findings

Children's perspectives on families

A qualitative study with children aged between 8 and 14 found that children's views do not necessarily conform to stereotypical images of the 'nuclear' family. From children's perspectives, the key defining characteristics of 'family' include love, care, mutual support and respect. In her study, Virginia Morrow of the Centre for Family Research, University of Cambridge, found:

- Children can be constructive and reflective commentators about the concept of 'family'. They have a pragmatic view of family life, and are aware of a wide variation in family practices and structures.

- From children's point of view, love, care and mutual respect and support were the key characteristics of 'family'. This was the case regardless of gender, ethnic background, and location. Overall, children appeared to have an accepting, inclusive view of what counts as family and their definitions did not centre around biological relatedness or the 'nuclear' norm.

- There were some differences between age groups: younger children seemed to express themselves in concrete terms while older children were more generalised in their use of language and drew on complex abstract notions of quality of relationships.

- The centrality to children of parents, especially mothers, as providers of physical and emotional care, emerged clearly.

- Sibling relationships were also important, and while such relationships are rarely conflict-free, they are often underpinned by a good deal of mutual affection and support.

- For some children, regardless of ethnic background, social life appears to revolve around relatives and extended kin.

- Friendships became more important the older the children were. Girls in particular described their close friends as central for emotional support, though this was also the case for some boys.

- In response to questions exploring 'being listened to', children wanted to be able to 'have a say' in what happens to them, rather than to make decisions themselves. Some children did feel they are listened to within their families, others did not, and others showed a sophisticated awareness that 'decision-making' may not be straightforward.

Background

Recent changes in social policy have highlighted the need to listen to children when decisions are being made about their care and welfare. However, little is known about how children make sense of the concept of 'family'. Most knowledge of children's experiences of family life comes from adults - parents, professionals, or adults' recollections of their own difficult childhood experiences - rather than from children themselves.

This research used a range of structured and unstructured qualitative techniques to explore norms and beliefs, and children's ideas and use of language about the concept of 'family'. The project examined the defining characteristics of a family, from children's perspectives; and who is important to children, in their own words. It also analysed how this changes with age, gender, and ethnic background.

What counts as 'family'?

Children's beliefs about what counts as family appeared to vary according to age and ethnic background. How they varied centred around whether marriage, children or proximity were the key components of a family. Younger children in particular saw the presence of children and marriage as being necessary to define family, and tended to refer to concrete examples from their own or their relatives' situations in discussion. Children of Pakistani origin were particularly likely to describe fathers and other family members as being absent for reasons other than divorce, for work or visits to Pakistan, but were still counted as 'family'.

> *"Families are for you, so if your mum and dad go to Pakistan ... the other half or the other quarter or something can, like, look after you." (Tahir, 8)*

In general, older children seemed more likely to generalise beyond their own experiences, without referring to concrete examples. Older children were less likely to see family as depending upon formal contractual relationships, and were more likely to see the nature or quality of the relationships between people as being the defining feature.

> *"A family is a group of people which all care about each other. They can all cry together, laugh together, argue together and go through all the emotions together. Some live together as well. Families are for helping each other through life." (Tara, 13)*

Children's definitions of family

Children defined 'family' in terms of roles (what family members do for each other), relationships (love and affection) and structure (the people involved, for example, a group of people who live together). Most of the accounts from younger children emphasised being provided for and cared for by parents, and this was the case across gender and ethnic background.

> *"My mum is important to me because she feeds me and clothes me and loves me very much. My dad is important to me because he pays for the food I eat and the clothes I wear. He cares for me and loves me very much." (Nadia, 9)*

Older children's accounts were more varied, but the quality of the relationships remained central: love, care and mutual support were the key constituents of families.

> *"Families are for help, mental and physical stability, love, support." (Alvin, 14)*

While some children used the terms 'related' and 'relations' in their definitions of family, they were not necessarily taking 'related' to mean genetic links, and some were clear that people are connected to each other in different ways, through marriage as well as blood ties. Rather, caring, love and the quality of the relationships involved defined family; this was clear across age, gender and ethnicity.

> *"A family is related to me in some way. Mum, dad, grandparents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, half-brothers/sisters, stepsisters/brothers are all family. Families are for giving me stuff; food, clothes, presents. Loving, caring for me and for giving things back to. And for people to talk to." (Bob, 14)*

However, younger children were more likely to write subjectively; the older children's definitions emphasised abstract notions, such as the quality of the relationships, more than those of the younger children.

> *"A family is somewhere you are loved, wanted and spend time with, care for you and brought you into the world, important. Families are for love, homes, helping you, understanding problems." (Danielle, 13)*

Generally, children's definitions of family reflected their descriptions of who is important to them, and there was very little discrepancy between how they described their own families and how they defined families in general. This contrasts with the way children answered questions about 'what counts as a family', which centred around family structures. The youngest children saw the presence of children, marriage and/or physical presence in the household, as a central part of what defines a family.

"It's normally a group of three or more people with a mum and a dad and some children, and who love and care for one another ... usually." (Betty, 9)

Their responses to open-ended questions, such as 'what is a family?' and 'what are families for?', presented a more complex picture. It was the roles and the quality of the relationships involved, and the provision of emotional and material security rather than household structure or the nature of the contract (in other words, the presence of children or marriage) that defined 'family'.

