

Hannele Forsberg and Virpi Timonen:

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The future of the family as envisioned by young adults in Ireland

Abstract

This article reports on young university students' visions of the future of the family in Ireland, a country that has experienced dramatic economic fluctuations and extensive social change over recent decades. Using a text-based role-play method, we obtained 34 students' written responses to two different scenarios pertaining to the family. Analysis of these texts indicates a strong orientation to a future where religion plays little or no role, and tolerance and freedom to choose govern family formation. The fear is expressed that some groups may be deprived of the freedom to marry and have children on grounds of economic inequality. Together, these two visions create a dialectic between more freedom (in choosing values/partners/whether to have children) and less freedom (due to inability to afford the 'luxury' of family life), reflective of the post-Catholic, economically exposed context. We show that young agents draw on social debates, traditions, their experiences and social positions in imagining futures of the family, illustrating interplay between structure and agency. It is interesting and significant that some social forces are seen as catalysts of both 'stronger' and 'weaker' families, in particular religion/the Church is used to explain both decline and flourishing of the family in the future.

Keywords

Students, family, futures studies, role-play method, Catholicism.

Introduction

In this article, we present findings from an exploratory study of young adults' visions of families in the future. In the field of youth studies, much research has been done recently on young people's views on various aspects of the future (e.g. Carabelli and Lyon 2016; Cook

2015; Prince 2014; Skrbis et al. 2014; Threadgold 2012), but there is very little research on future families envisioned by them. This article seeks to contribute to understanding the role of young people and culture in the social change of families: more specifically, the cultural meanings that young adults attach to future families. This is important, because both now and in the future families are shaped by cultural ideas, beliefs and values about family life. As Simon Duncan (2011) underlines, people draw on styles of thinking, the presumptions of particular social groups and lived social norms to construct their ideas around families, in a process referred to as bricolage. The thought processes that our study participants engaged in can be thought as illustrations of bricolage around the notion of families in the future.

We locate our examination in the context of Ireland. Ireland, with its distinctive combination of tradition and modernity in terms of the family, is an interesting socio-cultural context for studying the future of families. In May 2015, the Irish electorate voted for same-sex marriage; at the same time, the country still has one of the world's strictest abortion laws (abortion is possible only in cases where the life or health of the mother is in grave danger). While most countries in Europe are concerned with growing aged populations and low birth rates, Ireland's population is relatively young and fertility rates are among the highest in Europe (Gray et al. 2016, 56; Connolly 2015b, 17-34). In addition, intergenerational ties are strong (Gray et al. 2016, 70; Scharf et al., 2013). Following late legalisation of divorce in 1997, divorce rates have remained comparatively low (Connolly 2015b, 24). Sharp economic ups and downs have been characteristic of Ireland. The Great Recession, that affected all aspects of life in Ireland from 2007 until very recently, was followed by the current very rapid economic recovery (Gray et al. 2016, 95). As a market-oriented liberal welfare regime, Ireland leaves much responsibility to families and the private sector to cover the support needs of people facing social risks.

The aim of this article is to examine young adults' ideas surrounding family formation, having children and intergenerational relationships in Ireland. We start from the premise that visions of future families provide a prism of societal changes that could take place in the areas of welfare, work and economy, since families are not just personal relations, but intersect many other key structures of society (OECD 2008, 2; Morgan 1996, 11). We draw on the life course perspective to understand how and why young adults envision family change. The population we examined are university students. University students are only a segment of the young adult population, and cannot be construed as representative of the broader young adult population. Rather, they have here given us *one* window (out of many possible ones) into observing young adults' ways of thinking about the future of families; or to use Duncan's (2011) terminology, into how they engage in bricolage around family formation and family relations. Conducting this kind of study with a more diverse young population, especially if done longitudinally (rather than as a cross-section) would constitute an interesting next step that would add analytical depth and variance to the findings.

