

# Becoming the Author of your Own Life

A Sociology of Young Lives  
after Parental Divorce

Bren Neale

# Childhood:

## 1st Sociological Transformation

- ◆ from invisible objects of research enquiry into active research subjects with legitimate voices of their own
- ◆ from passive victims of their parents' divorce into active practitioners of family life / creative agents of change.
- ◆ from childhood *becoming* (outcomes research driven by a developmental paradigm) to childhood *being*: legitimacy given to the subjective experience of simply being a child.

# Childhood:

## 2nd Sociological Transformation

- ◆ Incorporates Childhood 'becoming' back into the frame of reference
- ◆ Moves to a more holistic understanding of children and young people as simultaneously 'being' and 'becoming'
- ◆ Re-vision child development, not in terms of fixed stages and outcomes, measured against predicted norms and expectations, but as a fluid and relational process that is played out over time in a complex variety of ways.
- ◆ Bridges the gaps between childhood and youth research: a ***sociology of young lives***

# Divorce: a dynamic process

- ◆ No longer seen as a 'one off' event that forever defines (and brands) the key protagonists
- ◆ Part of an ongoing process that is played out in a complex variety of ways and with differential effects for those involved
- ◆ Requires an understanding of how post divorce family life is negotiated and managed, and how relationships and commitments between kin are 'worked out' over time.

# 'Real Lives' research at Leeds

Negotiating Parenthood (ESRC1994-7)  
Post Divorce Childhoods (Nuffield 1997-9)  
Co-Parenting After Divorce (ESRC 1997-9)  
Enduring Families? (ESRC 2001-3)  
Family Dynamics (ESRC 2004-5)

Flowerdew, Neale, Smart, Wade

# The Enduring Families Study

- ◆ Aim: to explore the changing experiences and circumstances of an existing sample of young people with divorced parents
- ◆ Follow up interviews, conducted by Jen Flowerdew in 2001-2 with 60 young people from the North of England who had taken part in our original research three to four years previously.
- ◆ Age range 8-22 (majority 11-17)
- ◆ 31 female, 29 male
- ◆ 33 middle class, 27 working class
- ◆ 30 living in one home, 30 in two homes
- ◆ Ordinary divorced families (privately ordered arrangements)

# Dynamics of contact 1998-2002 (n=60)

- ◆ One Home (with mum) (n=30)
  - Varying levels of contact sustained: 13
  - Indirect or no contact sustained: 5
  - Increased contact with dad 4
  - Decreased contact with dad 7
  - Change in residence (dad to mum) 1
  
- ◆ Two Homes (50-50 or 60-40) (n=30)
  - Sustained 21
  - Abandoned – change to mum 5
  - Left home 4

# The meaning of contact

- ◆ Two dimensions of relationships
  - Mechanics (time, space, contact, residence)
  - Intrinsic nature (quality, emotional core, everyday conduct)
- ◆ Contact
  - The mechanics of a relationship
  - The starting point, a means to an end, not an end in itself
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- ◆ The amount of contact, the incidence of conflict or the number of changes in a family may tell us relatively little unless we also understand what these processes mean for those involved.

# Dual Residence: Claudia 1st interview

- ◆ **Claudia (aged 12):** They ask me what I prefer. Then they sort of say, ' Well you would prefer to do *that*, wouldn't you, but I mean it's up to you,' so they sort of put you on the spot. ... It's a bit hard you see, because you know that both of them want different things and if you agree with one then the other will be upset. I mean they don't say it but you can sense it, so it's a bit annoying, so it's better to say something completely different, 'cos then like neither of them win, then they'll just find an argument about something else! They always say that they miss us when we go. I just wish they lived together, it would be a lot easier.

# Dual Residence: Claudia 2<sup>nd</sup> interview

- ◆ **Claudia (aged 16):** The actual 4 days at mum's and 3 days at dad's hasn't changed. I think I might see dad a bit more because he's moved over to the side of the city where all my friends are ...which mum doesn't like at all. ... She can't understand that when I go over, it's to see my friends, not see dad. She doesn't think I want to be with her, which isn't the case. ... It's got worse over the past year or so. ... Like I was supposed to be stopping at mum's on Friday night but the way I saw it, Friday night was the one night that neither person kind of *owned*, cos ***they own our days*** (*laughing*). She'll say 'Friday night's my day', which pretty much says, 'I own Friday'. So last Friday I slept at dad's 'cos I'd been seeing friends. The only way that I could get her to let me go was to say that dad was not going to be in. ... Half and half is fine. I just think that now I'm 16 I should have more of a say.