"A family is a group of people who love you. Families are for loving you and for being kind to you." (James, 10)

Who is important to children?

Parents

Parents, especially mothers, were described as important by children because they provide physical and emotional care. Younger children described parents' roles as being clearly differentiated according to gender. Older girls in particular described their mothers as very important for someone to talk to, while boys seemed less likely to describe this need.

"My mum is important to me because I can always tell her all my secrets and she will always stick by me." (Lisa, 13)

"My mum is important because she cooks me food and [does the] washing. My dad is important to me because he takes me to work with him so I get to go on roofs at people's houses." (Mark, 13)

Other relatives

For some children, brothers and/or sisters and more distant relatives are very important. This is not differentiated by ethnic origin, though there may be differences in the expectation and meaning of siblings' relationships, according to ethnic background. This needs to be seen in the context of children's cultural background and religious traditions, which emphasise family obligations and interdependence. Contrary to stereotypical assumptions, children of Pakistani origin were no more likely than other children to describe extended families, and some children, regardless of ethnic background, described close and regular contact with more distant relatives which is clearly important to them.

"My brother is [important] too, although I don't say it because we're always fighting, but I don't think I could live without him." (Charlotte, 13)

"My little sister is important to me because I can sometimes trust her. She does get very annoying, though." (Callum, 12)

"My grandma and grandad are important to me because they are very good at listening, which I like." (Dougie, 12)

"My godparents are important too as they are the ones who have to take responsibility for me if my parents die ... My nephew is very important to me as well as now I am an auntie and I now help to look after him." (Sophie, 13)

Special relationships

The importance to children of a range of special relationships was clear. Friendship becomes very important for older children, both boys and girls. This is not particularly surprising, but suggests that children's wider social networks need to be taken into account when exploring who matters to them; this can be lost in a tendency to focus on parental or family relationships.

"My friends are also very important to me because they are there when I need them, they cheer me up, they help me when I get stuck. They understand and try and help me if I have something wrong. They don't moan at me if I don't get something right." (Paul, 13)

A range of people, including friends, appear to provide emotional support to children. Terms can be interchangeable: family members can be like friends, and friends can be like mothers or brothers and sisters.

"My next door neighbour is important to me because if I can't tell my mum something I can always tell her. She is like my second mum." (Janine, 13)

Pets

Finally, pets should not be overlooked as being of central importance, particularly for some rural children, offering companionship to supplement that from family, relatives and friends: *"you trust them and they trust you"*.

'Having a say'

When it came to discussions about making decisions, some children did feel they had a say in family decision-making, others did not. Most children felt it was important to have a say in matters affecting them, although religious practice and cultural background may have implications for how children see themselves, their self-expression and expectations of being listened to. However, quite young children

could understand and talk about the notion of 'rights' and being listened to. Some of the children reflected that they would like to have a say in the process of decision-making, and to be heard, but did not necessarily want to make decisions on their own or have ultimate control over the decision-making process. They would like to be consulted, be able to give their point of view, and have their opinions taken into account. Even quite young children saw decision-making as potentially difficult, and could see this from other's (and adults') perspectives.

> *"I think like your mum and dad like try and push you to make your own decisions ... I think some decisions you should make for yourself ... but sometimes there are some decisions that you can't make on your own, you need to like either get you friends involved, or your teachers or your parents, or your family ..." (Sophie, 14)*

Conclusions

The research concluded that narrow definitions of 'the family' as nuclear obscure a wide diversity in family forms and family practices. Similarly, children are not a homogeneous category. Children of different ages described 'family' in different ways. Younger children tended to use more concrete examples and older children were more abstract, but there was wide variation and some 8- and 9-year-olds could generalise beyond their own experiences and see things from a different point of view. Overall, children had an accepting and inclusive view of what counts as family. Their definitions did not centre around the nuclear norm or genetic ties. Children's households appeared to provide a supportive setting and these households could encompass a range of special relationships, including those with pets. The people who matter to children are the people who are available to them and around them.

About the study

The research is based on empirical data gathered in schools from 183 children aged between 8 and 14 in two parts of East Anglia, a rural area and a large town with a population of British Muslims originating from Mirpur and Azad Kashmir in Pakistan. The research used qualitative techniques including the following structured activities: draw-and-write about 'who is important to me?'; sentence completion on 'what is a family?' and 'what are families for?'; and a short questionnaire asking whether or not five one-sentence descriptions of family type (vignettes) counted as family. The project also used open-ended group discussions exploring children's responses to the questionnaire; what they read and watched on TV, and media images of families; and children's involvement in decision-making and the extent to which they felt listened to, in their families, schools, and neighbourhoods.

How to get further information

The full report, Understanding families: Children's perspectives by Virginia Morrow, is published by the National Children's Bureau in association with the Foundation. It is available from National Children's Bureau, 8 Wakley Street, London EC1V 7QE, Tel: 0171 843 6000, Fax: 0171 278 9512 (ISBN 1 900990 27 X, price £9.95 or £6.95 for NCB members plus £3 p&p for orders under £28; please enclose payment with order, with cheques made payable to National Children's Bureau Enterprises Ltd).

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Published by the
Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO3 6LP
Tel: 01904 629241 Fax: 01904 620072
http://www.jrf.org.uk

ISSN 0958-3084