

# **A QUESTION OF TIME**

**PARTNERS, PARENTS, PERCEPTIONS AND PRIORITIES**

**International Conference  
Stockholm, Sweden  
17 – 21 June 2001**

**KEYNOTE PAPERS AND CHAIRMAN'S REPORT**



**INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION ON  
COUPLE AND FAMILY RELATIONS**

In collaboration with

**Socialstyrelsen Sweden and KFR Familjerådgivningen Stockholm**

## Editor's Note

The International Commission on Couples and Family Relations (ICCFR) has been organising an annual meeting in the form of a professional conference since 1953. In the year 2001, this conference was held in Stockholm, Sweden. Over 80 professionals from 22 countries working in family counselling, therapy and mediation, family law and family policy discussed the subject 'A Question of Time'. This publication contains the three keynote papers and the report of the ICCFR Chairman, Paul Tyrrell (Australia).

The texts included are not necessarily a verbatim record of the conference presentations: it is the custom of the Commission Meetings to provide a written text to accompany a free presentation.

The Commission would like to thank all presenters for their contributions to this publication.

London, April 2002

Judy Cunnington, Editor

<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b>	<b>Page</b>
<u>Keynote Address I</u> <i>Lars Dencik</i> <b>Living in Modern Times: Implications for the Lives of Children and their Families</b>	<b>3</b>
<u>Keynote Address II</u> <i>Alfons Vansteenwegen</i> <b>Love is a Question of Time: Different Time Experiences in Couples</b>	<b>11</b>
<u>Keynote Address III</u> <i>Margareta Hydén</i> <b>Aftermath – The Time Dimension in Post-Nuclear Family Life</b>	<b>18</b>
<u>Chair's Conference Report</u> <i>Paul Tyrrell</i> <b>A Question of Time</b>	<b>33</b>

**LIVING IN MODERN TIMES:  
Implications for the Lives of Children and their Families**

**Professor Lars Dencik**

**Centre for Childhood- and Family Research, Roskilde University, Denmark**

Bob Dylan has sung about it, philosophers have speculated about it, revolutionaries are dreaming about it, conservatives are complaining about it and ordinary people are today experiencing it – that “the times they are a’ changing”. This, in fact, is what time is all about – *change*. But what does this mean for children and their families: that the conditions of their lives are constantly changing – and today at a pace that is probably faster than ever before?

The world we live in changes, and changes continuously. And nobody can know what the future may bring. The only thing we can be sure of is that after modernisation comes *post-modernisation*. This is how I label the ongoing developments, or rather transformations, of modern societies such as the Scandinavian welfare states. It is a process of making way for an as yet contour-less society. It is not a description of a new condition – only in the rear view mirror of history are there such things as a crystallised image of social conditions – but a name for a continuous, ongoing process of social transformation.

Today, the processes of globalisation and the diffusion of electronic information technology, in the process of mutually reinforcing each other, profoundly reshape the conditions of social life and the predicaments of human existence in many parts of the world. Changes in turn generate further changes: when one condition within a system changes, the other parts that in one way or other are related to it will have to adapt to it by changing their ways of functioning. This in turn generates new requirements for change, and so on. As a consequence, the pace at which the social conditions of individuals change accelerates. Whatever used to be doesn’t prevail very long. The social lifetime of almost everything – of technologies, production methods, political systems, ideals, family patterns, sex roles, parenting, childhoods – and also of the scientific ‘truths’ about these things – become shorter and shorter. Change becomes the natural order of things.

To make it concrete: Modernity refers to the social conditions those of us who have reached the age of parenthood experienced when we were ourselves were children and perhaps students. For instance, in Scandinavia today both parents – and also most mothers of young children – are in paid employment outside the home while their children spend their days in public day care centres (cf. Dencik, 1995). Hardly did we grow up into Modernity before we were thrust into *post-Modernity*: because continuous change is endemic to modernity as such. “Post-modernisation” is a phenomenon that always goes on. The prefix “post-” is here referring to nothing subtle or sophisticated, but should be understood in its very literal Latin sense, i.e. meaning “(what comes) after”. Post-modernity thus simply refers to the social conditions that are always and inevitably succeeding the conditions that prevail: those, for example, that prevailed when we ourselves were developing as persons during the formative years of our youth. In other words, those of us living in the well-functioning welfare states of Scandinavia and the economically advanced societies of the so-called Western world should acknowledge that we would have to leave behind the modern conditions we then knew.

Let us for instance compare “the hidden curriculum”- what I should learn without even being formally taught so - when I went to school in the fifties and the hidden curriculum confronting a little boy or girl attending school or kindergarten today. When I arrived in the mornings, my teachers told me exactly what to do – and so I did. What a good son, an appreciated pupil, a valued employee and a well-behaved citizen all had in common was that they all were reliable executors of instructions given by others (superiors). I, like the others, had to know my place.

The young child entering a daycare centre in a Scandinavian country today confronts very different challenges. Rather than being told what to do, the child stops for a second on the doorstep and looks around, trying to find out what is going on. He then decides which activity he would like to

join and, without causing much social friction, integrates himself into one of the ongoing activities. Rather than being good at executing the instructions of others, the “post-modern” child has to be skilled at exploring the possibilities of the situations she finds herself in. Rather than being a person who “knows” her place, the post-modern child needs to be someone that is able to *find* her own place. This occurs both because of the presence of multitudes of simultaneous alternatives and because the conditions of one’s actions are constantly changing. For the individual, there is an increasing need to be *oriented towards continuously reorienting* him or herself.

There are several factors contributing to the impression that both in society at large and with respect to family life in particular, we are in the midst of a grand-scale *epochal shift*. Manuel Castells, a leading contemporary sociologist, claims that we are rapidly moving towards a *network civilisation* (Castells, 1996). A new “ball game” is opening up, including new rules for how to lead one’s social life in general and for interpersonal relations in particular. Life, including family life, will have to be led by an almost completely *new social grammar* (cf. Dencik, 1997).

But what will the content of this social grammar be? There are those who claim that they know. Often these self-established social prophets find an audience more than willing to listen to and believe them: it seems that the more complex the transformations of the society become, the stronger the desire for simplicity, order and predictability will be. But let me say – in respect for anyone’s religious feelings and hopefully without insulting anyone – that when it comes to social predictions all prophets are, by definition, false. The future does not evolve according to any plan, at least not a plan planted in a soil of social conditions. Nor do children. Nor do marriages or parenthoods or any other interpersonal relations. Society, like knowledge and like human development, is an innovative system. The future of humans is continuously shaped anew and arrives – in a fashion that some may find comforting – only day by day: but, on the other hand – every day.

The only thing we can be sure about concerning the future of our children is that they will have to grow up and live in a world that we know virtually nothing about. Children are, so to say, life-sentenced to live in the future. How should one best prepare the young ones for that? Changing social conditions tend to render traditions and established customs more and more obsolete, not to say impotent, as guides to our way of handling things. What should we, their parents and teachers, then rely on?

My focus in this presentation will be on the challenges for the children and their families facing these ongoing transformations: the fact that the very predicaments of their existence are undergoing continuous and rapid transformations. How do these children and families cope with the process of continuous *post-modernisation*?

In order to be able to answer this question, there needs to be more focussed research into the ways people lead their *everyday lives*. This affects the character of people’s *family relations*, which in turn contributes to the shape character of any child’s *childhood*. All of this is strongly related to *the use of time*. Time and the conditions for how time may be used in society is an important key to understanding how families and children live and develop. Therefore I congratulate the organisers of this conference for their wisdom in having chosen “*The Question of Time*” as the theme for the deliberations.

Firstly I will - based on my own research into children and their families in Scandinavia - elucidate some significant challenges for children and their families living in today’s post-modern world. Secondly, I will present some recent data on how the child’s position in the family has developed over time by drawing from a cohort of children that have just reached adulthood. In between, I will present some preliminary results of an ongoing study of how time is used by parents and young children in contemporary Denmark.

### **From here to post-modernity.**

What does it mean for those children growing up today – and their parents – having to live in an era of rapid and continuous transformations? Almost anything we do when we raise our children is directed towards their future. In less dynamic societies we may know more or less what skills, which social competencies and the kinds of behavioural patterns that will be required of our children to handle their daily lives. But with the accelerating pace of change follows diminishing

possibilities to foresee what kinds of social environments the children will live in when they are adults. We cannot any longer trust that our own experiences will guide us adequately in preparing our children to handle their future life conditions because we cannot even grasp the contours of these conditions. Even if we seek knowledge more intensely than ever before, parents and teachers will inevitably be *chronically at a loss* (cf. Dencik, 1998). The future is not what it used to be!

Sociological analyses of late modern conditions stress that due to the fact that things have become increasingly interwoven and that conditions constantly change, we are finding it much more difficult to overlook the consequences of our actions. Some sociologists, like Ulrich Beck, therefore characterise post-modern societies as “Risk societies” (Beck, 1992). When looking to the future of our children, the only thing we can be sure of is that we cannot be sure of anything. Creating technical and social security measures may be the obsession of some societies, but nevertheless, life in post-modern conditions still turns out to be risky. Due to the post-modernisation processes, leading a family life is also an increasingly risky undertaking. One reason for this is the increased differentiation of social arenas. For the individual, the family becomes just one arena among several between which she or he moves. Each individual has increasing numbers of contacts, more experiences and more social interactions outside the family.

**The challenge is to be able to share life not only with family members, but also with people with whom one doesn't share personal experiences – neither between parents and children, nor between the couple. An increasing number of families are composed of partners who have a child living with them (at least on a part-time basis) that is not the biological child of the partner they live with (so-called “blended families”). Even with respect to intimate erotic experiences, an alienation may prevail between partners because these experiences are not necessarily shared between both parties: an increasing number of individuals have cohabited with, or have been married to another partner prior to the one she or he presently lives with. For these and many other reasons, the family becomes an arena with increasing *inter-relational alienation* between its current members. Therefore, establishing close relationships based on common experiences demands much more of the family members. In other words, family members can no longer be guided by traditions. In order to lead a fulfilling family life, its members will need to rely increasingly on their capacity to *reflect* continuously on their social relationships and actively to construct communality.**

As with everything else, intimate relationships and family life are also subordinated to the major forces of post-modernisation. Like the life of production, the sphere of social reproduction is also affected by processes of: *rationalisation* – such as the institutionalisation of public day care for children while their parents are at work; *secularisation* – by questioning, for example, the traditional values that has guided family life; and *individuation* – meaning that the individual becomes “disembedded” (cf. Giddens, 1990) from his or her ascribed social affiliations and may move as a free agent, perceiving his or her life as a personal “project” of which he or she is the “project leader”. Another leading sociologist, Anthony Giddens, describes the intimate relationships between couples made up of individuated individuals as “pure relationships”(cf. Giddens, 1992).

Establishing a family and an actual family life, like dissolving one, is accordingly viewed increasingly as a project that the individual may govern and interrupt if other options turn out more attractive. This of course poses new challenges to the family, to partnership and parenthood today. As an institution in society, the family in highly modernised societies is caught between two counteracting tendencies: on the one hand, weakened conditions for maintaining a common family life prevail, while on the other hand strengthened requirements on it (by its members) to constitute the basis for a meaningful communality are present.

One of the consequences of ongoing post-modernisation is that in most social arenas, such as the work place or the neighbourhood, people can no longer experience close emotional relationships: in its place, the family becomes a kind of specialised sanctuary for intimacy. Any individual presents only one aspect of himself to his workmates, perhaps another aspect to friends and yet another to his neighbours, and so on. In these arenas he is basically replaceable, and in that sense not a unique and indispensable being. He may feel that he is not fully acknowledged or understood by any of them – which is, in a sense, all right. But then the family needs to do the work instead. In the eyes of his family members he needs to be seen as a complete person: there

he expects to be fully understood, there he expects to be recognised and treated like a unique and indispensable individual, there the deep and intimate relationships should blossom. The same mechanisms in contemporary society that produce such demands on the family also undermine its possibilities to satisfy them. Hence family life in post-modernity tends to simultaneously involve extreme attraction and easily triggered potential for frustration.

If some generations ago, before the wave of industrialisation swept the Western world, people lived in what the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies in 1887 labelled *Gemeinschaft* – men lived with few, but nevertheless complex relationships. Their neighbours were not only their neighbours, but also their workmates, relatives, and so on. In the industrialised societies of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, social relationships changed, increased in number and became much more specialised – to an individual in these forms of *Gesellschaft*, some might have been his neighbours, others his workmates, and still others, his friends. The processes of post-modernisation accelerate and augment these tendencies so that what has been the setting for individual choice and freedom now turns out also to be the staging of experiences of emptiness and threatening existential loneliness. We may call this stage *Alleinschaft*.

A century ago, the great sociologist Emile Durkheim coined the notion *anomie* to grasp how individuals, due to drastic and rapid social changes, may become out-of-sync with society. The consequences may be dramatic and manifest themselves in the form of suicides, crime, and so on. In a parallel way today, we may notice tendencies towards what I would call social *atomie* – people being, or at least feeling “disembedded” from strong and stable social belonging, which in turn intensifies their *dreams* about communality and togetherness. The family, viewed from this perspective, appears as an attempt to realise a utopia. This kind of undertaking – that much we have learnt from politics – will, with great likelihood, end in sheer catastrophe.