# Dual Residence: Moving On?

- ◆ **Claudia (aged 16):** I'll be moving out to University soon, so. .... And then it'll be like, okay, whose holiday? Who are you spending time with (laughing)? ... x amount of days here and y amount of time there.

# Dual Residence: Rachel 1st interview

- ◆ **Rachel (aged 17):** They both arranged their lives around us. ... They both sued for custody. ... I'm with my Dad on Mondays and Tuesdays, my Mum on Wednesdays and Thursdays and then we alternate weekends. And then it's mad on Sundays. ... So they sorted this very complicated system. ... It was confusing at first, but like second nature now. ... You've got to settle in, because you sort of change, depending what house you're at. ... I find I'm a different person at each house. It takes a while to settle in, to being the other person. ... It used to take a couple of days. And then when there were short times, and I'd only be somewhere a couple of days it was a bit disconcerting.

# Dual Residence: Rachel, 2<sup>nd</sup> interview

- ◆ **Rachel (aged 20):** '[When I was last interviewed] I think I was in a fairly 'OK with the life' at that stage, which changes. ... I think I possibly accepted things the way they were. ... I knew they both desperately wanted me. They fought over us so they must have wanted us. ... But I mean, ... you do get used a bit like a pawn. I read that book you did for young people and one of the kids who was being shared said, 'It's like putting your life in a couple of carrier bags' and that is exactly what it's like...'
- ◆ **Q:** Were there times when you said 'I don't want to do this'?
- ◆ **Rachel:** 'Oh, there were. But it carried on (laughing)....My Dad, my Dad is a very strong personality....quite opinionated, a very dominating person ... quite jealous so he gets upset if he doesn't have equal or more ... more than equal of the time spent with my mother ...He is a fiercely kind of... I don't know, involved father . ... Very frequently, he'd say enough to make me cry. He is often quite frosty ... Makes you feel bad about your self. ... And I still have to try and balance [the time] .. .Christmas is a nightmare. .... Last year I saw them both about once a month....which was a bit of a strain really trying to see them so much...If I see Mum I have to see Dad.. Even now, it is really *ugh*.' [ If I was advising parents] I would recommend that the kids stay in one house and the parents move in and out. (laughing)....I think that's fairer.' . ...You know, all parents mess up their children. ... I think possibly I might be more a product of the way my actual parents are, rather than because they are divorced. ...

# Dual Residence: Flexibility

- ◆ **Rosie (aged 13, 2<sup>nd</sup> interview):** It's basically the same, but it's got more flexible. More because I've chosen. Like it's not been so rigid that I go to dad's on certain days. ... If there's something that I want to do then (laugh) I'm the one who decides really. ... if I want to go out on Sunday, then I go.
- ◆ **Jack (aged 13, 2<sup>nd</sup> interview):** When I'm older I'll just come to whichever house I choose

# Dual Residence: What helps? What hinders?

## ◆ What helps?

- Based on consensus, good quality relationships, needs of children.
- Flexibility, so that it can break down naturally over time as young people assume control of their own time and space.

## ◆ What hinders?

- Based on unresolved tensions, poor quality relationships, needs of parents.
- Inflexible and rigidly enforced so that it prevents young people assuming control of their own time and space.

# One Home: Diminishing contact

## Helen 1<sup>st</sup> interview

- ◆ **Q:** What's it like for you when you're going off to dad's?  
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- ◆ **Helen (aged 8):** I sometimes feel a bit sad, being with my mum only for week [days] cos I haven't stayed with her for the weekend. I didn't really want to go to my dad's because I didn't really want to get car sick and get even more bad in my tummy. ... Usually I feel poorly after I've been to my dad's. When I first went when I was about three, then I stayed in my bedroom and mum and dad had to pull me downstairs. ... Dad doesn't sort of help when he starts shouting at me if I get [something] wrong ... A good father shouldn't be hard on the wife and not hard on the children, but that's what dad does ... I feel safe at my mum's house because she hasn't got a temper and my dad has. ... They really don't like me to tell somebody this, but I don't really like my dad as much as my mum because he gets in a temper with me and he is quite horrible to my brother. ... I'm glad that I see my mum more now.
- ◆ **Q:** Do you think you'd like to change it at all in the future?
- ◆ **Helen:** It depends how horrible my dad gets, say he gets much more horrible, or say he gets much nicer and kinder. So it depends on that.

