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Trends that Affect Parents and Children in Our Present World

1. The recent Report of the Secretary-General of UN on the 'Follow-up to the tenth anniversary of the International Year of the Family and beyond' states that "the importance of the family in social development deserves to be placed high on the agenda of the Commission for Social Development, especially as it relates to the achievement of the three pillars of the Copenhagen Conference: reduction of poverty, full employment and decent work and social integration". Looking ahead to the work that should be done in the next years, it also proposes "to that end the following major themes [...] to guide the preparations for the observance of the twentieth anniversary:
 - Confronting family poverty and social exclusion;
 - Ensuring work-family balance;
 - Advancing social integration and intergenerational solidarity within families and the communities"¹.
2. A study published in *Social Forces* by Shelley Clark and Catherine Kenney, which explores the implications of the divorce revolution on parental financial support of adult children, provides more evidence on the correlation between those topics in the context of intergenerational relationship between parents and children².
3. During the last decades, society has witnessed in many parts of the world changes that have affected relationships between parents and children remarkably and modified the way those three topics should be approached. As Clark and Kenney put it, "among the most notable trends are a prolonged financial dependence of adult children on their parents, a dramatic rise in the rate of divorce and remarriage and a steady increase in women's labor force participation and control over assets and wealth".

Increasing stage of 'adulthood'

4. Much recent scholarly and media attention has been given to what is sometimes dubbed the emerging stage of 'adulthood' or 'boomerang kids.' It is becoming increasingly common for children older than 18 to remain at home, supported at least

¹ *'Follow-up to the tenth anniversary of the International Year of the Family and beyond - Report of the Secretary-General'* (29 November 2010).

² *Shelley Clark and Catherine Kenney, 'Is the United States Experiencing a "Matrilineal Tilt?": Gender, Family Structures and Financial Transfers to Adult Children'* (*Social Forces*, Volume 88, Number 4, June 2010, pp. 1753-1776).

partially by their parents, particularly while they are completing schooling³. In fact, never have so many members of younger generations been so dependent on their parents and grandparents for so long. In the US, for example, “41 percent of so-called ‘sandwich generation’ parents continue to provide at least some financial support to their young adult children”, according to the 2010 Families & Money Survey⁴. The survey polled adults who have at least one child between the ages of 23-28, as well as at least one living parent. In Europe, a study sponsored by Eurostat found that in 2008, about 51 million young adults (45.6%), i.e. 33 million persons aged 18-24 and 17.5 million people aged 25-34, lived in the same dwelling as their parent(s) for some reason. Countries can be grouped into clusters, with, on the one hand, the northern Member States, where young adults tend to leave the parental home earlier, and on the other hand, a group of countries composed of most southern countries, as well as some new Member States, where young adults tend to stay longer with their parent(s)⁵.”

5. Beyond the economic realities, there are some complicated psychological bonds that keep able-bodied college graduates on their parents’ payroll. Unlike the ‘Woodstock generation’, this generation aren’t building their adult identity in reaction to their parents’ way of life. Just as in the 1960s young men and women crowed about not trusting anyone over 30, these days they can’t live without “the same hyper involved parents who got minivan fatigue from ferrying their kids to extracurricular activities and turned college admission into a competitive sport”, as psychiatrist Alvin Rosenfeld says⁶. “They’ve convinced themselves they know how to lead a good life, and they want to get that for their kids, no matter what”. And, by the time those children reach their 20s, says market researcher Neil Howe, “their desires for the future are often indistinguishable from the desires of their parents. The ‘Me Generation’ has simply turned into the ‘Mini-Me Generation’⁷.”

Increasing rates of divorce and remarriage

6. In the US, three out of four divorced people legally remarry, and they usually do so less than four years after divorce. Consequently, almost one-half of the marriages include a remarriage for at least one of the spouses. It will most likely be a second marriage, but it could also be a third, fourth, or more. And one important change in remarriage rates between the 80s and the 90s has been observed —a decrease in rates of legal marriage and a concomitant increase in rates of cohabitation. Further, most remar-

³ Fussell and Furstenberg, *‘On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy (University of Chicago Press, 2005)*.

⁴ Lieberman Research Worldwide, *‘The 2010 Families & Money survey’ (Charles Schwab & Co., Inc., February 2010)*.

⁵ Marta Choroszewicz, Pascal Wolff, *‘Population and social conditions’ (Eurostat, Statistics in Focus, 50/2010)*.