Mum, dad, and mummy and her new partner: On children’s families and their family shifts as they grow up in post-modernity.

The fact that both parents are gainfully employed outside the home, that children spend their days in public daycare centres or schools, that individualism and “self-realisation” have become prominent values, and that the idea of gender equality has become widely accepted in contemporary Western societies are among the factors that contribute to shape the mode of life within the families today. Family life also is not what it used to be! The ways in which people live together in families are as new as the new institutions that have been established in society, such as, for example, pre-schools and public daycare centres.

In order to manage their life within the family, the requirements on individuals to have well developed social competences has become accentuated. Many new challenges confront family members, such as the fact that parents gradually become weakened in their position as role models for their children. Most of the children that grow up today will not become what their parents are – neither in terms of profession and position, nor with respect to life-style and value orientation. Instead, other group affiliations will exert a strengthened influence on them. Research points to the increasing salience of *peer-group relations* in shaping the development and identity of those who grow up under the present post-modern conditions (cf. Rich Harris, 1998).

How, then, are these new conditions for family life reflected in the ways families are established? In order to elucidate this I will cite some demographic data from the country in which I presently reside – the very well developed welfare state of Denmark. National statistics show that over the last decades the average age when people become parents has been steadily increasing. Two-thirds of the children born in the last decade were born to women between 25 and 34 years of age. From 1981 to 1995, the share of children who were born to women aged between 20 and 24 years has decreased by 50%. In 1981, 5% of those who became mothers were not yet 20 years old. Today only 2% of women become mothers when they still are teenagers. The share of children born to women over 30 years of age in the same period has increased by 70%, and for those over 35 years by more than 80%. Nevertheless, few women in Denmark give birth after they have passed 40.

In 1981 the birth rate was 1.44 children per woman. In 1995 it had increased to 1.81. To understand the significance of these figures we should compare them to similar figures from other parts of the world, such as the southern and Catholic regions of Europe. What is striking is that in countries like Italy, Spain and Greece, the birth rate is considerably lower and continues to decrease. This is also true for another highly developed country in another part of the world - Japan. In a country like Italy, it would be appropriate in this context to talk about something like a "birth-strike". The reason that this is not true for Denmark (and Sweden) is probably, to a large extent, because of the social welfare policy providing families – and especially mothers – with better possibilities than in most other countries to combine an active adulthood with parenthood. Many women have achieved a tertiary education and – according to several different welfare arrangements, such as the availability of public day care and access to paid parental leave in the Scandinavian countries – the opportunity to remain in their professions while still being caring parents for their young children.

These figures should be interpreted with caution. It is not the case that a mother in Denmark on average has more children than a mother in, say, Italy. Rather, a larger share of women in Denmark and Sweden become mothers than those in the countries mentioned earlier. In fact, the number of women from the cohort of women who have become mothers over the past few decades has been increasing. If two or three generations ago about 80% of a cohort of women became mothers – but then most of them had several children each – today the pattern is that approximately 90% of a given cohort of women eventually become mothers – but to "only" one or perhaps two children. There are simply fewer children born to more mothers in society: each individual child has a larger "slice" of mother than ever before! This development towards, if you wish, a "democratised motherhood" in Denmark and the Scandinavian countries, is paralleled by a simultaneous movement towards a more "intimised fatherhood". Not only mothers, but also fathers are not what they used to be! Recent studies show that fathers much more than before take part in and share, if not always on an equal basis, the tasks (and joys!) of caring for their young children.

How, then, do these families live together over the span of the child rearing years? In a not yet published study we have analysed the "family careers" of children growing up in contemporary Modernity. The findings are based on analyses using a rather unique database called *Børnedatabasen* ("The database on Children") housed at the National Danish Board of Statistics. This database enables us to trace the family history of all children born in Denmark in the years 1981 and 1995. It should be noted that in this database it is *the child* – and his or her experiences in different family settings – that is the unit of analysis.

The adults with whom the child resides define *a child's family*. If, for example, the child's parents separate, this means that the child lives in a *new family*. If then say, the mother with whom the child lives begins cohabiting with a new partner, this again constitutes a *new family* as viewed from the child's perspective. Thus a child may experience living in several new families during his or her childhood (defined the years from birth until the person reaches the age of 18). We refer to the sequence of families that a child has lived in during childhood as *the child's family career*.

Starting by looking at the children born in 1981 (approximately 50000) we are able to follow them in the statistics from birth until they reach adulthood at the age of 18. In what kinds of families did they grow up? How many of them experienced their parents' divorce and remained with one parent (mostly the mother) who then went on to establish a new family with a new partner, and so on. How many different families did the children experience during their childhood period until they became adults just before the turn of the millennium? The data show that 60% of that generation of children grew up in one family only: they experienced neither separation between their parents, nor a new "step" father or mother becoming a member of their family. However, 20% of the children experienced a breakdown or shifts of adults and so experienced two family types: 13,5% lived in three different families during their childhood years. There are, in fact, a small number of children who experienced growing up in as many as 10 different families during their first 18 years of life.

Looking at the kinds of families the children have lived in until they reached the age of 18 in 1999, we find that the majority of them – approximately 60% of all children – have had only one family – which is actually no "family career" at all. These children have spent their entire childhood in a

family with two biological parents who have lived together continuously during this period.

The type of family career next in frequency is much less common. It generally involves the child having started life by living with two cohabiting parents who later divorced, after which the child lives with just his or her mother until adulthood. Only a little over 7% of the children who turned 18 in Denmark in 1999 have had this family career. Close to 5% of same cohort have experienced a family career consisting of first living with two parents who stay together, then with a single mother, and then with the mother and her new partner. Number four in rank order of the family careers that the children have experienced is: first, to have lived with both one's biological parents; then with just the biological mother; and then again with one's biological parents who at some point in time, after a period of separation, live together again. The following list summarises the analyses on how many and what kind of families the children from this cohort experienced in post-modern Denmark:

- Virtually all children have at one time or other during their childhood been living with their two biological parents;
- One out of three children have at one time or the other during their childhood been living with only their biological mother;
- More than 20% of all children have experienced at least one new adult ("step-parent") entering their life during their childhood;
- Almost 20% of all children have been living in a family comprising their biological mother and her new partner. One fifth of these children have also been living with their biological mother and her second (adjacent to the child's father) new partner. One fifth of these have in turn also lived with the third new partner of their biological mother;
- One out of 13 children have at some point in time during their childhood been living with only their biological father;
- Approximately one out of 25 children have never lived with their father. Likewise one out of 25 children have at some point been living with their biological father and his first new partner and 10% of these children also with the biological father and his second new partner.

These figures convey what could be called a bifurcation phenomenon with respect to families in post-modernity. A majority of them are stable in the sense that the children living in them do not experience divorces or any other dramatic shifts in the family set-up. But a large minority of the families break down and many new family constellations are formed during the growing-up period. Among the phenomena we have been able to register is what may be called sequences of *serial separations*. This refers to the increasing number of children experiencing not only the separation of their parents, but also – often after a rather short period – the dissolution of the new family constellation they have recently come to live in. It seems that those children that have experienced a family break down in the first place are quite likely to experience even further family shifts as they grow up. We have noticed, for example, that the shorter time the child's second family has been living together, the more likely it is that it will end in separation. Typically, what happens is that a year or two after a separation the single mother starts to live with a new partner: in turn this family constellation in approximately 25% of the cases leads to a new separation within a year or two.

A family comprising a "new partner" and/or composed of a "blended family" appears to be more vulnerable to dissolution than a family that has not (yet) separated. Overall, the most frequent family breakdown is two cohabiting parents separating, after which the child lives with his or her biological mother. An interesting question is at what age of the child its parents are most likely to separate (if they do).

In examining the data, we find an evenly and continuously falling curve indicating that the older the child the less likely it is that the parents will separate. Conversely, the younger the child, the greater the propensity for the parents to separate. The largest number of separations occurs during the child's first year of life: somewhat fewer separations take place in the child's second year of life, and so on. The likelihood that the parents will separate is actually seven times as high when the child is around one year old compared to when he or she is 17 years old. It seems that for a couple a newborn child is not only a blessing, *but also a social explosive!*



## Chopped time and heated togetherness.

How then do young children and their parents in post-modern conditions spend their time when they are together? When viewed superficially, we approach what may appear a paradox: On the one hand family members are basically separated from each other during weekdays. On the other hand, family members appear to be establishing a never before seen intimacy, equity and closeness. As a matter of fact, this appears to be precisely what family life is there for in the present era of post-modernity. It seems that to the post-modern person, the family has become not only a project among other projects, but also a very specific project – one that specialises in sharing emotional intimacy and existentially significant experiences.

Those families that have small children, in the main, appear to lead a very child-oriented family life indeed. The parents are generally concerned about their children's development, the quality of their relationship with them and about their physical and mental well-being. Parents therefore devote most of their spare time – time outside the hours they spend working paid employment outside the family – *with* their children and *for* their children. They care for them, speak to them, listen to them and do many other things in order to satisfy and pay respect to their children and their interests and needs. One of the reasons for this is that adults today in the so-called advanced (i.e. technologically and economically highly developed) countries choose to become, parents: they “acquire” rather than “have” children. In many respects there is a new existential relationship between parents and children. Children in the modern Scandinavian welfare states are “planned”, and parents choose when to have them. On average, this occurs at a rather mature age, so parents are highly likely to be motivated to take on the full responsibilities of parenthood: virtually all children born are “wanted children”.

How then do Danish children spend their time? Studies carried out at the Centre for Childhood and Family Research at Roskilde University clearly document that the flow of time is highly segmented or “chopped up”. One activity is often interrupted by another activity, either by daily routines or (less frequently) by the interventions by staff members at the daycare centre. The other children around them and the attraction of the ongoing activities, however, influence most of the children's activity.

Our studies of children's daily life in Danish and in Swedish day care centres show that most children generally engage in many quite brief interactions with each other. Even if the main activity of most children is to watch and wander around, most of them in the course of a day participate in many different activities, but with many activity shifts and changes of interaction partners. Viewed from the outside it appears as if these children lead a virtual “turbo-life” in a turbulent world.

In the families – when the family members have come home after a day at work, in school or the day care – the flow of activities is quite different. The data show that from the young child's point of view, there are many different manifestations of seeking *togetherness*. Parents generally show a strong tendency to use their time together to establish *emotional intimacy* with the child. Activities such as hugging, embracing and other forms of affection-giving, playing together (especially on the part of the father), fooling around and so forth – although on the surface not serving any instrumental purposes – all amount to satisfying the parents' and child's urge to charge (a sense of) belonging into the family and with each other.

In order to achieve these goals of intimacy, most parents appear to experience *time*-related concerns. More often than not, a perception that one is “short on time” prevails. Parents seem to have high expectations – not least in terms of “being together” – and experience difficulties in finding enough time to achieve this goal. So the parents work out different kinds of “time-making strategies”, such as devising playful “rituals” and routines that might facilitate passing the daily hurdles (otherwise time consuming “nodes” in the flow of the day). An example of this is the adoption of careful mental preparations, such as at breakfast, to present the child with “today's agenda”. Another frequently adopted technique is to organise the daily family life as a kind of “relay” run – one party taking over when the other has to shift to another activity. On the whole, a high level of time-consciousness and time-managing capabilities seem to permeate post-modern family life.

There are, of course, different types of family life. One type we have found emerging in the contemporary Scandinavian welfare states is what could be described as a *team* family. It is a form of family life that in many respects seems to be quite congenial to post-modern conditions. It is characterised by a rational but also egalitarian orientation, by being a *negotiating family* in which all members participate in taking decisions by democratically discussing their common situation: but also – at the same time – giving room to each other to cultivate one's own individual interests.

Will this be the family of the future? Or will the family as an institution in society dissolve and disappear as some prophesy (and others dream of)? Our studies suggest that the family as an institution will probably become both more frustrating as an institution to live in, but at the same time also more attractive to individuals. Today the family as an institution in the Western societies is both more challenged and more vulnerable than ever, but also more indispensable for the socio-psychological (not necessarily material) well being of the individuals than ever before. Family life in the post-modern condition requires an *enhanced sociological self-reflection* on the parts of the individuals involved and, in particular, what in technical terms can be described as accentuated *reciprocal inter-relational reflections* between the family members.

“The times they are a’ changing” – by quoting this I started this lecture. But as time is changing so are childhood, parenthood, partnership and family life. Many of us, not least the so-called experts, tend to judge these developments according to schemes inherited from theories of child education and development, of family sociology and therapy that – due to the developments in society – have now become empirically obsolete. A major task confronting us therefore, is to challenge the established and our own so-called knowledge about these phenomena. What often masquerades as “knowledge” is often little more than fashionable social fads and old prejudices. There is an urgent need to launch research that can give us new and creative insights into what living in modern times actually means for individuals, for couples and for families.

#### References:

Beck, U. (1992). *Risk Society. Towards a new Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Castells, M. (1996 - 1998). *The Information Age: Economy, society, and culture*, 3 vols., London: Blackwell.