Young adults' vantage point on family change

The life stage positions of young adults open up a specific perspective on family issues (Gray et al. 2016, 59-60). Today's young Irish adults were born and grew up during the so-called Celtic Tiger era (from the 1990s to the early years of the new millennium). This period was characterised by rapid and profound socio-economic changes, including a turn from mass unemployment and emigration to almost full employment and inward migration, and dramatic improvements in the standard of living (Breen and Reynolds 2011). Extensive changes in traditional family practices can also be traced back to this period as 'new' family forms, such as cohabitation, one-parent families, divorce, same-sex families and reconstituted

families became more prevalent in Ireland. However, the Great Recession (2007-2014) followed the Celtic Tiger. The recession affected the economy severely and led to high levels of unemployment, mass emigration of working-age adults and strict limits on spending imposed by the European Central Bank. In the current post-recession era, Ireland is the fastest growing economy in Europe, but the shadow of the recession is still present in many people's lives and indeed constitutes a central, early and enduring influence in the life course of the population of interest, young adults who spent their teenage years and early 20s in recession-era Ireland. For instance, due to the very high housing costs caused by a massive gap between demand and supply, many young adults have difficulty to establish independent households (Gray et al. 2016, 95-96; 107-108).

Early adulthood is framed by customs, official rules and expectations surrounding the 'norm transitions' (Gray et al. 2016, 59-60). Historically, the family has occupied a core position in the social structure and religious ethos of Ireland. Catholicism was once all-pervading in the country, and its role in forming ideals surrounding the family cannot be overstated. However, the clerical scandals and child abuse cases in the 1990s and 2000s have eroded the credibility of the Church – in addition to the more profound modernisation processes of the culture and society (Breen and Reynolds 2011). Today the traditional norms that formerly confined sexual activity, cohabitation and parenthood to marriage have broken down, and Irish society is considered to have embraced more secular values in personal and intimate life. Liberal attitudes towards same-sex marriage, divorce, cohabitation and births outside of marriage are becoming increasingly prevalent (Garry et al. 2006). These changes began later than in most other Western countries, but they can still be seen clearly (Gray et al. 2016, 95-96).

Transitions of young adults towards adulthood have become prolonged and their sequencing has become more variable. People remain longer in education and postpone marriage and first births to later ages. Most are cohabiting or married in their late twenties or thirties, but postponing partnership is also typical. A third of young Irish adults (18-34 year-olds) are still living with their parent(s). Delayed adult life transitions are linked to family patterns, including the unbundling of marriage, parenthood and household formation (Gray et al. 2016, 95-96, 100). Nonetheless, the two-parent nuclear family is still the most typical growing environment of children in Ireland (Connolly 2015a, 5-9). Many Irish parents rely on grandparents for regular childcare, and there is an emphasis on extended family relationships (Arber and Timonen 2012; Gray et al. 2016, 70). When compared to the wider European context, many of the above-mentioned changes are close to European trends. What is distinctive to Ireland, is the later timing and faster pace of these changes. Moreover, some Irish family patterns are in clear contrast with general European trends, in particular, divorce rate is low, only 6%, and the fertility rate is relatively high, around 1.9 per woman (see Connolly 2015b, 17-34).

Most of the trends described above are typically interpreted as aspects of growing individualism (Gray et al. 2016, 101). The individualisation thesis emphasises the growing agency and autonomy of the individual in modern western societies. The fragmentation of the nuclear family and the diversification of family forms are part of this general understanding (Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Giddens 1992, 1999). Some other scholars consider that not all pathways are freely and equally available - or desirable - to everyone. The factors that are giving rise to different pathways are changes in values and socio-economic contexts within which young adults forge their choices (Gray et al. 2016, 101-102). As a result, concepts such as 'the negotiated family' (Finch and Mason 1993), 'personal life' (Smart 2007) or 'bricolage'

(Duncan 2011) have been developed for approaching how people actually 'do' or 'adjust' their life choices in practice. Young adults act and make choices on the basis of their understandings of what is possible and likely; they are linked to social relationships, especially to those of family and kin, which inform (but do not determine) their visions on future families.

The cultural approach and young adults' envisioning of the future

Earlier research concerning the future of families mainly leans on demographic trends that are based on the predictive approach. (e.g. Jokinen 2014; Parke 2013). The approach of this study is not limited to the causal assumptions based on earlier research. Instead, our interest is directed to the kinds of developments young people are able to imagine. Our interest lies in their imaginary envisioning of the future. Within the sphere of futures studies this approach is called the interpretative or cultural approach. In this approach, the identification of cultural meanings, practices and values is important (Parhiala 2013). The focus is on the experience of young students and their ways of envisioning the future, from their position in life.

