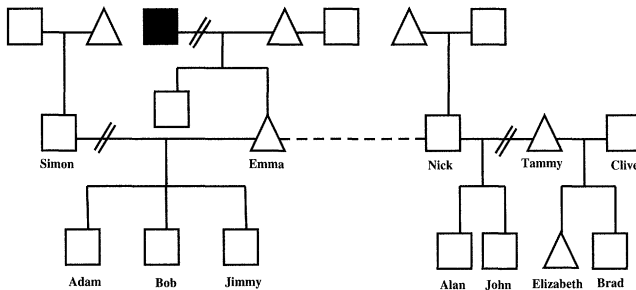tion in Figure 1, taken from a recent study of stepfamily kinship (Allan,

Figure 1: An Example of Stepfamily Kinship

Crow, & Hawker, 1999). Emma has been cohabiting with Nick for 3 years. She was previously married to Simon with whom she had three children, Adam, Bob, and Jimmy, who now live with her and Nick. Nick was also married previously and has two children from that partnership, Alan and John, who spend alternate weeks with Nick and Emma and with his ex-wife Tammy and her new partner, Clive. Tammy and Clive also have two children of their own, Elizabeth and Brad.

At issue here is how the various members of this network construct their family and how this differs significantly depending on their location within the network, in ways that are much more diverse than in family networks where there has been no marital disruption. For example, the family relationships of Alan and John include sibling ties with Elizabeth and Brad, although Elizabeth and Brad are not part of Emma's or Nick's family any more than Adam, Bob, and Jimmy are part of Tammy's or Clive's family. Whether Alan and John are part of Adam's, Bob's, or Jimmy's family is moot and depends on the distinctions those involved make between household and family and in the longer run, on what happens to the partnership between Emma and Nick. Similarly, the overlap between Emma's family network and Nick's family network is less strong than would be the case if they were in a long-lasting marriage. Moreover, the recognized family relationships of Emma's, Nick's, Tammy's, and Simon's parents are complicated by the presence of stepgrandchildren as well as the complex domestic circumstances of their biological grandchildren.

Within this context, analyses of the negotiation of kinship relationships (Finch, 1989; Finch & Mason, 1993) become particularly interesting. The essential premise of this theoretical perspective is that kinship solidarities are not normatively determined but are negotiated in a variety of ways over time within networks of family relationships. Sometimes these negotiations are overt, but more frequently, they are implicit and emergent. Ei-

ther way, they shape the ways in which responsibilities, solidarities, and connections are constructed. In traditional families, negotiations around these issues certainly occurred, but the calculation of family membership was more straightforward, even allowing for complexities such as which in-laws were really family and where lateral extension of family ended (e.g., under what circumstances are second cousins recognized as family?). With new modes of family, the spheres around which negotiation occurs become broader; just as importantly, the degree to which family frames the negotiation of solidarity and responsibility within these family-relevant relationships becomes part of their negotiation.

For example, how is fatherhood negotiated in families where there are two or more fathers—a nonresidential biological father, a nonresidential ex-stepfather, and a current stepfather? How is stepgrandparenthood negotiated? Who is considered family under what circumstances and with what consequences? In recent years, researchers have attempted to resolve some of these issues by making clear-cut analytical distinctions. In particular, as family and domestic complexity have increased, it has become more important than ever to distinguish between family and household, the one involving a set of kinship relations and the other a set of relationships based around a common or linked domestic economy. Yet, whereas this distinction is extremely useful for many issues, not least in analyzing household patterns where no claim is based on notions of family connection, in other regards, it misrepresents the reality it is trying to clarify. That is, in everyday constructions, the overlay between the notions of family, home, household, and domestic is marked. To some degree, each makes sense only within the contexts of the boundaries of the others. Thus, family is not the same as home, but to share a domestic economy in a household in which some relationships are defined as family connections and others are not nonetheless renders the household relationships that are not family connections more rather than less familial.