Dencik, L. (1995). “Modern childhood in the Nordic countries: ‘dual-socialisation’ and its implications” in Chisholm, L. et al. (eds.) *Growing Up in Europe*, Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, pp.105-119.

Dencik, L. (1997). “The Position of Families in the Transformation of the Modern Scandinavian Welfare States”, in Vaskovics, L.A. (Hrsg.) *Familienleitbilder und Familienrealitäten*, Leverkusen: Leske+Budrich, pp.248-277.

Dencik, L. (1998). “Modernisation – A challenge to Early Childhood Education: Scandinavian Experiences and Perspectives” in *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, vol.6 No 2 pp.19-33.

Giddens, A. (1990). *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Giddens, A. (1992). *The Transformation of Intimacy. Sexuality, Love & Eroticism in Modern Societies*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Rich Harris, J. (1998). *The Nurture Assumption. Why children turn out the way they do*, New York: Touchstone.

**LOVE IS A QUESTION OF TIME**  
**Different time experiences in couples**

**Professor Alfons Vansteenwegen**

**President - Institute of Family and Sexuality Studies**  
**KU Leuven University, Belgium**

**Time and difference in couples.<sup>1</sup>**

Psychology teaches us that the way we experience time is unique for each individual. In every relationship, this brings, therefore, a radical difference. The same event which for me is long gone can still be right in front of you. What passes quickly for me can seem to last an eternity for you. There are differences about duration. There are differences about how often one wishes to do something, differences in the tempo in which we live. There are also differences in the orientation we give to time. Truly communal time does not exist on its own just by virtue of the fact that a person lives with another.

One can affirm, from a psychological perspective, that couples who live together differ in about everything. They differ as well in their experiences of time. To demonstrate this we will list some of these differences and illustrate them by examples.

**Differences in the experience of the 'duration' of something**

Each one of the partners has his or her own experience of how long something lasts. This can lead to conflicts.

It is 11:00 pm and Koen is waiting for Els to return from the fitness center. She exercises an hour a week. For her that hour passes quickly. If she has a drink with some friends, she gets home at a quarter past eleven. For Koen that hour seems to last forever. He begins to wonder if something has happened to her. Els feels that she has hardly been away. Exercise and a drink with friends...

She is in good spirits and expects him to be happy to see her when she gets home. In the meantime, his anxiety turns to anger when he hears her get home. He is annoyed. They get into an argument. "Where have you been?" - "You never let me do anything! You should be happy that once and a while I do something for myself." - "And I sit here while the children are asleep! Is this any time to be coming home?" Each person has experienced the 120 minutes (exercise for an hour, a drink with friends, and travel) very differently. For him was it much too long. For her, much too short. But it is the same number of minutes! We see here the difference between clock time and experienced time.

**Differences in the 'orientation' of time.**

In a violence-marked relationship, Griet does not dare to share her thoughts with her husband Alex. She is fearful that the past will repeat itself and Alex will get angry again. "He will attack me again. He will beat me." The past paralyzes her. Alex, on the other hand, has anxiety about the future. He is afraid that Griet will run away, and that she will divorce him. He is fearful that his past has nailed him down and that she no longer believes he can change. "She has locked me in

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is a modified version of a chapter from the book *Liefde vraagt tijd* (Love Demands Time) published by Lannoo in Tiel, Belgium in 1999.

because of my past and she gives me no chance for the future." This fear about the future prevents him now from acting freely. Each has a different orientation for time.

Myriam still can not get over an adolescent infatuation. Paul reproaches his wife for it: "You are always in the past. In fact you are still not really with me. I really can't get through to you. Forget these things from the past. Draw a line beneath them and start again with me. Forget the impossible love. It had no chance. Stop holding on to that impossible chance." In a certain sense, Myriam's past is still in front of her. When problems arise in her marriage, she dreams about her loved one. This prevents her from really connecting with Paul. It is as though an old "prohibition" stands in the way of their relationship.

Partners differ in the ways in which they orient their time. One can orient time to the future or to the past. Partners even differ in the ways in which they do this. In every relationship, is one person perhaps more focussed on the future and the other more on the past?

Jan sees everything in a positive light. He can enjoy what exists around him: this bit of free time, a chat with the children, a walk with his wife. He has an aesthetic, contemplative attitude toward life. Time is opportunity to pause. Mien sees what still must happen. Her life is a series of pressing projects: shopping for the party still has to be done, the children are never there when you need them; going on a walk is an opportunity to think about new initiatives and new plans. She has a pragmatic attitude toward life. Time is a task. Mien thinks that Jan suffers from a sort of pathological procrastination. "You are always late with everything. You let things run behind. And you always have to patch things up because of your tardiness. You always do things at the very last minute!" Watching television, it becomes obvious, because he never checks the listings ahead of time, Jan always misses the beginning of a program. He clicks a channel and goes on watching. Mien says: "He looks at all the endings one after another." Jan thinks that Mien suffers from a sort of pathological busyness. She can never just sit still. "You can never just savour the present moment! You are always playing with new expectations. Every resting moment is packed with new plans."

Myriam suffers from the unfulfilled chances that have gone by. She is fascinated by "if only we had..." When she has guests, she says "I wanted to make endive, but that didn't work out. We are having cauliflower..." When she gives someone a book as a gift, she says: "It is a book by Grisham. I wanted to get one by Claus, but that didn't work out." Or: "I have a bottle of champagne, but I really had wanted to buy flowers." With dessert: "It is a bavarois but I had really wanted to make chocolate mousse." In this way she buries her household and her friends under a pile of impossible chances.

Within a jealous couple, Roeland looks toward the future with anxiety. He is afraid that he will lose his wife Erna. In all his decisions, this fear plays a role. It destroys the couple's pleasure. During visits and while on trips this hindrance is always there. Am I going to lose her? He continually keeps an eye on her. Erna has the opposite feeling. Her anxiety springs from the past: is he going to tighten his grip on me, smother me, control me, give me no freedom? Do I have to be careful how I behave when we have visitors, check what I say and do? Both partners miss a lot of opportunities which lie before them in the now. There is a real danger that the number of visits and trips will diminish and that they will eventually lose each other.

At 10:30 on Sunday night, he comes to her to ask her to iron his trousers! He absolutely needs the trousers in the morning to go to work. Because of her own job during the week, she has to do it immediately otherwise it will not happen for a few days. She feels pressured and yells: "Does that have to be done right now!" She reproaches him for always thinking too late. He, from his viewpoint, wanted to mention it earlier but didn't dare to because he did not want to disappoint her. Now, on Sunday evening, he has no alternative but to ask her. Both partners are feeling bad. Each has a different experience of time, and that can lead to conflicts again and again.

This difference in the experience of time is sometimes also seen in couples who come too late seeking relationship-therapy. They seek help. In the first conference, it is apparent that they differ radically in their sense of the problem. For one of the partners it is already absolutely too late for help. That partner wants a divorce. For the other, who usually has just realized that a problem

exists, everything is possible! For the one, nothing more is possible. For the other, everything is possible. To really solve a relationship problem, however, it takes two.

### **Differences in 'reaction' time.**

In some couples, the partners make it difficult for each other because each has a different reaction time. When she is ready to go, he has a lot of urgent things to take care of. That leads to tensions, On Sunday afternoon, he goes out of his way to pick up a cake at the bakery to give her a special treat. He makes coffee and wants to sit down and have a cozy time. She keeps him waiting, working away at things in the garden. There are so many urgent things that have to be done! He gets very irritated; but that doesn't bring her to the house any sooner. By the time she finally comes in, his mood is destroyed.

When they go to bed to make love, she takes an apple with her, which she eats at her leisure. He is climbing the walls. When she finishes the apple, he has no more interest... She reproaches him.

### **A difference of 'processing' time.**

They made a trip together to Columbia. Jan has great memories of the trip. In his free time, he dreams he is still back in Cartagena de Indias and in Mompos. In his mind, he is still drifting up the Magdalena river. He begins to quietly re-read the novels of Marquez, which play out in that area. Six months later, the opportunity arises for both of them to make an inexpensive trip to Egypt. Mien reacts immediately and with enthusiasm. Jan is still processing his first trip. He needs more time to work through it all. Mien is all set for new experiences. In every couple, there are differences in processing time, for pleasant as well as unpleasant experiences.

Birgit and Joris lost a daughter in a traffic accident. Joris took time to immediately work through all of this. He was very quiet for a few days, wrote a lot, and cried a lot. He worked through his grief almost immediately. Birgit hasn't had time to grieve: so much had to be done, so many things taken care of. She went into a phase of over-activity. Five years later she is still grieving. For Joris this is hard to accept. Sometimes it all becomes too much for Birgit and she gets lost in her sorrows. Joris feels himself powerless: how can he help her? It is important to note that they both realize that they differ in their processing time.

Whenever Mien confronts something that works against her, she explodes immediately, ranting and raving. But then it all passes. It is gone, gone for good. Jan swallows all the opposition. He keeps it in his heart. Over time it all piles up, and he becomes rancorous. He becomes hostile. He reacts, after the fact, when the only possible reaction is the reaction of powerlessness: kicking back, vengeful, becoming instantaneously destructive. These reactions accomplish nothing.

These differences in reaction time are actually found in physical studies of conflict-prone couples. During marriage conflicts, men (as far as pulse and blood pressure, for instance, are concerned) react more forcefully and longer than women. The male reaction is still measurable long after the woman is physically calmed down (GOTTMAN, 1994). This is one reason why men retreat to stone-walling, which can be a preliminary stage leading to a divorce.

### **Differences in 'tempo'.**

In every couple, the partners live according to a different tempo. Fred and Greet go for a walk. Whenever they go for a walk, he always walks ahead ten or fifteen meters. She has to work to keep up with him. Greet takes this badly. Whenever they go for a walk she feels abandoned, alone. She is sometimes afraid of losing her way. She needs to talk while on a walk together. She wants to be able to tell Fred what she sees. She wants to talk about the things she has noticed: look at that unusual mushroom, look how red the oak leaves are, etc.

Fred distinguishes between two kinds of walks: walking in the hills and walking in the countryside. In the hills, he thinks that each partner should climb according to his or her own tempo and wait for the other at certain crossing points. Out in the fields, he wants to walk as fast as he can, without waiting for the other. Walking for him is moving ahead. He feels that, when he goes for a walk, he has to continually put a break on himself. He likes to walk as fast as he can. He has no need to talk. For him walking is a form of escape, a way to focus on just his own thoughts.

This difference in tempo is played out in the lives of most couples, for instance, when eating. There are slow and fast eaters: one partner's plate is empty when the other is just beginning to eat. That leads to real irritation.

This difference in tempo is also seen in how partners understand things. One sums things up very quickly, immediately, and intuitively. The other has a slower and more analytic understanding, an understanding which often has more depth to it. One sees this difference as well in how one handles tasks: the same task (straightening up the kitchen, clearing the table, vacuuming, calling the plumber, doing the shopping, etc.) seems to be done in a flash by one partner and takes the other partner a few hours.

One couple says it this way: "We live at two speeds". "He is faster than I. He starts late and then takes care of things with lightening speed. I work more slowly." Sometimes he waits until an hour before guests arrive to start working on the meal. She is already thinking about it a week ahead of time and making preparations. He can change an appointment at the last minute due to changed circumstances. She has a lot of difficulty with this. For her an appointment is an appointment, regardless of changed circumstances. When it comes to getting over an argument and setting things aside, they have a reversed difference. Since she can not deal with stand-offishness, she is the one who comes around first. For him, that is too soon. He is not yet over it. She wants him to give her a sign when she can make up again.

### **Differences of tempo in making decisions.**

One specific kind of difference in tempo deserves special attention because it has significant implications: the difference in tempo when it comes to making decisions about things. In most couples, there is a difference in the tempo in which they make decisions. 'When the decision directly affects the relationship, this difference becomes extremely important. The person who decides first has more influence. The quick-decision-maker is the stronger person in the relationship. The other simply has to follow: this is in terms of the decision's being made. One can fight the decision or criticize it, but will always be operating from a less solid position. Here we see the weapon tactic of the "rapid takeover" (BAKKER & BAKKER-RABDAU, 1973). A person quickly gets what he or she wants because the other partner has not yet reacted. The chance for hostility to arise within that partner is greatly increased. Sooner or later the day comes when that partner has had enough and the relationship falls apart. One could make an interesting study about the influence of decision-making tempo on the power bases within the couple.

Frequently this difference in tempo gets interpreted in this way: I make the decisions because you never get around to it. I have to. By not making a decision, the second partner *decides* that the first must decide. In this way, not making a decision or making a decision very slowly is in fact making a decision. Not making a decision or slowly making a decision can also be a be just fine. They both say to each other: "Once you change, we will be happy."

### **Difference in desired frequency.**

In every couple there are also differences about how often a person wants to do something: frequency differences. Partners differ in how often they want to do something. Lena has season tickets for the theatre, and for years she has wanted Herman to go with her. She would at least like to have him go with her for the six times for which she has tickets. Herman is willing to go one time; but one time each season is more than enough for him. Such differences in desired frequency often lead to major conflicts. In fact they could easily be resolved in a frank discussion in

which the individual differences are respected (VANSTEENWEGEN, 1998). That there are differences between partners in the desired frequency for sexual relations is evident to everyone.