The imagined future is understood in this study as a form of social action. In this way, 'the family' is also approached as a way of thinking about and describing relationships and processes that can be encapsulated as bricolage (Duncan 2011). These ideas, which are based on the social constructionist perspective on the family, mean that the focus of the research is the process and terms by which the family is described (Gubrium and Holstein 1990, 26). This starting point requires an inductive and situationally-sensitive approach. The task of the researcher is to make visible the ways in which the family comes to be recognised (Gubrium and Holstein 1990, 27). What people do with words does not take place in a vacuum; they take account of local understandings of how to think and talk about family life. Our interest is in the cultural spectrum of the possible futures of the family, in the context of the early stages of the

life course of university students. Recognising cultural meanings attached to future families is important, because families are shaped by culture: we use existing beliefs and values to create and sustain ways of being, relating to, and caring for each other.

The research method we applied is called non-active role-play method, also known as empathy-based stories method (Eskola 1997; Forsberg and Nätkin 2016; Ronkainen and Ylijoki 1988). Students of social sciences at Trinity College Dublin were asked to write about their visions of future families, according to specific instructions, first outlined verbally and then distributed in writing during classes. Two contrasting framings (based on our adaptation of the instructions used by Ronkainen and Ylijoki [1988]) were offered to elicit the participants' visions:

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- A. Imagine that it is the year 2035 and a large international family policy conference is being held at the Convention Centre Dublin. In the conference, it is pointed out that in almost every developed industrial country, the importance of the family has grown. People get married and have children; the number of divorces has gone down. Intergenerational relations are highly valued. Imagine what might have brought about the situation. What has happened in the world during the last 20 years?
- B. Imagine that it is the year 2035 and a large international family policy conference is being held at the Convention Centre Dublin. In the conference, it is pointed out that in almost every developed industrial country, the importance of the family has decreased. Being a couple and partnering are short term and are not registered officially. Birth rate is low. Intergenerational relations are poorly valued. Imagine what might have brought about the situation. What has happened in the world during the last 20 years?
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Each participant formulated only one text (in response to either scenario A or B). One of the basic ideas of the method is to offer a tool for research to map the spectrum of cultural logics available in a certain socio-cultural context to perceive social phenomena. It has been estimated that a culturally essential spectrum of logics will be accumulated, and in about 15 texts typical framings can be discerned (Suoninen and Jokinen 2014, 38). Even though the writing instructions and the fact that all our participants were social science students undoubtedly frame the students' accounts, the students can be seen as creative adapters of the meanings related to the cultures and subcultures they represent. By their texts, they can disclose the degrees of freedom of cultural meanings. Because of the open form, the role-play method often produces expressive and meaning-rich interpretations (ibid.). However, we acknowledge that our participants had of course been exposed to various 'expert' understandings of family and society, as all were social science students, and therefore brought to their 'bricolage' both personal experiences and notions that reflect the literature and professional views (c.f. Savage 2011; Duncan 2011).

The data consists of 34 texts written by students of sociology, social policy and social work. Two groups of students were asked to write about their visions of future families, according to specific instructions outlined above, given at two separate lectures in the spring term of 2016; on each occasion, the students were divided into two groups by where they were sitting in the room, each group being asked to address either scenario A or scenario B so that an approximately even number of responses to the scenarios was obtained. Most of the students were white Irish people, and while their relatively homogenous socio-cultural background is recognised as a limitation of our research, it is broadly reflective of the population composition, where 85 % of the 4.6 million people in Ireland declare themselves 'white Irish'

(Ni Laoire 2015, 144). Three-quarters of the students were female, reflecting the fact that the majority of students of social sciences in Ireland are women. Nearly all participants were in the 20-23 age bracket. For reasons of confidentiality, this exercise was entirely based on the writings, i.e. the students did not engage in a group discussion of their responses.

The method of analysis is data-driven content analysis grounded in constant comparison of the texts and the common elements in them, a process that bears similarities to thematic coding with a strong orientation to identifying categories supported by the major themes (e.g. Schreier 2012). Two different collective visions of the families of the future emerged in the texts, as one could expect on the basis of the writing instructions. The visions were labelled the ‘scenario of stronger future families’ and the ‘scenario of decreasing family-centeredness’. Within these two broad visions (presented below) the analysis concentrated on identification, categorising and grouping together of the explanatory factors that the respondents saw as underlying family change.