⁶ Alvin Rosenfeld, *‘The Over-Scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap’*.

⁷ Neil Howe et al., *‘Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation’ (Vintage, 2000)*.

rying couples cohabit prior to legal marriage, and the length of cohabitation ranges from a few days to many years.

7. Internationally, research focuses on rates of remarriage after divorce. In general, reports from Western countries show remarriage trends that are similar to the US. However, in some Asian countries divorced and remarried families experience more stigma than in Western cultures, making it difficult to collect accurate statistics on step families, who can present themselves as a first-married, nuclear family in many situations. In Nigeria, where marital unions are relatively stable, and fertility is high, men and women remarry very quickly and at high rates after death or divorce. The traditional Muslim Hausa society of northern Nigeria has one of the highest rates of divorce and remarriage in the world. Apparently this is due to wives' fleeing oppressive family situations within a society that expects them to be married. Reports from the Dominican Republic explain that marriage and remarriage rates have decreased in the 1990s for economic reasons; women are choosing single parenting over marriage to men who are increasingly finding themselves unemployed due to a worsening job market. In much of the world, very little is known about divorce and remarriage patterns or about any other types of marital transitions⁸.
8. Consequently, many of the biological parents of today's children are no longer married to each other and have acquired new spouses. The introduction of step parents, who may or may not have previous biological children of their own, undoubtedly complicates intergenerational dialogue between parents and children. Who gets what assistance and who makes these decisions can be a touchy issue, especially when norms about stepparent and stepchild relationships are not clearly defined⁹. Step parents often put immense pressure on themselves to love and get on well with their new partner's children. But in reality, it may be impossible to ever love a step child as if it were your own. This can leave many new step parents feeling guilty and inadequate. Accepting the reality of the relationship can help both you and the children to allow time for feelings to develop.
9. Research also suggests that step mothers tend to have a more difficult time in their role than step fathers. And for 'step mums' who don't already have kids of their own, the new responsibilities can feel overwhelming, while many step fathers take on a lot of responsibility —emotionally, practically and financially— but may feel they have no power and aren't appreciated. And if they have children of their own, they may spend less time with them than with their step children, which can lead to feelings of guilt

⁸ Cfr. *Remarriage - Factors Affecting Likelihood of Remarriage after Divorce or Death of Spouse, Marital Relationships, Remarriage In Later Life* (*The Marriage and Family Encyclopedia*).

⁹ Cherlin, A. J and Furstenberg, F. F., Jr., 'Step families in the United States: A reconsideration' (*Annual Review of Sociology*, 20, 359-381, 1994).

and resentment, while divorced mothers enjoy far greater contact with, and support from, their adult biological children than do divorced fathers¹⁰.

10. The bulk of the literature focuses on the impact of divorce and remarriage on upward transfers of emotional support, social contact and care from children to their parents. Both the reciprocity and the solidarity perspective would predict that divorce and remarriage would weaken upward transfers, particularly to fathers. Specifically, if the divorce occurred before the child left the home, there will be reduced contact with, and support from, non-custodial parents (primarily fathers) resulting in a diminished sense of obligation (reciprocity) as well as reduced closeness (solidarity).
11. When using marital satisfaction and fairness toward the respondent as indicators, we find that at low levels of marital quality, there is indeed a smaller increase in depressive symptoms after divorce than at higher levels of quality. Even in poor marriages, however, the effect on depressive symptoms is positive, showing that people do not improve their well-being after divorce. Kalmijn finds that remarriage further weakens ties between parents and their adult children, with this effect being stronger for fathers than mothers. He interprets these findings through the lens of intergenerational solidarity and argues that women in their role as “kin keepers” are primarily responsible for maintaining family ties¹¹.
12. Divorce tends to reduce household wealth, especially for women, while remarriage increases it. Research shows that a person who marries—and stays married—accumulates nearly twice as much personal wealth as a person who is single or divorced. And for those who divorce, it’s a bit more expensive than giving up half of everything they own. They lose, on average, three-fourths of their personal net worth¹².
13. Clark and Kenney suggest that men’s behaviors are consistent with a ‘mating strategy,’ while women are more likely to follow a ‘parental investment strategy’¹³. While step fathers may to some extent compete for mothers’ attention and resources, step fathers appear to augment the amount of money mothers give to their biological children. Much less is known about step mothers’ willingness to support the biological children of their husbands. It appears, however, that women’s dominant parental investment strategy provides relatively little motivation for investing in stepchildren either at young or at older ages¹⁴.