### **Differences in the 'exactness' of time.**

Six o'clock for you is five minutes before six for me! Partners differ in determining time itself. When he has to be some place at eight o'clock, he will be there five minutes before eight. When she has to be some place at eight o'clock, she walks in at fifteen minutes after eight. The variability, the way in which we bring stretched differences to a situation, is different for each partner. When he is already in the car with the motor running, she has to still go to the toilet. When he is all dressed to go and standing on the step, she has to quickly run to the bathroom for one last minute check of make-up. And when she is ready to go with him to do the shopping, he is still in his work clothes in the garage.

### **Differences in planning time.**

The degree to which each partner wants to plan time is also different. Marielle and Luk each have a different idea about planning time for the weekend. Marielle would just as soon organize the entire weekend ahead of time and down to the last detail. This is when we will get up, this when we will eat, when we will do the shopping, get some recreation, etc. Everything is laid out, well organized so that we will then have some real free time. Then we know when we will do the shopping so that we have everything in house for the weekend, etc. Luk's dream is a weekend in which nothing is planned. We will see what we do, then we will have all kinds of possibilities. An improvised weekend. Nothing is tied down. We will allow ourselves to be surprised by what comes along. During the week we have to follow a tight schedule. On weekends we are free. A woman writes: My husband wants to organize everything ahead of time. I like (a little) adventure. When we spend a few days at the sea, just the two of us, at breakfast he already wants to know what we are going to eat for lunch. Then I think: just let me enjoy my coffee. Lunch is a long time off."

### **Morning and evening people.**

He is awake early in the morning. He talks a lot and is very active. In the evening he is disagreeable, quiet, and wants to go to bed at ten o'clock. Otherwise he lies on the couch napping. In the morning she is unapproachable: grumpy and unpleasant. She sits across the breakfast table from him; and each word from him is just too much! It is only around noon that she comes to life, and in the evening she can't be stopped.

### **Differences in the need for sleep.**

Seven hours of sleep are enough for him; but she needs her ten hours to feel fresh and alert. This is a permanent difficulty in relationships. Although he can certainly go to bed with her a bit earlier, and this would not be bad for their sexual relationship, it is very difficult for her to stay up longer if she cannot sleep-in the following day. This is a simplified way of solving something by forcing the other partner to take care and change.

Taking initiatives in a relationship is a special matter. One does not take an initiative at the request of the other partner, because it would then not be an initiative. One can't do it *by* appointment, because all spontaneity is lost. One can, nevertheless, take care in a relationship that enough variation is built into keeping an appointment so that the other partner still has some room for doing something on his or her own. The partner, for example, will take care of, once a week, arranging an activity outside of the house and select what and when.

## Differences in the desired order of things.

Herman asks Lena for a bit of attention after the children are put in bed. He feels lonely and unimportant in her eyes. He feels passed over and ignored. He needs some time to be with her. He needs some time for them to be together: a hug and a chat. It irritates him that it never happens in the evening. On days when she works full-time outside the house, Lena is so tired at night that she has hardly the energy to say a word. Once the children are finally in bed, she has had it. She wants to relax in front of the television; and she wants to be absolutely left alone. But Lena, from her viewpoint, really finds it a bother that Herman, before he goes to sleep, reads in bed and “never says a word”. She feels herself rejected and unimportant in his eyes. For Herman, this is the only time he really has to read. This is clearly a problem of order. They each want the same thing, but each at a different time. They both need attention from the other. Both need a place to escape to, a refuge (VANSTEENWEGEN, 1998). The need each partner has is justified. But they never get what they both want, because of timing: she wants to escape at the moment that he wants attention; and he wants attention at the moment that she wants to be left alone!

A number of marital problems run along this path: one partner wants something at the very moment that the other partner is unable to give it. Here it would be enough to seek out one or another kind of agreement in order to resolve this for good. Herman and Lena, to take the previous example, can perhaps find a moment together at bedtime, but before Herman has opened his book, or after putting the children in bed but before Lena plants herself in front of the television.

Differences in order also say something about what each of the partners considers important. My values are expressed in what I want to do *first*. Those are literally my “priorities”. In every partner relationship there are two sets of priorities until the two come to one *statement of purpose for the relationship*. What are our priorities? These can only be determined through discussion about *my* and *your* priorities.

A special problem of order is the problem of *interpretation of the order of interactions*. In most couples, each partner has a different explanation for what is going on. Each partner makes a different order of events for what is going on (what WATZLAWICK, 1967, calls “punctuation”). “You started it and my behaviour is just a reaction to your exaggerations. I am *now* straightening out what you messed up *back then*.” This is well illustrated in the story of the nag and the deaf person. In a couple, the man asserts that the source of all problems is his wife: “I am married to a nag. She nags from morning to evening. It is unbearable.” The woman places all the blame for the problems on her husband: “I married a deaf person. He never listens to what I say. That is not very easy to put up with! If I don’t yell, he doesn’t hear me!” Each partner gives his or her view of the situation. They both make a different order in their explanation for the problems. The nag says: “I nag because you never pay any attention to me!” The deaf person says: “I keep my ears closed because you are always nagging.” This interaction, which in a sense is circular (they influence each other at the same time), is chopped to pieces by each partner in a different way so that the other is the source of the problem. My behavior is simply a correction to your exaggerations. The other has to change first. This is a difference that will last throughout their relationship; and it is no small thing!

## Conclusion.

The experience of time for each partner is personal. It differs from that of the other partner. There are differences in processing time, reaction time, desired frequency, the experience of duration, ordering of time, exactness, etc. In order to be able to live together with a partner, one has to do something with these differences. To resolve the difference one first of all has to grasp what is going on. This is an absolute prerequisite in order to come to a workable relationship. ‘When a person makes the difference clear, he or she can solve it through negotiation. In this way a person comes to an agreement in which either a midpoint is sought or one takes turns.

Truly communal time in a marriage is an assignment. It is not something that simply comes by itself. It is a result, an achievement of the couple. Simultaneous time doesn’t come by itself from a relationship. It is something that two people working together accomplish. There has to be discussion and foundation work. Just as is so true about everything in a relationship: truly communal time only comes about when partners talk to each other.



**References.**

- BAKKER, C. & BAKKER-RABDAU, M. (1973): *No Trespassing: Explorations in Human Territoriality*, San Francisco: Chandler and Sharp.
- GOTTMAN, J. (1994): "Why Marriages Fail", in: *The Family Therapy Networker* 18, 40-48.
- VANSTEENWEGEN, A. (1993): *Liebe — ein Tätigkeitswort*, München: Claudius.
- VANSTEENWEGEN, A. (1998): *Liefde na verschil*, Tiel: Lannoo.
- WATZLAWICK, P / BEAVIN, J. / JACKSON, D. (1967): *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, New York: Norton.

**AFTERMATH –  
THE TIME DIMENSION IN POST-NUCLEAR FAMILY LIFE \***

**Professor Margareta Hydén,  
University of Stockholm, Sweden**

**Introduction**

In recent decades we have witnessed a minor revolution in the area of family life in Sweden. The nuclear family, based on the heterosexual couple, no longer has an exclusive position as the only family form. The nuclear family is still dominant in the Swedish culture, but has become a more and more fragile basis for a continuing family life and parenthood. Marriages end in divorce to such a great extent that it is reasonable to describe a breakdown of the nuclear family form and the making up of a new family or family form as a basic fact of life in today's social pattern of personal relationships. Consequently, a divorce and the subsequent reorientation can be viewed as a part of an expected life cycle for many people. A similar process has taken place all over the western world (cf. Boh, 1989; Morgan, 1996; Simpson, 1998; Smart & Neale, 1999). We now see a series of other family forms, in which parents and children meet under new conditions. Examples of these include the stepfamily (Levin, 1994; Visher & Visher, 1990), the one-parent family (Bak, 1997; Knoll, 1995), and the homosexual family (Golombok & Tasker, 1994; Henriksson, 1995).

In my talk today, I will focus on one of these "new" family forms, or rather one kind of family form – *the post-nuclear family*, the family that is developed *after a divorce*, after the breakdown of the marital relation between the parents.

Although about 50,000 Swedish families every year are faced with the task of forming a post-nuclear-family life (SCB 1997), and almost as many children are affected, the Swedish culture lacks rituals to mark this passage. There are several collective and culturally well-defined ceremonies to choose from for the passage from the unmarried state to the married state. These range from a large church wedding to a simple ceremony performed by a justice of the peace. In a divorce, the conditions are the opposite. A passage from married to divorced is experienced and dealt with individually. The legally expected course of action in Swedish society is that the parents continue to exercise their parental rights and responsibilities, but without the basis of the married couple relationship. The formation of mutual agreements on parenting is something that is supposed to be handled between the two partners. It is not surprising that conflicts concerning the shaping and formulation of such an agreement arise during divorce. A divorce can be described as a method of solving conflicts in a marriage by having the partners go their separate ways. But at the same time, the partners are required to reconstruct the parental roles, and this can result in overpowering demands on their negotiating capacities.

My talk here today deals with parents who have availed themselves of parental mediation sessions at the Municipal Family Law Department in their Swedish home town, in order to get assistance in finding a solution to disputes about children's care, housing, and visiting rights. The origin of my talk is a study in which 34 couples who came for parental mediation agreed to have their sessions tape-recorded. The study was a qualitative analysis of the task of reconstructing the family, the areas of conflict brought into the mediation sessions, and the role of the mediator in the process of problem solving. The overall purpose was to make a contribution to the understanding of the negotiations and transformations of the parental roles necessary after a divorce, and to shed light on the role that social work play in this process.

What has time got to do with it? Well, the times they are a' changing for these parents, that is obvious. But after that, when the divorce crisis is over? As a matter of fact - time has a lot to do with it. When I am finished, I think you will find that time means almost everything. What I will suggest, and urge you to examine further in you everyday practice, is that most conflicts between divorced parents, are around the issue of time.

But before I will focus on time, I will make a detour and pay some attention to the post-nuclear family as a area of interest for researchers.

### **Family Studies**

The study of the post-nuclear-family forms and family life is becoming an increasingly popular field. British sociologists Carol Smart and Bren Neale in their ground breaking work *Family Fragments?* (1999) make the point that mainstream sociological theorists have, through their conceptual work on a broad canvas, come to see 'the family' or intimate relationships as requiring analysis if changes taking place elsewhere in conditions of late modernity are to be understood (ibid. p. 5). In their study, Smart and Neale carried out two rounds of interviews with sixty separated parents and examined the various patterns of parenthood – co-parenting, custodial parenting and solo parenting – and the ways in which they were negotiated. The major focus of the study was the moral commitments of the parents, their rights, and their responsibilities.

The other sociologists referred to in Smart and Neal's work are Anthony Giddens (1992) and the German Sociologists Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1995). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argues that we live in a 'New Era', characterized by a collision of interests between love, family and personal freedom. The nuclear family based on gender status is falling apart on the issues of emancipation and equal rights, which no longer conveniently come to a halt outside our private lives (ibid. p. 2). According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, the result is 'the quite normal chaos called love', and 'the family' will constitute itself in a variety of forms: the negotiated family, the alternating family, the multiple family, new arrangements after divorce, remarriage, second divorce, new combinations of your /my/ our children and so on.

The "normal chaos called love", that Beck and Beck-Gernsheim are talking about, is not a cool, nice and cosy little love. It is a heated, passionate love, with the power to form and reform lives. Paradoxically, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim state, the more individualistic, self-absorbed and self-fulfilling we are, the more intimacy, security and possibilities to identify with significant others are we searching for. However, the love between man and women has been more and more risky. If love comes to an end, we are running the risk of being abandoned. The ties between children and parents, are not as easy to break. That brings the children in a very special and important position in their parents lives. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim puts it this way:

"By now we have reached the next stage; traditional bonds play only a minor role and the love between men and women has likewise proved vulnerable and prone to failure. What remains is the child. It promises a tie which is more elemental, profound and durable than any other in this society. The more other relationships become interchangeable and revocable, the more a child can become the focus of new hopes – it is the ultimate guarantee of permanence, providing an anchor for one's life" (ibid. 1995, s. 73).

Could you see the time dimension approaching again just about here in my account, the account I called a "detour" from the question of time in post-nuclear family life? It is approaching, because in post-modern family life the children are important for the well-being of the parents – not only the other way around, and the adults need *time* with there children, time that has to be negotiated between the parents. Conflicts around time are frequent in the parental mediation practice. The disputes are either around two parents claim for time with there children, or around one parent's wish that the other should spend more time, with the argument that time is so important.

Is it possible to understand this "post-nuclear parents" conflicts in another way than as a desire for the Significant Other? Yes, I think so. I think I have to emphasis the difference between nuclear family parenting and post-nuclear family parenting, just about here.