Scenario of the stronger future families

The discussion of this scenario is organised around the two central categories that emerged from the data, namely ‘emergence of a new family value system’ and ‘greater gender equality and work-family balance’, the two sets of forces that were envisaged to bring about the ‘stronger families’ scenario.

Emergence of a new value system

The most dominant explanatory category for future changes that emerged from the writings is the impact of *a new value system that is more accommodating of a diversity of family forms,*

especially in terms of couple relationships. The following extract encapsulates the vision of a more diverse and tolerant world that is linked to the increase in the importance of families:

Religious beliefs are no longer a cause for fighting...People can be peaceful, secure and hopeful...They are no longer fearful of the future...Difference is accepted globally.

The types of families that exist are based on love...the world is a happier place to live and a more pleasant place to procreate in. (R. A-8)

This extract crystallizes how tolerance of difference, personal choices and love are the new (global) values that frame strong future families in the students' accounts. The erosion in the role of religion is something that the majority of the students consider a likely antecedent to value change. On the basis of the writings, the values to be abandoned have parallels to the Catholic socio-sexual doctrine (e.g. disapproval of same-sex marriage). The new value frame is envisaged to lead to an array of improvements that, instead of stifling family life and close relationships, allow them to flourish. The new values of tolerance are crystallised in the idea of marriage equality (allowing same-sex marriages), one of the core background ideas referred to when outlining the vision of stronger families in the future:

Individuals in the past may have divorced in part due to their sexuality. Individuals are now free to marry regardless of their sexuality...marrying who they truly love. (R. A-1)

...people are marrying for love and not for any other reason. In the past couples who generally did not love each other, but were together for social, financial and religious reasons would eventually break up and divorce. However, in the last 20 years people have not married for any purpose other than love. (R. A-3)

In these visions, people are free – on the basis of love - to *choose* whom they marry, a freedom that strengthens families. The marriage equality referendum of May 2015 was clearly still very fresh in the minds of the students; indeed, it is arguable that this referendum was an extraordinary, generation-defining moment in the lives of young Irish people who voted overwhelmingly for same-sex marriage.

At a more abstract level, these envisaged futures can also be construed as a form of ‘enlightenment’, making way for greater preparedness and a more ‘rational’ or secular approach to forming couple relationships and building families. When families are planned more deliberately, and formed on the basis of *choices*, instead of adherence to externally imposed (religious) principles, families are imagined to become stronger. The following formulations reflect the idea that stable families result from informed, rational choices:

People now understand that marriage is a commitment and do not want to face the hardship of divorce so they wait until they are sure their relationship is stable before entering marriage...it is the norm to marry later in life, and there is no pressure for couples to marry before or shortly after sharing a home. (R. A-13)

More couples are moving in together before they are married, ending up with the ability to make marriage decisions with less societal pressure and naturally have their children later. (R. A-16)

Excessive use of technology and its side effects of ‘losing physical touch with loved ones and seeking solace from iPhone or laptops’ was seen as a development that would make people

value face-to face interaction more. However, some students also thought that clever use of technology would facilitate *rational choices* of partner that would in turn enhance their chances of relationship success:

Dating sites such as Match.com and even Tinder emphasise shared traits and looks before people meet in person. People may find it easier to find the right partner and eventually get married. Therefore, pre-knowledge of the person prior to the commitment of marriage may reduce the likelihood of divorce. (R. A-17)

With reference to children and parenthood, the visions of stronger future families suggest that more education and understanding of what is ‘good for children’ will strengthen parental capacity and competence, leading to more stability and greater child wellbeing. Some of the students who make this suggestion appear to hark back to a traditional family form (mother-and-father), strengthened by parental prudence:

[People will] know that a stable relationship between a mother and father is an important element in the child’s life and so are more likely to stay married. As education has increased and thus, awareness of mental health and psychology increased, individuals and couples are more likely to seek help or counselling etc. if they are having a problem in their life or marriage. (R. A-4)

Again, the idea of greater *rationality* in people’s behaviour features as a factor that would strengthen families. In particular, future parents are seen as highly rational agents who ensure that they are ready and able to face the challenges of childrearing, because they will be mature, well-resourced adults:

Couples are choosing to postpone having children until they are in a position where they are able to care for their children. As a result, family breakdown has decreased. (R. A-12)