¹⁰ Judith P. M. Soons and Matthijs Kalmijn, ‘Is Marriage More Than Cohabitation? Well-Being Differences in 30 European Countries’ (*Journal of Marriage and Family* 71, December 2009, 1141 – 1157).

¹¹ Kalmijn, M. and C. Monden, ‘Are the effects of divorce on well-being dependent on marital quality?’ (*Journal of Marriage and Family* 68, 1197-1213, 2006).

¹² Jay L. Zagorsky, ‘Marriage and divorce’s impact on wealth’ (*Journal of Sociology*, vol. 41 no. 4, 406-424, 2005).

¹³ Shelley Clark and Catherine Kenney, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Hofferth, S. & K. Anderson, ‘Biological and Stepfather Investment in Children.’ (*Annual meetings of the American Sociological Association*, August 2001).

14. Considerable research finds that mothers' stronger ties to their biological children facilitate far greater upward transmissions of emotional support and contact with mothers than with fathers¹⁵. Building on these studies, we find that women may not only influence upward transfers, but also direct downward cash flows, which provides more evidence that as marriage breaks down, we are seeing what sociologist Frank Furstenberg has called a "matrilineal tilt"¹⁶. That is, as Bradford Wilcox puts it, "children who experience divorce or single parenthood typically end up relying much more on mom than dad. In this case, the adult children of divorce generally can depend more on mom than dad when they need a financial helping hand¹⁷."

Increasing participation of women in labor force

15. This topic leads us to considering work-family reconciliation, as it has considerable implications in demography, equality and well-being issues. Chinchilla et al. point out that "initial research in this field focused on analyzing the role of work-family conflict. Today's researchers are focusing on work-family enrichment. Researchers who study conflict argue that having a lot of responsibilities in several different life areas (such as family, work, sports, and politics) can lead to negative behavior and foster stress and anxiety. Research findings tell us that there are several healthy work-related benefits for the employee who is playing an active role at work and in the family. Being an active parent as well as a productive worker facilitates the development of competencies and pleasurable experiences. Evidence suggests that the benefits of being involved in family responsibilities and activities can be gratifying and increase self-esteem, which might in turn strengthen the person's performance and commitment to their job. Therefore, involvement in more than one role at the same time —e.g., family and work— creates positive experiences that carry over from one sphere to another. Organizations should encourage employees to engage in family activities, because they will be energized and more productive¹⁸."

16. But multi-tasking is not always easy and sometimes even detrimental. From the experience in Sweden, Himmestrand warns that "we know today from attachment psychology and neurobiology that early separation of infants from parents can, in some children, create chronically low thresholds for stress. This can lower the threshold for anxiety for the rest of the child's life. Early separation would be expected to lead to a less resilient future generation. Medical technology today can actually measure stress

¹⁵ Kalmijn, M., 'Gender Differences in the Effects of Divorce, Widowhood, and Remarriage on Intergenerational Support: Does Marriage Protect Fathers?' (*Social Forces* 85, 1079-1104, March 2007).

¹⁶ Frank F. Furstenberg Jr., "On a New Schedule: Transitions to Adulthood and Family Change" (*Transition to Adulthood Volume 20 Number 1 Spring 2010*).

¹⁷ Bradford Wilcox, "The Matrilineal Tilt in the Support of Adult Children" (*Family Scholars*, 2010).

¹⁸ Chinchilla et al., 'Balancing Work-family: no matter where you are' (*HRD Press, Massachusetts 2010*).

levels in the saliva easily and clearly, making stress research easy to perform, also in small children. We also know today that early exposure to large groups of peers leads to peer orientation, which has detrimental results on psychological maturation, learning, and the transference of culture between generations¹⁹.” From Canada, Neufeld has explored in detail the causal connections in these phenomena, showing that peer orientation is the root of bullying, teen age gangs, promiscuity and the flat-lining of culture which are all visible to various extent in most western countries²⁰.