### **Post-nuclear-family parenting**

According to family systems theory, the family differentiates and carries out its functions through subsystems. The nuclear family is based on the spouse subsystem, formed by a man and a woman living together. A new level of family formation is reached at the birth of the first child. The spouse subsystem must now differentiate to perform the tasks of socializing a child without losing the mutual support that should characterize the spouse subsystem. A parental subsystem

must be established and the spouses have to commit themselves to a jointly conducted parenthood (Minuchin 1974; Hoffman 1981).

In order to explore further the distinctive features of family life, I will suggest the formulation of a new concept: 'family-hood'. The concepts of 'family-hood', 'spouse subsystem', and 'parental subsystem' are related in a special way. 'Family-hood' include parents as well as children, and its basis is not so much the spousal relationship as the *joint home* they have founded. The joint home provides a space for the family-hood to develop. In the nuclear family, spousal relationship and parenthood are divided but closely connected and linked to family-hood. The post-nuclear family form is characterized by the contrary; the link between the spousal relationship and parenthood is broken, as is the link to family-hood. The parents' relationship as a couple no longer comprises the binding link in family life. Parents are expected, however, to interact when it comes to the children – without being united in family-hood. A couple relationships can be ended and integrated as a part of the individual's life history. It is quite possible to have one or more "ex-partners" in one's life, like "life-history artefacts", without any further contact. Today it is not possible, however, to have "ex-children". Parenthood can therefore not be terminated as can a marriage. In earlier times in Sweden, it was easier for a man to escape from contact with the child in a divorce, or by not marrying the mother of his expected child. Similarly, the mother had a greater possibility of claiming that the father should not have contact with the child, for the child's own welfare. If the mother remarried, the stepfather was expected to take the place of the biological father. Thus it was possible for a man to have "ex-children" or "non-children" in a way that is no longer possible in contemporary Sweden. There were ways of dissolving parenthood that no longer exist. The expressed legal norm of today is that one may be divorced – but not from one's children (for Swedish discourses of childhood, see Halldén, 1991).

One consequence of having parenthood and family-hood no longer combined in the post-nuclear family is that two new parental positions are created, the *housing parent* and the *parent with visiting rights*. These two positions give rise to a variation in organization of the parenting in the post-nuclear-family. The housing parent – usually the mother, but not always – is the one with whom the child lives 50% of the time or more. Housing parenthood can be combined with joint custody in the legal sense, as well as with single custody, but not with the other parent having single custody. The parent with visiting rights – usually the father, but not always – is the one with whom the child lives less than 50% of the time.

Parenthood with visiting rights can be combined with joint custody, and with the other parent having single custody, but not with the parent with visiting rights having single custody. The child of divorced parents can have two housing parents and no parent with visiting rights, although this situation is not common. The child then lives equal amounts of time with both parents. These parental roles have a built-in inequality in reference to *rights, obligations, and responsibilities* between the parents and between the parents and the child (for a discussion of the moral aspects of post-nuclear parenthood, see Smart & Neale, 1999). This inequality is not gender-specific in theory, but rather in practice, since most children have their mothers as housing parents. It means that they have to work out their relationship with their fathers on the basis of quite different conditions than before, and compared to their mothers. Most children have great difficulties in meeting this task, and many get very little help in solving it.

Some parents try to equalize the matters with a 50/50-residence scheme for the children. This way of living usually functions only around the time of the divorce, and when the children are small. Small children are either together with their parents or in day care, and are therefore easy for the parents to coordinate. Older children have their own networks and schedules, and it is necessary for the parents to live near each other if a 50/50 scheme is to work. If parents embark on new lives, they may need greater distances between them.

Swedish family law does not give parents any specific direction on how to solve these problems. The legislation restricts itself to giving directions about basic rights and obligations between parents and children, a set of "mini-standards". The parent with visiting rights is to pay a fixed support, and follow basic agreements about visiting rights. Here it is an issue of arriving at the agreed time and place, and returning the child with his gear at the agreed time and place. How the visiting rights are to be made up is not regulated by law; that is up to the individual. The housing parent has economic responsibility for the child, and must "maintain" the child on the fixed support, her/his own income, and on subsidies from the state such as child benefit allowances and possibly housing allowances.

## Negotiated parenthood

After a divorce, earlier habits, rules, and living patterns of parenthood allied with family-hood must be changed or given new content. There are no culturally determined rules or conceptions of what changes must be made, or what content is most suitable. The structure of parenthood must be negotiated between the two parties. These negotiations are often most difficult to deal with, for several reasons.

Ideally there are no strong feelings involved in a negotiation – but in a divorce there are always strong feelings involved. The binding power of the love relationship has been lost. This does not mean that other feelings cannot bind the parties together. Anger and rage can have a powerfully liberating effect – a liberation that can be positive for the parenthood negotiations, because it defines the parties in relation to each other, and this is beneficial to the negotiating. Anger, which cannot be converted into liberation but rather turns into hatred, is more problematical. Usually, we prefer to believe that hatred, like anger, has a defining, dividing power. Hatred then becomes a servant of the separation. It can work like this – but it can also work to the contrary. Hatred can become a link that binds the hater to the hated, as to a loved one. Hatred is similar to hope in that it is nourished by an eternally unsatisfied need for respect and nearness. Hate wants to tear down the hated to the level of the hater so that the two can meet in equality, while hope wants to uplift the one who is hoped for to the level of the one who is hopeful. A man or woman in the grip of hatred risks eternal linkage to his/her opponent. The conditions for negotiating new parental roles from this position of dependence are not so good.

When the parents come to parental mediation, they have usually based their parenting arrangements on their positions as housing parent and parent with visiting rights, respectively. This means that their relationship is asymmetrical, which is not the ideal situation for negotiations. Ideally, negotiating is based on symmetry position- and power-wise, and on discussion between equals who are prepared to give and take to achieve a result from which they both have something to win. It could be said that the parents have equally strong positions when they enter the mediation sessions, because the means of force they command have no power to create anything but losers. A housing parent has the option of denying access, and a parent with visiting rights has the option of disappearing. As a *threat*, this exercising of power can possibly function as a means of exerting pressure to get one's own way. Once used, the threat creates a diminishing living space for both parents. It turns them both into single parents, one with a child and the other without, and the child into a child with only one parent. This state of equality is fragile and can easily be altered. One of the most obvious examples is the inequality between a violent man and his victimized wife. In these cases, family mediation is not a suitable method for finding a solution to disputes about children's care, housing, and visiting rights.

A court decision can increase one parent's power at the expense of the other. By granting one parent the housing of the child and granting the other parent visiting rights according to a certain schedule, a balance of power is created between the parents. The court can therefore decide *where* and *when* parenting is done, and grant the parents the positions of housing parent and parent with visiting rights, respectively. In exceptional cases, the court can try to control to some extent *how* visiting rights are to be exercised, by requiring that a third person should be present. For all else, the parents must rely on themselves and on each other. There is nothing that says, however, that the parents' ability and prerequisites for negotiation are improved by the court's attempts at solving the conflict.

## The Study

Back to my study. Back to the 34 couples and their mediators, and the tape-recordings of their sessions. In my talk here today, I will use the first session of eight couples.

In order to get the context - a few words about parental mediation in the Swedish version.

Parental mediation in Sweden takes place over a brief period, usually consisting of three to five meetings. The method, in the Swedish version, is not adapted to any psychotherapeutic idea of helping the couple work through the separation. It differs from most psychotherapeutic methods

in that attention is not focused on *what has happened*, but rather on *what will happen*. Regressive behavior is not encouraged. This is especially true if it is expressed as attacks on the other party, containing accusations of old injustices. Grief is permitted, as are expressions of strong feelings of anger and disappointment, but extended aggressive attacks against the opposite party are cut short.

The series of sessions are meant to result in some form of agreement. This agreement can be formalized as a contract about custody and residence, with the same legal status as a court decision. The mediator, in his/her capacity as a socialworker in family law, has the duty of determining that the contract is consistent with the child's best interests. "The child's best interests" is not an unequivocally defined concept.

An example of a contract that could be contrary to the child's best interests might be where the parents of an older child want to make an agreement that is clearly against what the child wishes. This is contrary to current Swedish law. Another example could be that the parents of a small child want to have the child meet the nonresidential parent only once a year for a longer period – e.g. a month of vacation. This can be seen as contrary to developmental psychology know-how about children's need for regular and frequent contact with both parents, which is considered especially important during the early childhood years.

Even if the pronounced ambition among parental mediators is to include the children in some of the sessions, this happens only on rare occasions. The material in my study is then suitable for a parent-focussed study, and less so for the study of the role of children in mediation. However, a common feature of the accounts given in the sessions, were that the children were given agentive positions by their parents. The arguments given were brought forward in the name of the children, for the sake of the children.

### The Analysis

The first step in the analysis of the first sessions of eight couples, was to try to find the underlying thematic structure in the material. I sought a pattern that held the statements together thematically. For this analysis, I was guided by the American literature critic Kenneth Burke (1969) and his "motivation grammar". Burke poses the question: "What is involved when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it?" "An answer to that question," he says, "is the subject of this book" (p. xv), and continues: "We shall use five terms as generating principle of our investigation. They are: Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, Purpose. In a rounded statement about motives, you must have some word that names the *act* (names what took place, in thought or deed), and another that names the *scene* (the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred); also you must indicate what person or kind of person (*agent*) performed the act, what means or instrument he used (*agency*) and the *purpose*" (p. xv). In conformity with Burke, the question I posed in the study was "What is inextricably associated with statements about parenthood?" I further posed the more detailed questions of who can be a parent, where and when parenting is done, as well as how parenting is practiced and what it includes.

### Themes of post-nuclear-family parenthood

The answers to the questions of *who* can be a parent, *where* the parenting is done, *when* and *how* is it done, and *what* parenting should include, corresponded to an equal number of what I will call "dimensions in parenting".

### Thematics of parenting

Basic parental dimension	Answers the Question
Personal dimension	<b>Who</b> can be a parent?
Place dimension	<b>Where</b> is the parenting done?
Time dimension	<b>When</b> is the parenting done?
Action dimension	<b>How</b> is the parenting done?
Ideological dimension	<b>What</b> should parenting include?

This content analysis of the conversations showed how the talk was basically concentrated on the time and place dimensions of parenting. Parental mediation practice appeared very much concerned with *time*, and the conversations to determine when one parent may see his/her children can be both long and emotionally upsetting. Thus, the talks about “when” in the sessions are carried on in an argumentative form, including other dimensions. A parent who states that he/she wants to see his/her children more often, could, for example, argue as follows: “If I have to return the children as early as *Sunday afternoon* (dimension of time), we will not have time to *do* (dimension of action) what we want to that day.” Another parent could argue as follows: “We must meet *often* (dimension of time), because I want my children to *get to know me as a whole person*, (dimension of ideology), and not just as a playful Sunday Daddy”.

The parenthood that is the subject of the sessions is completely biologically oriented. New partners are often spoken of as problems, seldom as resources, and never as persons who can be thought of as having parental functions. In conversations between parents for whom a longer period of time has passed since the divorce, however, new wives/husbands or partners are spoken of in milder tones. They are, however, never physically present in the sessions. Close relatives – primarily the maternal grandmother – are often described as being so significant that their roles are almost parental.

From the point of view of the parental mediation sessions, the characteristic features of post-nuclear family parenthood could be described as struggles about getting “enough time/interaction space” with their children. When parenthood and family-hood are no longer combined, no joint home provides a readily available space for interaction. From the point of view of the children, the outcome of these talks is of decisive importance. Many studies on children’s experiences during and after the divorce have focused on this subject. In their study of 522 adolescents from 365 families, four years after divorce, Buchanan, Maccoby and Dornbusch (1996) found that the majority of the adolescents had some contact with their nonresidential fathers, but it was harder to maintain if there were ongoing conflicts between the parents. In the Children of Divorce Project, Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) interviewed sixty children five years after the divorce. Over half of the children said that they had early fears that their nonresidential parent would abandon them, fears that fortunately had never been materialized. However, “enough time/interaction space” does not mean a maximum of time. Custodial parents in Wallerstein and Kelly’s study reported high tension, fatigue, depression and difficulties in coping, due to the heavy burden of being a single parent. Lonely, dejected mothers were cared for by their children during periods of crisis with a maturity and tact well beyond the children’s years.

For the majority of the 86 couples that visited the Municipal Family Law Department during the year of my study, conflicts were about visiting parents claiming more time. A few referrals concerned housing parents’ claims of wishes to transfer time to the visiting parent, based on their opinion that they had more than enough access to their children.

### **Housing parents and visiting parents**

The positions of housing parents and parents with visiting rights, respectively, are fundamental constituting factors for interaction between the parents in the sessions. These positions appear to be a stronger structural factor than gender. The number of fathers in the investigation who are housing parents is, however, too small to make it possible to make any extensive conclusions about the significance of the gender variable to the parents’ positions. Usually the discussion is based on the wish of a parent with visiting rights for a greater place in the children’s life, and the housing parent has opposed this. In a very few cases, the issue is *where* the children and the parents are to meet. One example was a mother who was a parent with visiting rights and who wanted to have the child visit at her house. The father was opposed to this, since he felt that the mother’s new partner was unreliable and could become violent. In a few cases the demand for change is directed at the parent with visiting rights. In these cases it is primarily mothers who want the fathers to be more involved in their children’s lives.