One interesting sub-theme in the vision of a more rational, planned family life of the future relates to the role of reproductive technology. Here, too, the respondent paints a picture of a future where parenthood is planned, predictable, and manageable. The reference to (foetal) 'pre-screening' is significant because extensive screening for abnormalities is not done routinely in Ireland (largely due to the fact that foetal abnormalities are not acceptable grounds for abortion):

Advances in medicine may also help increase family sizes. In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) may be more readily accessed for women in their forties and fifties, after they have advanced in their field of work and have a steady income. IVF treatments are often very successful, leading to twin or even triplet births, increasing family sizes. Also, advances in general health and pre-screening may make it easier for parents to have healthier children...Couples may find it easier to prepare and cater for the needs of children. (R. A-17)

Interestingly (in view of the highly visible campaigning for abortion rights on university campuses), abortion is mentioned in a cursory fashion in only a couple of texts, and it is also linked to the idea of people adopting more enlightened practices through education and awareness: 'Change in legislation re. abortion – more education and awareness due to this'.

Pro-choice ideals in combination with ‘enlightened thinking’ also mean, for one writer, that ‘there will be less out-of-home care for children and [fewer] crisis pregnancies’.

Greater gender equality and work-family balance

The second core explanatory category for stronger families in the future pertains to the impact of social policies and structural changes, in particular changes in labour market participation of women, as well as the supportive role of intergenerational relations. These public and private supports are seen as supportive of child-rearing, in particular with reference to the cost of caring for young children (a consideration that makes sense against the backdrop of the extremely high cost of formal childcare in Ireland). The respondents envision a future where families are more central *precisely because women are able to find fulfilment as workers and as mothers*; this is an idea that runs strongly counter to what are still prominent remnants of highly gendered thinking on women and work in Ireland (e.g. the Irish Constitution still retains a famous clause that claims to protect women against the ‘economic necessity’ to engage in paid work ‘to the neglect of their duties in the home’):

If women were treated equally, they wouldn’t have to spend as long building their careers as they do now and therefore could have more time and money to have more children. They would also not be afraid of getting pregnant and losing their job or not getting enough maternity leave. (R. A-5)

The idea of women building careers is also linked to the notions around greater rationality and choice in relationship-formation as discussed above - although it is interesting to note that, in the second data extract below, choosing a male partner still features as taken-for-granted behaviour for a woman:

As women follow their career paths, women are getting married at a later stage. People are no longer so quick to get married, and thus seem to be ensuring that their romantic relationships are healthy and sustainable, before choosing to get married. As a result, there is less family breakdown. (R. A-12)

Women as a group now have their own economic and social standing and have a power base. They are able to pick the man that they want rather than having to choose the man to support them and give them social status. (R. A-16)

Several of the imagined changes in family policies are of the kind that encourage and enable couples to have children, by alleviating the *cost of children*, a theme that also comes to play a central role in the ‘scenario of decreasing family-centeredness’ (see discussion below):

Universal health care for all, free education with no third level entrance fees...have encouraged people to settle down, marry and have children as there are better opportunities for all children across the board. (R. A-3)

...childcare packages may have become more affordable, making it easier for low to middle income families to have larger families and work to support the children. (R. A-17)

The dual breadwinner scenario is envisaged to materialise through improvements in leave policies not just for mothers but also for fathers (paternity leave being very recent in Ireland – introduced in September 2016), and through greater reassurances over the quality of childcare

(an issue that regularly features in the Irish media through exposés of malpractices in kindergartens):

Increased maternity leave provisions and in particular an increase in paternity leave provisions has made it more practical for couples to have children as it has relieved them of the pressure of returning to work and finding childcare shortly after their child is born...the introduction of subsidised childcare has made childcare accessible to those who need it. Greater regulation of childcare facilities has also increased the standard of childcare; this has made parents more comfortable sending their children to childcare facilities. (R. A-13)

However, raising children is envisioned to be easier not just thanks to government interventions and improvements in formal services, but also through intergenerational solidarity within families. The anticipated impact of greater longevity and closer relationships with grandparents features in a number of responses that detail the mechanisms whereby the importance of grandparental support to younger family members is expected to increase:

...children are more likely to have all four grandparents alive and involved in their lives. This has led to intergenerational relations be more valued. Parents have the help of their parents for longer which has contributed to all relationships in family remaining close. (R. A-4)