17. Fogli and Veldkamp propose to overcome it with a model of ‘learning and belief’. The labor force participation of mothers with young children, suggest the economists, is strongly influenced by mothers’ beliefs about the effects of that participation on their children, which are shaped by observing the children of their peers in the labor force. This interaction of action and belief —each informing the other— underlies an economic model that helps explain much about the trends in work patterns and attitudes of women. They contend that after women learn through observation about the impact on children of mothers taking jobs, they modify prior beliefs and use the new ones to guide their decisions about whether to take jobs. As more women join the labor force, more information about child outcomes becomes available, exerting a stronger influence on other mothers, and accelerating participation trends.
18. Added to this mix is women’s increasing control over individual and household resources, through both their increased participation in the labor force and their rising levels of wealth. Parental investment is generally defined as a contribution toward a particular offspring’s survival that entails some cost to the parent, in terms of resources, time, energy and the parent’s ability to make investments in other offspring. This principle is consistent with men’s supposed reluctance to “raise other men’s children” and related insecurities about the paternity of the children they are raising²¹.

Conclusions: Increasing research?

19. Richter et al. have pointed out that today “fathering is as much a sociocultural as a biological construct, and most children experience more than one type of a very wide range of fathering relationships. The continuum encompasses co-residential biological fathers who are present for the entire period of childhood at one end, as well as concerned teachers and other mentors who may take a keen interest in children and encourage them over long periods of their lives, on the other. For this reason, the term social fatherhood has emerged to describe the many ways in which children can be connected to men who take responsibility for a child’s wellbeing.” Therefore, “this

¹⁹ Jonas Himmelstrand, *Shared Responsibility Family & Society - The Question of Choice* (2011).

²⁰ Gordon Neufeld, *Hold On to Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers* (Ballantine Books, 2006).

²¹ Wilson, M., and Daly, M., ‘Risk of maltreatment of children living with step parents’ (Lancaster, Hawthorne, NY, 1987).

state of affairs requires a fairly dramatic readjustment of our perception of fatherhood and how fathers may be involved in the lives of children. The increasing diversity of fatherhood, and the fact that fatherhood is frequently evaluated against a 'maternal template' (that is what mothers usually do for children), complicate research on the effects of fatherhood on children's development. What is clear, however, is that fathers can have both direct and indirect or mediated effects on children²²." There is no doubt that we need more research to be done in order to help children by helping parents to fulfil their role in whatever circumstances they have to face.

20. One of the elements that should be taken into account is that, if the primary job of a parent is to prepare their children for how things really work, they should teach them that in the real world you don't always get what you want. If parenting is about transmitting the knowledge and skills necessary to become independent adults, self-sufficient and upstanding members of society, parents should set limits to the behaviour of their children. Too many young adults today have unrealistic expectations when they initially go out on their own, primarily because their parents failed to do so. Many feel they are entitled to immediately live a middle-class life style or better, because that's what they're used to, and because they haven't learned that there is a difference between helping and enabling. As a result, they can easily get frustrated or demotivated or unmotivated when they realize that is not the case. As Taylor Gatto puts it, "our official assumptions about the nature of modern childhood are dead wrong. Children allowed to take responsibility and given a serious part in the larger world are always superior to those merely permitted to play and be passive. At the age of twelve, Admiral Farragut got his first command. I was in fifth grade when I learned of this. Had Farragut gone to my school he would have been in seventh. You might remember that as a rough index of how far our maturity has been retarded²³."

21. How intergenerational exchange is affected by the distribution of resources in the larger society also requires more investigation, in order to make transition into adulthood a more comprehensive path. "Moving out of the natal household has become precarious for those with limited means. Unlike the not-so-distant past, when marriage provided an easy (though not always a successful) route out, fewer young adults today are willing to commit to a permanent union, in part because they lack the resources and the mindset to settle down and in part because they lack confidence that marriage provides the security that it once did. These conditions help to explain why parenthood now often precedes marriage for many young adults growing up in disadvantaged households. By contrast, for youth from advantaged families who are able to complete college, the extended period of growing up brings few costs and many benefits. The longer educational process provides greater opportunities for self-exploration, includ-

²² *Men in Families and Family Policy in a Changing World, Division for Social Policy and Development – DESA (United Nations).*

²³ John Taylor Gatto, 'Underground History of American Education' (The Oxford Village Press & The Odysseus Group, 2003).

ing the search for stable life partners. Delaying marriage and parenthood, it appears, results in wiser marriage choices and consequently more stable family situations and more positive environments for childbearing and childrearing²⁴.”

22. Consequently, we believe that the upcoming anniversary of the International Year of the Family presents an opportunity not only to draw attention to challenges faced by families in different parts of the world, but also to promote the necessary research about each one of the proposed major themes, and we suggest taking into account the previous considerations for it.

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²⁴ *Fussell and Furstenberg, op. cit.*