In the sessions, the mediator tries to help the parents negotiate a place where the children and the parent with visiting rights can meet – one upon which both parents can agree - and one which is reasonable for the child. It appears that the socialworker’s goal is the praxis for “normal visiting rights” which has been developed by the court of law. “Normal visiting rights” are every

other weekend, Friday to Sunday, one evening in the other week, and equal shares of major holidays and vacation time. The mediator tries to see what will be possible to agree upon in arbitrating the parents' wishes. Regularity in the parent-child relationship is considered very important.

### **How should post-nuclear-family parenting be practiced?**

The subjects of how the parents see their parental roles, what they want in their parenthood, or what they need from each other in order to be as good parents as they wish to be, do not immediately come up in the mediation sessions. Indirectly, however, these issues are very much present. The most common pattern of conversation is that one parent rejects a wish of the other parent to have more space in the children's lives, by using arguments based on a certain understanding of what good parenting should include, and accuses the other parent of not fulfilling these requirements. The parents' obligations to the children are often touched upon in this indirect way. The argument is inclined to lead to the conclusion that the child should be protected from meeting this incompetent parent too often. The contents of these accusations are often not talked about in the discussions. On the contrary, the leader often cuts off the accusing parent.

The parents' job is defined by the parents, primarily as seeing to it that the children's need for care is satisfied. The focus on this theme is probably connected to the fact that the conversations most often concern children of pre-school or lower-school ages. The most-discussed aspect of childcare is the children's *need for security*. The concept is voiced in expressions like "it's her security that's important"; "there's no security in that"; "making sure that Cecilia (child) is calm and feels secure is the most important"; "these are secure conditions". Security is connected to continuity – everything should remain the same all the time, and change is equated with insecurity. Security is also connected with protection – the child must be protected from a dangerous and unfamiliar world. The unknown can be threatening. People can be dangerous for the child, because they are unreliable or conduct their lives in a way the parent cannot accept. It is usually the housing parent who brings up the child's security. The parent with visiting rights, as a rule, does not present any different point of view, but can protest against ideals of security that are all too extreme. In Excerpt 1 we meet a mother who claims that it is inappropriate that the father see his two-year-old daughter, because she might be exposed to something she should be protected against. The primary threat was a twelve-year-old son from his earlier marriage. The mother thought that his behavior was peculiar, and didn't want the daughter to come in contact with him, which the father accepted:

#### **Excerpt 1:**

**Mother:** *Yes, the problem is, what I've definitely decided about, is that when Lotta (child) meets Birger (father), he shouldn't have any contact at all with his son ... it's totally forbidden as far as I'm concerned ... and if it's not, then...*

**Father:** *They usually don't meet, so there's no reason to worry.*

This did not especially calm the mother. She said that she had reason to suspect the father's son, the environment around him and what the daughter might be exposed to if she were to be with her father:

**Mother:** *But then I might add that Ma... the mother (father's ex-wife) there has been associating with ... well, with bisexual people and homosexuals so that there... (Everyone talks angrily at once)*

**Father:** *Been associating with, she's been working with... they're from her job.*

**Mother:** *She's invited them to her house and so on. So then you kind of wonder what's going on, and whether Lotta will be exposed to something that...*

**Mediator:** *Is that what's contributing to your fear...*

**Mother:** *Yes.*

The protection theme is also linked to the control theme. The majority of housing parents are strong supporters of the importance of structure, i.e. fixed habits and routines. A criticism frequently aimed at the parent with visiting rights is that at his/her home there are no fixed rules and routines – or the routines are not those which the child is used to, and that there will therefore



be a break in the child's continuity. For the sake of structure and continuity, the housing parent would like to participate in deciding what rules are to be enforced at the home of the parent with visiting rights, as well as what happens during the visits. In Excerpt 2, a mother explains why the children must come home on Sunday afternoon after having been with their father, and not go directly to school from his house on Monday morning. She has just declared that children need basic security and fixed routines, and continues:

**Excerpt 2:**

***Mother:** ...that they come back on Sunday afternoon, and that they know that they'll have time to wash, fix, they'll have time to ... organize things, take a bath, eat supper, have time to talk in peace and quiet about what happened over the weekend and what I've done over the weekend ... we'll have time to make plans for the week and talk about what we're going to do, and fix everything back and forth ... and then we go to bed and then the school week begins as it usually does.*

Conversations about discipline are remarkably absent, as are those of what requirements can be appropriate to make of children, e.g. what they should know at a certain age, what duties they should have, and what responsibilities they should have. When this theme does arise, it is in the form of accusations that the other parent requires too much, or that he/she puts his/her own needs above those of the child. In most cases a philosophy of parental submission is advocated. One example is that of the mother who angrily told of how her children of seven and eight years, had come home and told her that their father had been very angry at them on the weekend, because they had gotten up around six in the morning and started to play noisy games. It had disturbed the father and his new partner, and especially her teenaged children. The mother stated that children should be able to play when they wanted to, and that she herself had changed her morning habits so that they would not inhibit the children's desire to play. She said that the father's actions showed that he thought too much of his own needs and welfare. He should have put his own needs aside in favour of the children's, and not let new relationships or responsibilities take up so much of his time.

**A narrative perspective on parental mediation**

The second step of the analysis was governed by my general interest in applying methods of narrative analysis to interviews as a way of understanding the process of constructing and reconstructing identity in adult life. So far, I have concentrated on how women and men make sense of acts of marital woman battering, i.e. how they define, interpret and explain these acts, how their understanding changes over time, and what it means to their self-understanding to be the victim or perpetrator of such acts. (see for example Hydén 1994; Hydén & McCarthy 1994; Hydén 1999).

I have had the opportunity to study how parents talk *about* parenthood in a special context, specifically an institutional context that occurred because the parents found themselves in a conflict. The material to which I have had access is thus observations on parenthood, and it is these observations which are the object of my study. It can be a question of expressing a conception of how things should be, about how wrong it is that things are as they are, or how important it is not to change anything. Thus, I have not witnessed how the parents *actually practiced* their parenthood; I have only heard them talk about it. However, I do not look upon their narratives primarily as a retelling of something that has happened, but rather as actions *in themselves*, as an activity through which the parents actively create their parenthood. More strongly put, one could say that I interpret this as the parents talking *about* their parenthood, at the same time as they *practice* it in their narration. Since the parents are in a situation of conflict about how the parenting should be "done", they are forced to argue for their individual sides and define in this way their contribution to the design of their parenthood. In order to gain comprehension of which kind of parenthood the parents are "doing", it is necessary to know something about what they're talking about, but also how they talk. One basic question is *who speaks to whom, and in what way?*

### **The Narrator's Position: in the name of the child**

The initial conversations were based on one parent's desire for change:

**Mother (the one spoken about) ← Child ← Father (narrator)**  
**Father (the one spoken about) ← Child ← Mother (narrator)**  
**Positions of the narrator, the one spoken about, and the child in "the tale of the problematical other".**

The other parent had already rejected this desire. It is the rejection that was the source of the contact with the Municipal Family Law Agency. This rejection was repeated during the session, usually right from the beginning. It was most often done in the form of one or more narratives about the other's faults, especially concerning the satisfaction of basic requirements of how a parent should act toward the children, and what responsibilities can reasonably be demanded. By not fulfilling these basic requirements, the parent was described as someone who has forfeited the right to have his/her desires granted, or someone who was not worthy or mature enough to make decisions about his/her contact with the children. The children were always present in the conversations – not as actual participants, but as reference points. Both mediators and parents commented constantly on the children. The basic position of the narrator was not to talk in his or her own name, but in the name of the child. By doing so, the parents spoke from extremely individualized positions. This impression was reinforced by the mediators asking the parents many questions, basically about the claims that were made by one of the parents and about the other parent's reaction to these claims. Usually the parents answered the questions by rejecting the claims. These rejections were given the form of a narration, a short monologue, which further contributed to the individualization of the talks. The parents talked to each other only infrequently, and the mediator didn't take any initiative either to encourage parental dialogues. The parents talked mostly *about* each other *to* the mediator and *in the name of the child*.

### **Storylines: The tale of the problematical other**

This narrative was generally introduced early in the session, and dominated the rest of it. It became a kind of expression that was used by all participants for the remainder of the discussion. The narrative must fulfill certain criteria if it is to be so dominant; it must be reasonably coherent and complete, it must be clear, and the narrator cannot be fumbling and insecure. Besides fulfilling these requirements, it must also be culturally rooted in current ideas of what good parenting includes. The structure of "the tale of the problematical other" can be described, very schematically, as follows:

- The narrator places the child/children close to him/herself and between him/herself and the other parent (see Figure 1).
- The narrator speaks for the child/children
- The story is related to other culturally accepted narratives of what good parenting should include.

This way of telling is not primarily gender-based. Men as well as women use this narrative form, more so if they were parents with younger children who tended to formulate this kind of narrative, more so if being a parent was the dominant factor in their lives after the divorce. What is expressed is that the parents were fighting a battle about the roles they will have in the child's life. Hence, it is a classic parental theme. As the theme of the post-nuclear family, however, it gains a special form since the parents, depending on whether or not they are the parent with custody, have such different prerequisites for having access to space in the child's life, and for controlling each other's access to the children. When parenthood is distinguished from family-hood, when the parents have less opportunities to control each other's ways of conducting parenthood, and when the role of housing parent and parent with visiting rights offers different slots of interaction-space – there are new subjects that need to be negotiated and to fight about.

"The tale of the problematical other" could be read as an answer to the other parent's claim to see more of the child. This claim was rejected by the other parent, on the ground that for the

child's sake it would be preferable that he/she not sees the other parent more often, or that the first parent be given responsibility to control the other. Allegations could be shortcomings in childcare:

### **Excerpt 3: Talking about the father in the name of the child**

**Mother:** *About the normal visiting rights, that doesn't work either... I said to Börje, for example, that we must, in the future when you meet the children, you have to ... there must be an end to the pizzas and hamburgers and stuff like that ... you'll have to start cooking real food for them,...and then he says that he hasn't got time for that... I was sick there for a few weeks, and then I took care of the kids and cooked food for them... but he sits them in front of the cable TV programs or puts on a video film when they're at his house.*

Or that the child had to suffer because of the parent's lack of dependability:

### **Excerpt 4: Talking about the mother in the name of the child**

**Father:** *Ann was... in Stockholm the weekend before and had promised Cecilia that she would drop in ... on Sunday during the day ... but she hadn't ... she hadn't done that, she called at 6 o'clock and said that she'd overslept and had missed the morning bus from Stockholm ... that's what made me call ... that she let Cecilia down ... that Sunday*

Allegations can be made about the parent's bad judgement and suspicious social relations:

### **Excerpt 5: Talking about the mother in the name of the child**

**Father:** *So I object to... to... Cecilia will be there on the weekend because of ... I think that Erik (the mother's new boyfriend) should ... first and foremost should get help for his addiction and prove that he can manage without drugs... for Cecilia's security... because there's no security there, and since he's also threatened me ... via Ann that Friday night...*

The mediators had different ways of trying to break up this form of communication. They could go in and try to halt one parent's narrative. In the example cited in Excerpt 5, where the mediator interrupted the father by making an attempt to *rephrase* the problem so that it does not accuse the mother, but rather states that the parents have a *conflict*. The mediator asked the question "What effect does your conflict have on Cecilia?" and the mother answered, "We've talked to her a little about it." Then came a conversation between the mother and the mediator, in which the mother described how the daughter wonders why she doesn't live in the house they all lived in earlier.

The mother in this example did not accept the father's description. She did not, however, formulate a total rejection, but she denied certain details ("But I didn't go there"), tried to give the narrative another content, ("Yes, but he's clean"), and questioned his moral right to tell his tales ("He can't step in and make random judgements about other people's lives"). By making reference to his duty as a parent ("I can have control of Cecilia's life ... her security"), he rejected her questioning of his right to speak as he does. This statement could be called "a patriarchal narrative in the world of the post-nuclear family". It is a heroic saga, where the father stands for security, dependability, and continuity, and the mother stands for the opposite. The mother's shortcomings were the cause of the daughter's suffering, but by having the father set up conditions for the mother's visiting rights with the daughter and checking that they are obeyed, both the mother and child could be protected.

The narrator presented himself indirectly as someone who was essentially without shortcomings or weaknesses. However, there is a gender difference in this form of narrative. Women present themselves primarily as *victims* of the Other, i.e. the husband/the father. This causes a reduction in quality of life for both mother and child. A male narrator most often presents himself as the narrative's *hero*, the one who is best suited to take the responsibility for both the children and for the fault-ridden Other, i.e. the woman/the mother. Thus the father, as well as the mother and children, can be ensured of a good quality of life.

## **Marginalized narratives**

### **Lack of cultural resonance**

In order for a narrative to become dominant in the mediation session and gain status as a basic narrative to which all participants must adapt themselves, it must first have the basic standards of narrative coherence and cultural resonance. That is, the narrative must be based on culturally rooted concepts of how a good mother and father should be. Any narrative that claims to be a narrative about the Problematic Other, but does not properly relate to other narratives about what is good, and respectively, dubious parenting, will never achieve any credibility. In the worst case, it can completely counteract its goal, and instead show the narrator in an unfavorable light. These other narratives can be entirely unspoken, but they are important since they form a basis for other narratives.