The fact that economic recovery and consequent decline in emigration are expected to enhance intergenerational relations is understandable against the backdrop of developments

over the last decade in Ireland, where the Great Recession that started in 2007 led to an exodus of young workers, a trend that is only now beginning to be reversed:

Unemployment has come down dramatically...the need for economic emigration has been diminished...Now that we have more stability economically and politically around the world graduates can remain in their country of birth...We have closer bonds...greater contact with extended family members. (R. A-10)

However, not all students saw grandparents simply as a useful childcare reserve. In the following data extract the respondent envisages a fortuitous confluence of many factors that feed into a scenario where grandparents are closely involved, but less out of a need or family obligation, and more on the basis of a choice to cultivate deep intergenerational ties:

As the level of women in the workplace increases...and often both parents are working, official childcare services are more easily affordable for many. Thus, the grandparents can adopt a more fun and exciting role in the lives of the grandchildren...Caring for the grandchild is no longer viewed as a burden, but instead is time spent building relationships. (R. A-12)

Therefore, while extended family members remain central in this scenario, their role is expected to be transformed into a more 'leisurely' one due to improved and more affordable formal childcare services.

We will now turn to analysing the texts that put forward imagined reasons for 'weakened families'.

Scenario of decreasing family-centeredness

This scenario is organised around two core explanatory categories: economic and labour market changes and value changes.

Economic and labour market changes

The students expected economic and labour market changes to play a dominant role in weakening families. There are two main ‘storylines’ for this scenario, the benign one where economic growth and gender equality in the labour market gradually bring about changes, and the almost dystopian one where economic inequality leads to a situation where only the wealthy can have children.

On the more benign side, many of the students made a connection between increased labour market participation of women and greater gender equality, and a decline in the importance of families. However, the pressures of evolving labour markets are not seen as affecting women only, but rather the anticipated necessity to be more work-focused, and greater geographical distances between family members, are expected to contribute to the decline in the centrality of family life. These views echo the widely-shared experience among Irish people of witnessing family members and friends emigrate for work, and often settle abroad. These notions portray a globalised world where educational and career pursuits are borderless, and older family generations are frequently left behind:

Younger generations might move abroad for college and other career opportunities, whereas the older generations might stay in their country of origin. Of course,

technology might still play a huge role in keeping in touch with the loved ones, however it is clearly not the same as face-to-face contact. (R. B-10)

More drastically, some respondents envisaged a loss of meaning and attachment to the idea of romantic love as the demands of work increase and the pace of life intensifies:

Romantic relationships are not highly valued above work life goals. When individuals become too busy to engage in these relationships, they stop. The concept of love is seen as an inefficient use of time. (R. B-8)

The dystopian scenario where the cost of living has become prohibitive, in the sense of *a serious obstacle to having children*, was a predominant category in the data pertaining to the ‘decreasing family-centeredness’ narration. In this scenario, the cost of living – in particular the cost of housing – is envisaged to be so high as to absorb a very large share of earnings, even in dual-earner households. The current housing crisis in Ireland (especially in Dublin) can be seen to shape these responses:

The low birth rates have occurred...because of the increasing pressure on people to work more in order to provide for a home and the huge cost of living in this country. People have given up on the idea of having a nice home and being married with a few children...family relations are pushed to the back as people try to keep their heads above water to live a decent life. (R.B- 4)

A corollary of this phenomenon is rising inequality, which in turn means that children are imagined to have become a ‘luxury good’, attainable only for the wealthiest:

...working couples...had to use so much of their income on housing it left them in a position where they could not afford to have children. Both must be working in order to keep a roof over their head...Because of the huge debt...[the government] could not implement any worthwhile policies...Those who were really well off could afford children...Families are becoming something only the wealthiest can afford (R. B-5).

Indeed, some responses came close to envisaging a kind of class conflict, where the lower earners resent the sense of righteousness and entitlement that the better-off project towards those who are deemed to lack the right to have children, due to their low incomes and consequent inability to afford children:

How can I have a child/ren when I have insufficient funds nor can I afford a house, childcare, education, a livelihood....why should I have children in a society that penalises low-income parents for having children. The snobbery of the middle class thinking that they are the moral ones who have the 'right' to have children while the poor working should not have the 'right' to have children because they have not earned that right... (R. B-16).