# One Home: diminishing contact

## Helen 2<sup>nd</sup> interview

- ◆ **Q:** have your feelings about the divorce changed over the years?
- ◆ **Helen (aged 11):** Yeah definitely because I realized, I found out, you know, about my dad, because I didn't really – well, I did know, but not like, know as in completely understand, ... 'cos Dad was not treating Alistair very well. That was when I started to see him less. And when I realized that I actually had the choice, if I wanted to, I didn't have to go. ... I didn't really make the choice until last Thursday. I told my dad on Thursday night....I had to, so I could just ring mum the next day and tell her to come because [otherwise] he could have turned her away or something. ... Alistair left dad... the summer before last ... because he didn't want to see him again. ... So I kind of realized that I could leave whenever I wanted to. And then Alistair came back to dad's last winter term. And I think dad's been much nicer to him now, 'cos he's worried.
- ◆ **Q:** What's it been like living in your family?
- ◆ **Helen:** Sometimes I wish that I wasn't – that it could be a different life ... if I look at somebody else's family, I would rather be in their place, 'cos I would love their parents . ... I wouldn't love just mum. [...]
- ◆ **Q:** If you could have one wish, what would that be?
- ◆ **Helen:** Well I would probably say that I wish I had never known my dad. Because then Alistair and I would never have to know what went on.

# One Home: Diminishing contact

## Joey: 1<sup>st</sup> interview

- ◆ **Joey (aged 15):** [mum's house] is home. ...although I have a home at dad's and if I wanted to go and live with him I could. There are times when I really miss my dad and I wonder what it would be like living with him but then it'd be the other way round and I'd miss my mum. ... When I was younger I used to go down a lot, every other weekend, till I was 11 or 12 and then I started going down less and less and I don't go down that often any more because I do a lot of things with friends. I don't know anyone down there. ... I know that, however much I see of dad, he's always there and if need be I can ring up and say I need you, sort of thing ... he comes here a lot more in the last year or two ... he takes everybody out, including mum. ... The changeover from going down frequently to ... not frequently was very gradual. There wasn't a time when I thought, '*I'm not going to see dad so often*', it used to just become, '*well, I'm not going down this weekend because I'm going out with Tim*,' so the routine sort of fell apart a bit. He knows I can never really commit to stuff more than a day or two in advance ... I mean I just see what comes up. My whole life is like that really. Dad understands that I do see friends a lot and they are very important and he does respect that. If he's rung up and said, 'Are you coming down this weekend?' and I've said, 'no', then he says, '*fine*,' He doesn't mind. .. It's no reflection on him.

# One home, diminishing contact

## Joey 2<sup>nd</sup> interview

- ◆ **Joey (age 18):** It probably is slightly less that I've been seeing him [since the last interview] ... It was my relationship with other people, friends...and I was busy doing my A' levels and stuff....I mean my relationship with my mum and dad hasn't deteriorated at all, it's just that my life here has become more, not more important, but more involving, if you like. ...It wasn't an *active* decision, It just kind of happened. And dad does understand that I have a life here. It's not like you know, I'm ignoring him or anything like that. And I still speak to him frequently and .... when I go down there and see him at weekends and stuff it's great. Because we go off and do stuff together ... like, go to the theatre or go out for a meal or that kind of thing.
- ◆ **Q:** What's it like living in your family?
- ◆ **Joey:** I think its great. I've really enjoyed it and I still do. I don't know, I think we are all just really close and I am lucky.
- ◆ **Q:** If you could have one wish for your future
- ◆ **Joey:** To remain close to my family ... whatever happens to stay close to all of them.

# Policy Implications

- ◆ Quality not quantity.
- ◆ The quality of young people's relationships with their parents is of paramount importance to them. The amount and nature of contact between a parent and child may tell us relatively little about the quality of the relationship. Good contact is not more contact, but contact that reflects a good quality relationship
- ◆ Shared residence built around fairness may not be fair for children
- ◆ Such arrangements may have a lasting and by no means positive impact on the lives of young people, thereby becoming an unwanted legacy of the divorce.
- ◆ Families after divorce may 'endure' in both positive and negative senses.
- ◆ Where parents are able to 'let go' of their children through their teenage years they are more likely to sustain a good relationship with them in the long term.
- ◆ Parent/ child relationships are organic and evolving.
- ◆ Contact arrangements should reflect this. Where they are inflexible they may be detrimental to young people and constrain them in developing their individual identities and managing their own time and space. Flexible arrangements enable young people to become the authors – or co-authors - of their own lives.