We can see in Excerpt 6 what can happen when such a cultural rooting is missing. We meet a father who got into an argument with the mediator, because his idea of how a mother should act did not agree with hers. The parents had a 3-year-old son who lives 50/50 with each parent, an arrangement that was sliding more and more into living with the father and visiting rights with the mother. The father now wanted single custody, since he thinks that the mother does not fulfill the requirements of good motherhood. To strengthen his message he gave an example. The mediator did not agree with the basic premises:

#### **Excerpt 6:**

***Father:** If Conny is to be with Agneta on a Friday afternoon, for example, then what does Agneta do? ... well, she starts getting ready for the evening as early as three or four in the afternoon and everything... yes, then that whole afternoon with Conny is gone ... the whole morning the next day.*

***Mediator:** Mmm, but I'm thinking like this ... it's not unusual ... that the parents hire a babysitter and get ready for it when they're going out some evening, and that takes time...*

***Father:** Why does one have to use the weekend then for...*

***Mediator:** I can't see anything compulsive in that ... and I can't see either that... the necessity for completely giving up if it happens that she wants to go out and have a good time.*

***Father:** No, no ... but you don't have to make a habit of it.*

***Mediator:** No, you don't.*

***Father:** Don't have to ... because I think that it's still a child we're dealing with here, eh, that we have responsibility for.*

***Mediator:** It's so... but even as a single parent you have the right to a social life.*

Since the father's narrative lacked cultural roots in the mediator's conceptual world, he will not appear to be the responsible father that he wants to appear to. His wish to get single custody can come to be understood differently than what he had in mind. It risks a change from being seen as a desire to protect the child and at the same time support good motherhood, to his appearing as controlling in an inappropriate way. Perhaps he was out to dominate and exercise power in general?

#### **To speak in ones' own name**

Yet another example of the difficulty of giving a narrative the status of a basic one which can dominate the conversation is the female narrator who spoke for herself when she rejected the father's wish to see his two-year-old daughter. To speak thus as a parent without having the child as a reference point creates obvious problems in the mediation session.

In Excerpt 7 we meet a mother, about half an hour into the session. The father wanted permission for regular visiting rights with his daughter, which the mother had rejected. He had not seen her at all for several months. The mother had four other children with two other earlier fathers, whom they saw very seldom. She declared herself happy with the arrangement, since she claimed that they were free to seek contact whenever they wanted to, and were old enough to do that. The mother felt that the father's son from an earlier marriage was not good company for her daughter, and since the father was the housing parent for the boy, he could not guarantee that

they would never meet. The mother began by telling about the father in the pattern of “the Problematic Other”, but her narrative was questioned by the father as well as, to some extent, by the mediator. The mediator persevered in emphasizing the importance of the child’s spending time with both parents, and tried to encourage an arrangement with the father with which the mother could feel safe. The mother gave up her attempts to speak for the daughter, and started speaking for herself:

#### **Excerpt 7:**

***Mother:** Right now I feel ... I have asked the social welfare agency for six months in which we could be completely alone together ... so we can organize our .. yes, what do you call it .. little future or whatever... despite everything, even if we separate then it’s been a little chaotic here and there, and I’m unemployed, and so much is happening, getting used to the day care center and all that ... and I should be looking for a job at the employment agency... and it’s like I haven’t got the strength for this stuff right now ... I just want it to be the kids and me, and see to it that we.... Well, get some kind of a boost upwards, eh .... And I’ve asked for that ... six months...*

***Mediator:** But how did you ... asked the social welfare agency...they can’t do anything about that...*

***Mother:** They said that they can exert pressure... because sometimes you just want to have time for yourself as a human being ... to start yourself up.*

This kind of narration marginalized the mother to a great extent in the session. After it was presented, the mediator went in very actively to bring about a visiting rights plan. The result was a regular visiting time of only one day each time. A time was also booked for a new mediation session to see how it had all worked out, and a goal of increasing the visiting rights was set up.

#### **Conclusion: Post-nuclear- family parenting**

About one-fourth of the divorced parents in Sweden attend to parental mediation. An increasing number of parents are making use of this opportunity. While it was earlier a resource mostly used by couples who found themselves locked in conflicts, parental mediation is now also used by parents who are more undecided and confused, rather than battling. Parental mediation in the Swedish version is not primarily focused on the kind of agreement that is reached between the parents, but is concentrated on the efforts to assist the parents in the process of reaching one. Given its character of a well-structured conversation, parental mediation in the Swedish version has no fixed form, but rather is constituted by the series of moves that parents and mediators enact.

One denominator for the transition between nuclear family and post-nuclear family seems to be associated with some statement showing to what extent and in what way the parents are *entitled* to the children, and vice versa. The statements of entitlement also could be understood as manifestations of the parents’ wishes and needs to be acknowledged by the children. I see this as a favorable point of departure for parental mediation. With two parents taking an interest in the child, there will be energy and desire to invest in the sessions. Given this favorable circumstance, the entry into post-nuclear family life thus poses problems. For the visiting parent – in most cases the father – they consist of problems of forming a close relationship with the children on a limited time slot, in a place that is not a joint home, and winning the support of the housing parent to do so. For the housing parent – in most cases the mother – the problems are of a different order. She is the “giving” parent in the constellation of visiting and housing parents. She has to conduct a parenthood based on almost full time care and responsibility for the children, and at the same time let him take over some parts of her sphere of mothering. The dependent and advancing position as well as the giving and supporting position are both demanding in their own ways and offer different kinds of bases for the development of the parent-child relationship. They also offer a specific prerequisite for the interaction of post-nuclear family parenthood.

In the growing debate and in studies of troubled parenthood after the divorce, the cause of the trouble has basically been identified as old conflicts and distress originating from the marriage or from the time of the break-up. In the kind of parental mediation I studied, attempts to move into

old conflicts were regularly blocked, especially if the attempts included attacks on the other party. In this situation, the significance of the place- and time dimensions of parenthood comes to the forefront. In the nuclear family the joint home is taken for granted as a place for the development of a parental relationship, as well as a parent-children relationship. The link between what I have called in this article "the link between parenthood and family-hood" is such a close connection that it is normally not acknowledged. After the divorce this connection is broken. In most cases this broken connection is experienced, but still not acknowledged. This lack of acknowledgment causes unarticulated problems and conflict. I would suggest that some alterations need to be made in the methods of conducting parental mediation, alterations that will make it possible to focus on the broken link between parenthood and family-hood and on the new conditions for parenthood this rupture causes.

Faced with the task of reorganizing parenthood, most of the parents in the study with young children aimed at what I have called a *homogeneous family form* after the divorce. That is, a family consisting of one parent and children living together in a close relationship, with the parent having a generally unrestricted entitlement to the child. In order for this to function, the parent must also have control over the child's contact with the other parent, as well as control over the division of responsibility between the parents. Conflicts come into existence when both parents try to reach the goal of creating a homogeneous family with the children, or when one parent opposes the idea of homogeneity and looks for a solution based more on heterogeneity. The *heterogeneous* family form can be described as one based on the idea that it is possible to build a childhood on differences and dissimilarities. The notion of children's need for security is basic in both family forms. In the homogeneous family it is mostly synonymous with predictability and repetition. In the heterogeneous family's version it is based rather on the idea that it is advantageous to the children that they learn to deal with different situations. Defining security in this way excludes security built on too much repetition, since it gives the children too little experiences, and therefore produces insecure children. The narrator's positioning of him- or herself as the representative of the child constituted a major discursive feature in the parents' narrations, whether or not the argument followed the lines of launching the homogeneous- or the heterogeneous family forms.

I see the aiming at forming a homogeneous family after the divorce, as an unacknowledged attempt to solve the problems these new conditions causes, without really identifying them. The problems of being a housing parent with almost full-time care and responsibility and at the same time having to be "the giving one" in relation to the other parent could be "solved" if one parent were given unrestricted entitlement and power over the child. Similarly, the problems of being a visiting parent, given a limited time slot and being "the dependent" in relation to the other parent could also be "solved" if one parent were given unrestricted entitlement and power over the child. However, parents trying to develop a homogeneous family form that requires complete exclusion of the other parent and sole power over the child found him- or herself in conflict with the mediator. Development along these lines appears contrary to Swedish family law, as it would decrease the children's rights to both parents. It would also be contrary to the fact that a parent may be divorced – but not from his or her children. \*)

### **Endnote**

(1) *The study was financed by The National Swedish Board of Health and Welfare and The Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Services A first report, "Samarbetssamtal – socialt arbete med föräldrar" ("Parental Mediation – social work with parents") is being published by The National Swedish Board of Health and Welfare. The report is based on the entire collection of data, and is a description of parental mediation as a working method.*

---

\*) A revised version of the article "For the child's sake: parents and social workers discuss conflict-filled parental relations after divorce", published in *Child and Family Social Work* 2001, 6,

## References

- Bak, M. (1997) *Enemorfamilien*. [The single-mother family]. Frydenlund, Köpenhamn.
- Beck, U. & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (1995) *The Normal Chaos of Love*. Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Boh, K. (1989) European family life patterns – a reappraisal. In: *Changing Patterns of European Family Life* (eds K. Boh, M. Bak, C. Clason, M. Pankratova, J. Qvortrup, G. Sgritta & K. Waerness) Routledge, London.
- Buchanan, C.M.; Maccoby, E.E. & Dornbusch, S.M. (1996) *Adolescents after Divorce*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Burke, K. (1969) *A Grammar of Motives*. University of California Press, Los Angeles.
- Cobb, S. (1994) A Narrative Perspective on Mediation: Toward the Materialization of the "Storytelling" Metaphor. In: *New Directions in Mediation. Communication Research and Perspectives* (eds J.P. Folger & T.S. Jones) pp.48-66. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks.
- Edwards, D. & Potter, J. (1992) *Discursive Psychology*. Sage Publications, London.
- Giddens, A. (1992) *The Transformation of Intimacy*. Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Golombok, S. & Tasker, F. (1994). Children in lesbian and gay families. *Annual Review of Sex Research*, **5**, 73-100.
- Halldén, G. (1991) The child as project and the child as being: parents' ideas as frames of reference. *Children & Society* **5**, 334-346.
- Harré, R. (1983) *Personal Being*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Harré, R. & Gillet, G. (1994) *The Discursive Mind*. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks.
- Henriksson, B. (1995) *Risk Factor Love*. Dissertation. Dept. of social work, Institutionen för socialt arbete, University of Göteborg.
- Hoffman, L. (1981) *Foundations of Family Therapy*. Basic Books, New York.
- Hydén, M. (1994) *Woman Battering as Marital Act. The Construction of a Violent Marriage*. Scandinavian University Press, Oslo.
- Hydén, M. & McCarthy, I. (1994) Woman Battering and Father-Daughter Incest Disclosure: Discourses of Denial and Acknowledgement. *Discourse and Society*, **5**, 543-565.
- Hydén, M. (2000) *Samarbetssamtal – socialt arbete med föräldrar*. [Parental Mediation – Social Work with Parents] Socialstyrelsen, Stockholm.
- Hydén, L-C & Hydén, M. (2000) Routinisation in Parental Mediation Talk. Paper presented at ICLAPS Conference in Cardiff, UK.
- Knoll, T. (1995) *Not a piece of cake. Ambivalence about female-headed families*. Lund dissertations in sociology 9. Lund University Press, Lund.
- Levin, I. (1994) *Stefamilien – variasjon og mangfold*. [The stepfamily. Variation and variety] Aventura, Oslo.
- Minuchin, S. (1974) *Families and Family Therapy*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Morgan, D. (1996) *Family Connections*. Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Statistiska Centralbyrån (SCB) (1997). *Välfärd och ojämlikhet i ett 20-årsperspektiv 1975-1995*. [Welfare and inequality in a 20-years perspective] Levnadsförhållanden, Rapport nr 91, 269-285.
- Simpson, B. (1998) *Changing Families. An Ethnographic Approach to Divorce and Separation*. Berg, Oxford.
- Smart, C. & Neale, B. (1999) *Family Fragments?* Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Visher, E. B. & Visher, J. S. (1990) Dynamics of successful stepfamilies. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, **14**, 3-12.
- Wallerstein, J. & Kelly, B. (1980) *Surviving the Breakup*. Basic Books, New York.

**CHAIR'S REPORT ON THE 48TH ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF  
THE INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION ON COUPLE AND FAMILY RELATIONS  
Stockholm, Sweden, 2001**

## **Introduction**

Our Berlin conference only seemed as if it were last week and here we were gathering again in the Stockholm just over a year later. With this in mind, time and our perception of it was to prove one of the main themes of the conference.

Participation numbers were once again strong with over one hundred participants from twenty-one countries attending. As I moved amongst our colleagues I was struck by the warm and relaxed atmosphere of the conference. Stockholm and its people seem to exude a calm and friendly manner and it appeared that these attributes contributed to the ambience of our gathering.

