

Book Reviews

Children in Changing Families: Life After Parental Separation

Pryor, J. and Rodgers B.

Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2001
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Reviewed by: Jane Ritchie

This is a timely book that provides research-based facts and measured comment in an area that is often the subject of sensationalist media commentary based on ignorance. It is one of a series devoted to 'Understanding Children's Worlds'.

The book begins with what is called a Glossary. As a glossary is defined in my dictionary as 'an alphabetical list of terms peculiar to a field of knowledge with definitions and explanations' I would prefer to call it a list of the major studies referred to in the book. This is of interest in terms of the studies available from each country (US 8, UK 6, Australia 2 and New Zealand 1, with one not sourced as to country). The single New Zealand study is the Christchurch Health and Development study. I was surprised that the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study was not also included, but perhaps it has not provided data from their cohort on the topics of concern in this book.

The authors present demographic data drawn from the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand in their search for well-documented information on trends in family demographics. And here I have my first reservation about the book. Information is not provided for all the countries evenly and consistently, probably because such information is not readily available. Here are some examples drawn from a section on Public Attitudes toward Family Change:

"Related to women's higher rates of employment, at least in the US, is the decline in men's relative earning power." (p. 11)

What is the position in the UK or Canada or Australia or, more importantly for a New Zealand readership, in New

Zealand?

"In the US in the late seventies, approximately 60 percent of people surveyed agreed that married people were happier than those who were single, and there was little change by 1985 (Thornton, 1991). In Australia in the early nineties, though, fewer thought that married people were happier - only 37% agreed (De Vaus, 1997)."

Again, the same questions apply, except this time, Australian data as well as data from the US are provided.

One topic on which comparative data are presented for almost all the countries is cohabitation. In Canada, 14% of couples cohabit, in Australia it is 10%, in the UK it is 12% of women and 16% of men; one wonders why there is a gender disparity in the UK and not in the other countries. In New Zealand 25% of partnerships in 1996 were not legal marriages. Why is the rate in New Zealand so much higher? This disparity is not addressed. And what is happening in the US? Percentages are not provided, but one learns that there has been a 46% rise in the number of cohabiting couples between 1990 and 1997.

It is interesting to read a very detailed breakdown (p. 26) of where children in Australia are living after partnership breakdown - 69% with the mother, 2% with the father, and 22% (19% with the mother and 3% with the father) in a step or blended family; but where, oh where, are the New Zealand data? Maybe they are not available in such detail; we do learn from the Christchurch study that 18% of that cohort entered a step family before 18 years of age.

One of the major themes of the book is the consideration of two competing perspectives on gender roles, separation, divorce and their effects on children. The first is the conservative one, in which mothers are primarily caregivers and nurturers; their careers are secondary in importance to family considerations. Fathers are, of course, breadwinners and heads of households. Children should have decisions made for them by their parents. Divorce is invariably harmful and should not be made easy.

The second perspective is liberal: mothers as well as fathers are entitled to careers; children are entitled to their opinions and have a right to be involved in decisions about

their futures; children can have satisfactory lives without fathers and, if a marriage has broken down, then divorce is best for all concerned.

My reading of the book suggests that the research upon which the authors draw largely favours the liberal perspective. Pryor and Rodgers painstakingly tease apart the many and various strands that contribute to family dynamics in times of transition: the family setting before the separation, the conflict between the adults, economic circumstances, the views and agency of the children caught up in it all.

The authors acknowledge the complexity of families and hence the necessity for selectivity in the scope of the book. One might have expected a chapter on mothers rearing children without partners but there is no such chapter; there is, however, a chapter on fathers and families since the authors believe that interest in fathers and their role in families is of recent origin. Recent is, of course, a relative term. When we began our child rearing studies in the early 1960s it certainly never occurred to us to interview fathers as well as mothers; child rearing, in those days was the domain of women, conducted under the pervasive influence of Bowlby and his ideology of maternal deprivation (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1970).

But by the time we came to our first replication in 1977, feminism had arrived in New Zealand and there was never any question that fathers should also be interviewed (Jane Ritchie, 1979). Since then there has been a burgeoning interest in fathers and families (e.g., Biller, 1971; Lynn, 1974; Lamb, 1987, 1997; Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Jane Ritchie, 2001) so I cannot agree that interest in fathers is new, but I do accept that reasons of space may well provide an adequate explanation for the special attention to fathers.

One of the strengths of the book is the provision of detailed summary tables (pp. 75-112). These present data comparing children from intact and separated families over various outcomes: education and adult socioeconomic attainment, aggressive, antisocial and delinquent behaviour in childhood and adolescence, adult and adolescent substance abuse, physical and mental health in adolescence and adulthood and family intimate relationships. These tables are useful since they illustrate how important it is to consider all findings in a particular area, rather than relying, as the media so often do, on the findings from one study, which, when put in the context of other research, would be seen as an aberration. It must have been extremely frustrating for the authors to have to include an errata slip correcting errors in two of the tables. The authors conclude that although there are differences in outcomes in most of these areas, the differences are not large. But before we dismiss such findings as inconsequential, we are reminded that, because of the growth in the proportion of children who experience parental separation, these differences can have important policy implications.

Mention is made of the United Nations Charter on the Rights of the Child (p. 15). I believe the authors are referring to the Convention, rather than the Charter. They could have noted that the United States is the only one of their

source countries not to have ratified this convention; in fact, the only other UN member not to have done so is Somalia!

As I read the book, I became increasingly uneasy. Something was missing. Consultation with the index revealed no entry for Maori, nor for indigenous people, nor for minority groups, Black people or African Americans. Ethnicity is almost entirely missing from the book! Clearly, the bicultural and multicultural perspective now so important and interwoven here in New Zealand has not impacted on the consciousness either of the authors, their editors or the researchers on whose studies they draw.

I was puzzled, at first, by the highlighted paragraphs that dot the book. I thought that they must be important passages thus singled out for the reader's attention. And they probably are. But why was it necessary to include the same material, virtually word for word, in the text? It reminded me of reading a borrowed book, already highlighted by someone else.

The back cover tells us that the book will be of value to "academics, practitioners and students from a variety of disciplines". Because of the inconsistent presentation of data from the various countries, I am not sure how useful the book would be to any of these categories of readers.

What I would like to see next would be a book, covering the same topics, but using New Zealand data predominantly and written primarily for a New Zealand readership. Such a volume would truly be of value to New Zealand academics, students and practitioners.

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