The economic struggles of low- and middle-income earners are also envisaged to reverberate through the generations, and across the entire life course as the high demands of working life and the inability to save impact on intergenerational relations and lives at older ages, where people are seen to become more individualistic in their orientation to leisure rather than family duties:

Traditionally grandparents would have taken over the role of bridging the child minding gap but now their children lived far away [due to economic migration] they could no longer do this. As the grandparents were living longer this kept them in the labour market for longer as they had to keep earning money in order to pay for increased expense of everything. Also a larger number of these older people don't wish to be used as childminders. Having worked for 40 or 50 years they wanted to enjoy their retirement. This refusal...to mind their children's children prevented [younger generation] having children. (R. B-5)

The effect of increased dedication to paid employment is also imagined to be felt in generational relations more broadly, including in the parent-young child relationship, and in attitudinal differences between younger, more liberal generations and the older, more conservative ones:

To sustain a home in many households means both parents work, which reduces the amount of family time. Much of the child's daily interactions are from an external person, usually a worker in a crèche. (R. B-14)

People value friendship as their family now so if they fall out with actual family members it's not a big deal...due to the referendum and the freedom for same-sex marriages and relationships. The older generation has not been accepting of such a change and therefore their younger generation family members simply leave them behind (R. B-15).

Intergenerational family relations are also believed to be negatively impacted by childlessness and low fertility, divorce, reconstituted families and emigration: older family members might find themselves lonely with no one to look after them.

Change in the value system

The second major explanatory factor in envisioning the decline of the family in the future was the category of values, where the decline of the Catholic Church is referenced as paving the way for a decline in the importance of the family. This is particularly interesting because, as discussed above, decline of Catholicism was envisaged to underpin the 'stronger future families' scenario as well:

One reason why there has been a decrease in the importance of family is because of the decline of the influence the Catholic Church has on the population. In previous years, people were forced to marry young into committed relationships. Due to the political influence that the church had...divorce and marriage separation was not possible. The church also had an influence on birth control and education in relation to family planning. (R. B-13)

Other factors are also seen as contributing to the decline in the importance of marriage, including a more general change in attitudes towards unmarried people, and the greater economic independence of individuals:

People don't feel the pressures of society to get married...and think more practically in terms of finance, such as the cost of bringing up a child. They do not feel the need

to marry as unlike in the past, they are more independent and can support themselves.

(R.B-7)

Divorce is no longer stigmatised, remarriage and reconstituted families are more common, but weakening of the bonds between family members is expected to be one of the consequences of this:

Whereas people used to be married for life, this is no longer the case as people may remarry couple of times and might have children with multiple spouses. Once remarried, they may have more children with their new partner. As a result, they might spend more time with their new spouse and kids. This could put constraints on family relationships. (R B-10)

Lastly, social media and non-kin are seen to offer possibilities for relationships and assistance, so that the family is not needed:

...people are looking more to their networks of friends for support. Technology has introduced social networks such as Facebook and Twitter where people are engaging more with people outside the family. (R. B-4)

Thus, the importance of social relationships is not weakening; it is the 'forced' marriage and the normatively imposed family practices that are envisioned to lose their importance.

Discussion and conclusions

The young people who participated in this study were able to imagine potential futures of families and to assign diverse antecedents to these visions. Obviously, the instructive frame story of the writing task and the two versions of the frame story impacted on how the students wrote, but the texts are the results of the imaginative ‘bricolage’ (Duncan 2011) that the students engaged in. The students explained the future changes in families primarily with reference to: 1) the economy and employment, 2) values and religion, 3) family policy and 4) technology. These explanatory factors were emphasised differently and partly contradictorily in the two scenarios, drawing on aspects of the young people’s life stage positions, experiences, their meanings and values together with contemporary debates and wider cultural discourses influenced by expert views (c.f. Savage 2011). .

Of particular note is the fact that two forces, namely religion/Church and women’s employment/dual breadwinner scenario, were strongly drawn on to explain *both* the ‘stronger families’ *and* the ‘weaker families’ scenarios. This emphasises the cultural importance of some social forces in family change. The most evident is the role of the Catholic Church as a change engine in both visions of the future families. The Catholic Church continues to play a strong role in the social imaginaries of young people. This reflects the recent rapid social, economic and value changes in Ireland, and a generation that bridges the past and the present.