Our sincere thanks go to Mrs Eva Elfver-Lindstrom and Mrs Ingrid Regno for their wonderful efforts in organising the conference. In addition I wish to thank Mr Lars Petterson from Socialstyrelsen for his organisation's support and sponsorship of the conference.

We were honoured to have Mrs Ingela Thalen, the Swedish Minister for Families and Children to open the conference. She took time to outline some of the major initiatives by the Swedish government to support couples and families, particularly as they relate to increased work demands and its effect on family life. On behalf of all participants I thank the Swedish government for its support of the conference.

Mrs Gerlind Richards, our General Secretary, has continued her herculean and entirely voluntary efforts throughout the year ensuring that the Commission runs smoothly. We are all very much in her debt. The Board of the Commission is investigating ways of sharing this large load somewhat more equitably. It must be remembered that it is our continued success that is causing much of this increased pressure thus the Board would be keen to hear of any ideas to manage the increased demands.

I would like to acknowledge the thought provoking efforts of our keynote speakers, Professor Lars Dencik from Denmark, Professor Alfons Vansteenwegen from Belgium, Dr Margareta Hyden from Sweden, and Mr Danny Ford from Australia for his final plenary presentation. I would also like to give a special thanks to our workshop presenters; Leslie Young and Annie Blunt (United Kingdom), Maureen Luyens (Belgium), Justice Neil Buckley (Australia), Martin Koschorke (Germany), Bertil Sanden (Sweden), Claire Missen (Republic of Ireland), Professor Wilhelmina Kalu (Nigeria) and Chantal Lebatard (France).

Our hardworking group leaders were Simone Bavery (South Africa), Derek Hill (United Kingdom), Judy Cunnington (United Kingdom), Dianne Gibson (Australia), Martin Wiklander (Sweden) and John Chambers (United Kingdom). Leading groups at an international multi-lingual conference is not an easy task and it was carried out to a very high standard.

## **Thoughts and Discussions**

Of the seven conferences that I have attended so far I believe that this conference topic was the most challenging to analyse and debate. The topic 'A question of time' is a short, deceptively simple phrase. However, its application to close personal relationships between adults and, adults and children raises a myriad of opinions and perspectives. There is no doubt that the topic was contemporary and timely. It caused passionate debate amongst participants and it was obvious



from the beginning of the conference that this was a topic that people were keen to debate and grapple with.

One of the challenges of organising an international conference for people working in the personal relationships field is to ensure that the topic is useful to a range of practitioners and cultures. As has been mentioned at an earlier conference we all experience the gift of twenty-four hours. In a general sense the idea of time is common to all cultures and individuals, however how time is defined and experienced occurs in many disparate ways.

In this report I will attempt to distil some of the rich and complex perspectives put forward. I cannot hope to capture all the debates but was fortunate to hear enough of them to make some comment. In addition I am mindful that our conference attracts many people who are practitioners and policy makers with respect to couples and families. There is therefore always a sense as to how the learning from our conferences can be applied to therapeutic and policy challenges. Our conferences have always attempted to be relevant and applied. This is one of the great strengths of our gatherings in that people are willing to tackle very difficult topics, analyse them, debate them and then apply what they have learned in their professions and their lives. This has been my habit and I suspect the habit of many others.

The national setting and immediate environment always influences our conferences. The strong sense of welcome generated by the conference organisers and by the people of Stockholm encouraged and reinforced an openness and confidence within our debates. There was a sense that here was a city and a people that had thought about the art of living. There was a sense of balance that permeated the conference. This does not imply a lack of urgency but that working, domestic life and relationships needed to occur equitably within the day.

An important concept that was raised quite early in the conference was the relationship between time and silence. Do we have time for just being? Is there a personal use for silence? Is there a collective use for silence? It was debated that time for a personal silence, a meditative silence was something that in recent years needed some vigorous defence. Mass media and the IT revolution attempted to fill up free space during the day. However many participants felt that time should be made for a personal silence just to think or even relax, a time for the individual to re-charge and reflect.

It was also argued that collective silence could have a positive personal or relationship influence. This could manifest itself by simply being with a partner or loved one, or it could be more formally exhibited as in collective prayer or meditation. It is interesting to note that some commented that in order to achieve either personal, couple or collective silent time considerable planning had to occur. Life is intrinsically busy and full of distractions therefore couples often need to consciously take time to intensify their experiences. The mundane, the workaday, uses a lot of the available time so that any personal time available to the couple can be extraordinarily precious. At the same time we need to be careful not to take a too western or Euro centric view of this issue in that in many developing countries a couple's entire time is taken up with work or survival, and providing food and shelter for their families.

Another interesting question raised was as to whether power and time are connected? This can be particularly relevant with respect to the relationships between adults and children or adolescents. Children can be very sensitive to time and wanting to know exactly when and where things will happen. Because they are still adjusting to their environment some control over their time and how it will be spent increases life's predictability and therefore their sense of control and security. Adults, in general, see themselves as the custodians of a family's time and thus children can sometimes feel a loss of control. A parent or carer will generally dictate the use of that time. This control can become oppressive from the child's perspective.

It is also possible within adult relationships that one person may try to organise or dominate the time available to the couple. It is obvious that this can lead to a sense of powerlessness or frustration. Both individuals may accuse the other of being the one who is trying to dictate the terms in the use of time. Professor Vansteenwegen was eloquent on this point in his example of the couple that each week had some time apart while one pursued some exercise and a quick drink with friends while the other was at home. The one who was at home felt somewhat

abandoned and time passed very slowly, while for the other time passed very quickly and felt upset that she was criticised for this recreation. The same two hours were experienced by both but in fundamentally different ways. This was no small matter and caused a serious rift in the relationship.

At the other end of the scale, at the macro level, the question was raised whether national goals and ideologies also affect the use of time. An example put forward was the Israeli kibbutz. If a country's efforts are directed primarily towards defending itself then it may institute policies that are highly directive with respect to how couples and families use their time. If a country is falling behind economically it may exhort or force its population to work harder therefore, either directly or indirectly, affecting the amount of time available to couples and families. These are relatively extreme examples but are indicative of how national policies can have a significant impact on the use of personal and family time.

A challenging recent phenomenon has been the increased ageing of the population in developed countries along with a corresponding decrease in birth rate. Some national leaders are now warning their ageing workforces that all may need to work longer to maintain standards of living. The younger generation will not be large enough to generate enough government revenue to support an ageing population and most governments are not looking to expand their migrant intakes to any significant extent. We are yet to see what effect this will have on families and relationships, however if parents and grand-parents are being encouraged to work well into their sixties or beyond this could have a significant effect on extended family and inter-generational family interaction. More and more time of the extended family will be spent working. This may not all be negative in that older people will be encouraged to extend their careers and remain economically active but at what personal or family cost? In a few years this may be an interesting topic for a future conference.

Another 'hot' topic during our conference was the effect that the IT phenomenon was having on couple and family time. What will be the effect of e-mail and text messages on relationships? Are we just at the beginning of this revolution, and as practitioners and policy makers are we prepared? In some working groups it was said that people might not seek as much eye-to-eye contact. It was also expressed that over long distances the new technology can be a force for good by reinforcing family and intimate relationships. In one sense the IT revolution has been ongoing since the invention of the telephone, a piece of technology that may be painful to the hip-pocket but appears to be universally acclaimed as an aide to long distance relationships. It was also expressed that the new technology was superior to TV in that it was highly interactive albeit at the detriment of face-to-face contact.

It was pointed out by one speaker that we can get carried away with worrying about the minutiae of time and relationships in that, until the twentieth century, most people spent their entire lives in a 100 kilometre radius. Our ability to travel and to communicate over large distances has expanded the number of possible relationships and, ironically, there is an accompanying pressure to maintain those relationships. The counter argument is that this relatively modern phenomenon of long-distance or even IT enhanced intimate relationships is likely to increase in frequency and thus is an area of ongoing challenge and research for all who work in the couple and family relationships field.

One subtle but fundamental point that was raised throughout the conference was the time and value that couples and families gave to being together. If this was a fundamental commitment by the couple or the family then the relationship could be a place where uniqueness was valued. Valuing uniqueness struck a strong chord with many participants in that it was felt it may be something we are in danger of losing, particularly within developed nations. Participants from non-western countries did not feel this sense of loss of uniqueness as strongly although they did have a sense of some early warning signs.

On a slightly lighter note it was observed by our Swedish colleagues that they have noticed more time is being given to touching and intimacy. During social interaction they felt that appropriate touching was being used more frequently. This was seen to be an improvement on 'normal' Swedish social contact, which they felt was sometimes a little stilted. Touching was seen to increase the warmth of social interaction. Conversely, some participants from Latin countries felt

that there was too much touching, in fact, it had become intrusive even claustrophobic! Without drawing too fine a point, this disparity in views did illustrate that while the quest for intimacy is seemingly universal it is not without its limits at both ends of the spectrum.

Another theme emerging from the conference was that people thought that time pressures could contribute to a sense of loss, as if there was something missing from their lives, even though materially life was reasonable. It was observed that people who had had near death experiences appeared to value the now much more. How can we value the now without having to go to the extremes of a near death experience? This was seen to be a fundamental challenge in that life appeared full of experiences but contained very little time to reflect on them and even less time to value them. Is the now beginning to disappear from our lives in that many people are working to tight deadlines and thus are very future oriented, striving to reach a range of personal and professional goals? No definite answers emerged from the conference but there was a strong sense that the now was being lost in mass media trivia and spurious personal objectives.

It could be argued that some of the changes occurring within the post-modern family or couple is part of the spread of democracy, in its most general sense. Some women are experiencing an increased economic independence and thus more control over their lives. Some women are now able to predict and control their time usage with more confidence. An increasing number of children have access to sophisticated communication technologies, which can liberate them, to some extent, from a traditional lack of power. The growth of democracy can be painful and difficult as more voices are heard but a voice that is being acted upon is better than no voice or one that is ignored. If some males, in roles as traditional breadwinners, are feeling threatened or usurped it may be that this is a necessary part of democratic principles taking root in couple and family relationships. These principles are by no means universal and could be seen as threatening family stability in some cultures. However increasing democracy within couples and families is an emerging process and will be an area for ongoing analysis.

At a more grass roots level the conference also debated how the couple or family could remain a sanctuary for intimate relationships. Do we give sufficient time to this fundamental human activity? In a number of western countries the divorce rate is approaching fifty per cent, there appears to be a revolving door approach to child rearing and day-care is as much for the parents as it is for the children. The notion of sanctuary is quite an evocative one particularly when the couple and family experience strong, sometimes overwhelming demands on their time. Sanctuary within the family may be an ideal in that it evokes notions of acceptance, love and uniqueness but it is an ideal that appeared to have the support of all participants. It is such concepts that link our participants and our conferences. There are many differences but one of the great strengths of our meetings is the time and space to look at what is common and what is not, learn to value both, and even change from entrenched positions.

## **Summary**

From our discussions it was apparent that time and its potential use within the couple and family context challenged all participants in an intellectual and professional sense. As mentioned at the beginning of this report the topic was deceptively simple but infinite in its complexity. The potential of time, or time and its potential use, is an intriguing matter for all who work in the personal relationships field. It is ebbing away at the same rate but can we control it, can we minimise its waste, can we use it to our advantage, particularly as it applies to our intimate and family relationships?

In a sense there is an inevitability about time and relationships in that they will both pass no matter what the quality of the relationship. Given that life is finite it would appear a fundamental goal of human existence to enhance significant personal relationships as much as possible.

What did this conference determine with respect to "A question of time"? I was not party to all discussions but I do have a sense of some of the conclusions reached. At a practical level there was the issue of the intimate relationship constantly being interrupted by extraneous demands,

children, friends, media, telephone, work to name a few. In some ways this was seen as a battle for time and space. Couples need to be vigilant and cooperative to ensure that their time together has its reflective and quiet moments, that togetherness is not forgotten because of other more strident demands.

At a more macro level there was sense of the rhythm of time, the circle of time and its fundamental influence on all us. The conference encouraged considerable reflection on our own existence and thus the debates were more personal rather than clinically professional. There was a sense that participants needed to reflect with both head and heart in order to arrive at conclusions. A number of participants said this was quite enriching in that they had the opportunity to assimilate their own experiences with their professional lives.

A strong sense emerged that while not all the answers were uncovered the conference allowed many participants the time to analyse carefully the demands on families and relationships in a variety of cultural situations. Once again the “I” of western cultures met the “we” of traditional cultures. This is a gross over-simplification but it as an enriching and powerful aspect of our conference.

If I was forced to choose a theme that emerged from our debates it was that time is precious. It must be utilised carefully if couples and families are to achieve balance and fulfilment. Families do not always come in traditional forms; in fact childhood, partnership and family life is increasingly in a state of flux, challenging many professional and developmental models. Once again our chosen field of couple and family relationships must look again, investigate what is happening and give assistance to those who want to improve or save their intimate relationships.

As Professor Lars Dencik said, time is about change, and the pace of that change is increasing. Our challenge is to assist couples and families to use time and change to their advantage, for time and change to enhance relationships and to have the skills to assist when time and change threaten to overwhelm.

**Paul Tyrrell**

**Chairman**

**International Commission on Couple and Family Relations**

Canberra, Australia

August 2001