The issue is that as family patterns become more diverse and complex, so the parameters around the notion of family become more ambiguous. Moreover, such ambiguity cannot be resolved by analytically tighter definitions of what family really is and is not. The point about the changes occurring is that family actually is becoming more ambiguous, in Bauman's (2000) terms, more liquid and less solid. As Morgan (1996, 1999) asserted, there are a range of family practices that involve different senses, different constellations, and different involvements of family. Increasingly, because family relationships need to be understood as process or as flux rather than as an established, given structure, the process of negotiation around family practices comes to the fore, although such negotiation

is itself structured by past family practices and negotiated outcomes. To draw on Giddens's expression, there is a greater contingency than was apparent in the past around family relationships in general. In part, this is based on the reduced certainty informing the construction of couple relationships, but it is more than just this. It is a broader potential for the demography or configuration of family to alter in ways that are not predictable. Events lead to the reconstitution of the complex of household, family, and consequently, kinship in a manner that is not understood as part of a foreseeable narrative in the same way that construction around the nuclear family was in the past.

Of course, many couples remain together; some family networks are relatively stable in this regard. But increasingly, people's sense of family is less certain and more contingent than in the past. Changes in partnership formation and dissolution are central to this precisely because of their effect outside the couple on family networks and family practices. Movements out of partnerships into single and nonresidential parenthood and into new partnerships across family or kinship networks capture the potential there now is for flux and reconfiguration in family relationships. One lay response to this has been a differentiation of what family really is, with an emphasis on blood as the defining criteria. For example, distinctions are often made in stepfamilies between real family and other family. People speak of their real father or real siblings in contrast to a stepfather or stepsiblings who are not defined as family in this sense. Arguably, such notions of family and kinship, being in essence about blood, will become more prominent. This is the message behind ideas that parents retain parental responsibilities even when they no longer live with their child(ren).

Yet as noted, such blood ties are by no means always sustained following separation. Some fathers in particular have little involvement in their children's lives, and neither do the father's kin. And other relationships, however defined, do enter the family realm and become involved in family practices, especially when coresidence is involved. Thus, residential stepparents over time come to embody aspects of parenting and coresident stepsiblings aspects of siblinghood. So too stepgrandparents may act like grandparents, at least to those stepgrandchildren residing with their (adult) child. However, as our own research into stepfamily kinship demonstrated, these relationships are often understood to be highly contingent on the continuation of the intermediary partnership. If and when the partnership ends, then typically so do the stepkin ties that it engendered. The sense of family commitment that develops in these stepkin relationships is distinct because of this underlying contingency from the more enduring commitment normatively expected of blood kinship (Allan et al., 1999).

CONCLUSION

It is evident that major changes have been occurring in family patterns in Britain and other Western European countries over the past 30 years, changes that were not predicted at the time despite the research interest there was then (as now) in family life. The root of these changes is structural; they lie in the transformations to the social and economic order occurring in late modernity. More specifically, the changes constitute new understandings of the relationship between sex, marriage, and childbearing. Throughout Europe, there has been a dissociation between what might be termed relationship-based sexual activity and marriage. Equally, the strength of association between marriage and childbearing has been weakening, although Britain stands out for its high levels of unpartnered births (Kiernan, 1999a). Although there are differences in detail, broadly similar shifts can be discerned in patterns of partnership formation and dissolution in many European countries.

Such demographic trends are congruent with an increase in individualism and the relatively reduced economic and social dependence of women on men as husbands. Certainly in Britain, there has been a highly significant change in people's family careers. The uniformity evident for much of the 20th century has been replaced by increased diversity, especially with regard to partnership formation and dissolution. Clearly, these changes alter individuals' experience of family. Thus, as the nature of relationship commitment among adults has been shifting, so more people construct forms of serial commitment and more children experience diverse forms of parenting. In turn, these changes affect cultural constructions of what family is. Whereas once this could be taken for granted as largely unproblematic at a lay level, this is no longer so. The boundaries between family and nonfamily are less tightly constructed.

In turn, although there is a clear distinction to be made between family and household, the realms of family practices have become more blurred. For many, the whole complex of family/household activities now crosses household boundaries, but equally, it also incorporates into family people whose status as family members is less securely based. At times, the response to this is to tighten definitions of family and fall back onto notions of blood connection. Here, ideas of real family come to the fore, supported in part by cultural understandings of genetic certainty resulting from new scientific developments. However, at a day-to-day level, more diverse and complex forms of solidarity and antagonism develop between people who have familial involvement with one another. Stepfamilies provide classic illustrations of the working out of these matters, but the rise in cohabita-

tion as a form of adult commitment together with shifts in marriage and divorce have altered the ways in which family relationships are negotiated. Analyzing how these changing family-relevant processes are constituted over time should ensure the vibrancy of British and European family research well into the future.

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