In the scenario of the stronger future families, we saw how the students envisage a future where old (religious) belief systems and their control over family formation have been replaced by a more secular and rational approach. Instead of religious guidelines, the future is seen as free from any particular doctrines (this is in the line with the European trend: the youngest generations are less religious than the older ones c.f. Collins-May 2012, 81). It is

striking how many respondents referred to family formation as a *rational choice*, both in terms of choosing ‘the right’ partner (and hence staying together for good) and in terms of having children at the ‘right’ time (when career has been established). However, family formation is also envisaged to remain value-based in the broader sense that the values of freedom, reason and tolerance have come to play a central role in allowing people to become self-directing agents who make decisions about family and children on the basis of their own choices, which in turn are guided first and foremost by love and more ‘enlightened’ approaches to marriage and family formation. This vision mirrors the values social liberalism, concerned with gender equality and different family formations and ways of living. In this thinking the hetero-normative marriage has given way to multiple forms of families shaped by cohabitation, single parents, blended families and same-sex couples (Henricson 2012, 17, 19–20). It is perhaps particularly encouraging that movement towards greater gender equality is seen as a fundamental underpinning of stronger families in the future: the students have faith in what is commonly referred to as ‘the Nordic model’ where high levels of gender equality go hand in hand with comparatively high (in Western context) fertility rates.

The most startling aspect of the ‘family decline’ scenario is the notion that family life is in the process of becoming differentiated by socio-economic resources. There is evidence that aspects of family life are becoming strongly differentiated along social class lines in countries such as the United States, where some scholars now allude to marriage as a ‘luxury good’ in the light of class-based decline in marriage (Pew Research Center 2010). Most aspects of family life in Ireland remain ‘classless’ for now - for instance the number of children per woman is not contoured by class (Fahey 2015) - but the students who took part in our research indicated that a return to a world where singlehood and childlessness become more widespread among lower-income groups is imaginable for them. Indeed, this would

constitute a reversal to the historical pattern of restricted access to family formation for lower-earning groups, which has left large numbers of never-married people (men in particular) in the current older population of Ireland (Timonen and Doyle 2014). Fears about the future are reflected in this vision, mirroring perhaps the more general cultural logic of risk awareness (Beck 1992). Increasing poverty and growing inequalities between families, and the implications of these trends for the welfare of future generations have become a concern in many European countries. The recent financial crisis, together with austerity measures and cutbacks in social protection schemes, has served as a particularly strong impetus for risk awareness in Ireland, one of the countries hardest hit by the crisis. One central threat is the prospect of total reliance on oneself to cope with everyday life (without state support), something that many of our participants had witnessed among their social and family circles as people in Ireland took recourse to emigration and other solutions that signalled a profound disconnect from the Irish state.

When compared to the European context, in many respects, young students' visions of the future of the family in Ireland might not appear particularly radical or even imaginative. Many of the developments they envisage have already played out in several European countries where, for instance, motherhood is not considered a major obstacle to labour market participation. In the Irish context, however, progress towards many aspects of gender equality is still incipient (for instance, paternity leave was introduced as late as 2016). Therefore, the envisioned futures outlined in this article are transformational and far-reaching, from the perspective of 20-23-year-old students in Ireland. This contrast to the broader European context is intelligible in the light of the different life course experiences of our participants, many of whom were witnessing for the first time aspects of transformation in gender relations, such as fathers taking paternity leave and more mothers working outside the home.

Overall, our results evidence the interplay of two rather different forces of advanced modernisation and post-industrial economy in Irish society, within which young adults envision the future. On the one hand, the students orient strongly to a future where religion plays little role, and tolerance and individual freedom to choose govern family formation. This can be seen as an aspect of the ethos of individualism which social theorists have more generally linked to family change (Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Giddens 1992). On the other hand, the data evinces a distinct unease with the ‘economics’ of family life: will it remain affordable for all, or will some groups be deprived of the possibility to marry and have children? So, contrary to what the individualisation thesis proposes, financial necessity is a strong factor in the Irish students’ orientations. Put together, these two visions create a tension between more freedom (in choosing values, partners, whether to have children) and less freedom (due to inability to afford the ‘luxury’ of family life); this is the dialectic that young students in Ireland face as they contemplate their future selves as potential spouses and parents, or as single, childless adults.

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