

INTRODUCTION

There can be little doubt that ours is a society riding the crest of vast and profound social and economic change. The material conditions and social landscapes through which we experience our lives are increasingly an uncharted sea of unanticipated shift and hidden consequence and many of us have the unsettling feeling that we are out of our depth. It is natural to respond to this rapid and fundamental change with concern, particularly when many of the enduring keystones of our lives have been problematized. Family is one such keystone.

Family—and its apparent decline—is a topic of great interest. The breakdown of marriage and other relationships, family roles and responsibilities, the alienation of children, the rights of grandparents, juvenile crime and drug usage, and the emotional fallout of divorce are all current and emotive issues. Few individuals remain untouched by this debate.

The changes we are witnessing in relation to family are made all the more worrisome because we have a limited vocabulary for discussing and understanding profound change—a vocabulary characterized by normative framings and assumptions of deficit. It is very easy to look at the changes in ‘traditional’ family structure and read ‘breakdown’, ‘decline’ and ‘loss’. A politics of blame and rhetoric of ‘reconstitution’ very quickly follows. However, given the fundamental nature of contemporary social and economic change, this is not an adequate response. The shifts that we have experienced will not disappear; there will be no reversion to the ‘good old days’; and to continue to interpret change through a lens of deficit is counterproductive. We therefore need to develop a framework and vocabulary for addressing families in new times.

New Times: New Families begins the exploration of a new vocabulary and new theoretical framing that might have some salience given the context of new times. It begins by outlining how we came to talk about the modern nuclear family—what we would now call the ‘traditional’ family—in negative terms, chronicles some of the fundamental changes that have taken place of late, and then building upon current sociological and cultural studies work, it describes a new, more flexible framework that can accommodate difference and ongoing change without looking for lack or dysfunction.