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Why Progressives Should be Pro-Family

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Family values and market values

When Margaret Thatcher dismissed the notion of society in the late 1980s we were not left with straightforward individualism. We were to make do, specifically, with 'individuals *and their families*'. Protecting and promoting the institution and value of families has long been claimed as a conservative agenda. In practice, conservatives have rarely been able to honour their commitment to families. The conservative aspiration to hold together a postwar family model may have been genuinely strong, but it proved weak against the breakup of the postwar social settlement. We saw this when indicators of poor quality families shot up over the 1980s and early 1990s. It seemed the greater the angst about family breakdown, from lone or teen parenthood, from having children outside marriage to divorce, the faster it rose.

This terrible clash—pairing family values with free-market values—has re-emerged recently in the United Kingdom. 'Compassionate Conservatism', proclaimed by Prime Minister Cameron, has fallen foul of 'austerity' economics. Despite the ambition to become the most family-friendly country in Europe, within the first year of the Conservative-led coalition, the British government was 'downgraded' by the Family and Parenting Institute for its record on families. Pre-election vows, such as the tax break for married couples have been quietly ditched, as fiscal challenges expose the tensions between liberal and social conservatism.

Public fairness and private families

While the political right struggles to defend or publicly value the family in practice, the left rejects (if not ridicules) the very idea. For those seeking social justice, families are often seen as a problem. Families redouble and reproduce inequalities by bringing together advantages and passing them on to their children. They inevitably put their own before the wider public good. They are the main site, if not source, of inequalities between men and women. And, as a private sphere, the family demarcates the limits of government action on equality, however necessary that limit might be to preserve liberty and autonomy.

While different traditions on the left accept different balances between protecting family, on the one hand, and promoting fairness, on the other, egalitarian thinking is trapped in this trade-off. Being pro-family is seen as being anti-equality, women or minorities. This makes the left deeply suspicious of endorsing, encouraging and valuing the family as an institution. But, while families certainly do amplify inequalities between and within them, the picture is more complex. Differential access to family life is an inequality itself—and one that drives and sustains other inequalities.

While the demands of fairness are disputed even amongst egalitarians, even relatively moderate conceptions of social justice, rooted in John Rawls, recognise two core components. First, everyone should be able to access a decent

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minimum of primary goods (or core capabilities, in Sen and Nussbaum's approach). Second, there is a fair distribution of other goods based broadly on merit and desert; popularly referred to as an 'equality of opportunity'. Empirical analysis suggests that family relationships matter both in and of themselves, and in enabling fair opportunities; a full answer to Sen's challenge to egalitarians, 'equality of what?'[1] would include family relationships.

There are unique aspects of families—close, committed, quality relationships—that affect access to a decent quality of life, and to fair chances in life. Good family life could be seen as a 'primary good': we need it no matter what else we want from life. And the access one has to family and care impacts one's choices indirectly because this access affects the distribution of other goods that preoccupy egalitarians: education, work, income or wealth. This is why it is difficult for conservatives to square a commitment to the family with one to the 'free' market. But it is also why it will be increasingly hard for egalitarians to maintain a commitment to advancing social justice alongside a liberal indifference to the quality and structure of families. Egalitarians should value greater equality in people's access to good family relationships and care as an end in itself. Yet, even if they only want greater fairness in schools or work, they need to acknowledge unequal access to good family life.

A decent minimum of family care?

Poverty is usually defined and measured in economic terms: to be poor is often to lack income or basic material resources. But it has an invisible emotional aspect to it too. Those children who have the poorest outcomes, in school, work or in wider life, are not only those with the lowest incomes. They are those who have gone without close attachment and relational care. The divide between those who have their 'basic' emotional needs met, and those who do not, is less observable, but no less consequential. When we 'decluster disadvantage'[2] we see that emotional needs can be just as 'basic' as economic ones. And, where we find emotional poverty, we do not always find economic poverty, and vice-versa.

Children deprived of secure caring family relationships carry a high and lasting risk of poor development. At the extreme, children who have been abused or neglected, and have spent time in local authority (state) care, are greatly overrepresented amongst those with behavioural and mental health problems. They are more likely to have 'special educational needs' and less likely to get GCSEs than those on free school meals (a measure of their parents being on low and largely benefit income). While the school attainment gap between those on free school meals and other children has narrowed slightly over recent years, the gap between children in care and other children has widened.

Lacking basic family care is no small problem: in England and Wales, more than half a million children were known to be 'in need' on social work registers over the last year. There are gradations of what we might call 'emotional poverty' too. For the United Kingdom, from the Millennium Cohort Study we can estimate that 23 per cent of children lacked either warm or consistent parenting.

These family relationship advantages, often observed and measured as 'socio-emotional skills', are increasingly important to how well people progress in school and work, and their probability of accessing a decent income. Positive parent–child relationships can help children in low-income families become ready for school. In explaining why income inequality persists between the generations, personal and social skills were 33 times more important for those born in

1970, than for those born over a decade earlier in 1958.[3] James Heckman has shown emotional capabilities are a stronger predictor of long-term educational achievements than are cognitive abilities in mathematics.[4] It should therefore be concerning that England's Early Years Foundation Profile shows fewer children meet expected levels of emotional development than expected levels of numeracy before they start school.

Rightly anxious to maintain attention on economic poverty and inequality, the left has been too quick to dismiss concerns with the quality, and the stability, of family relationships. Given that having an actively involved and interested father is one of the strongest indicators of later educational success, it should trouble egalitarians that one in six babies are now born without a father even living with their mothers. Even before they have started school, one in four children have now seen their parents' relationship status change and become less stable.[5] While a third of those born to single parents who then had periods of partnerships already had behavioural problems by the time they were five, only 13 per cent of those who had stable married parents over the first years did. This should be alarming, but not surprising: children thrive and achieve when they—and their parents—feel wanted, worthy and secure. The divide is less between different kinds of family structures, than between those households that form a family structure, and those that do not.

While economic and emotional inequalities are certainly associated with each other, they cannot be collapsed into one another. Families affect chances in life in terms of the education, income and wealth they can give their members, including their children, but also importantly through the time, sensitivity, security and stability they are able to offer. Money cannot simply buy you love, or care.

Disadvantage as the loss of family life

Children with good socio-emotional development grow up in an environment that meets their social and emotional needs. That does not mean exclusively maternal or familial care, but it does rely upon stable, secure, close and responsive family relationships. Children who are not securely attached to their parents are significantly disadvantaged when it comes to developing trust, a balanced sense of self and self-regulating emotions, and even brain development. Income-poverty undoubtedly matters: growing up in a low-income household is the single biggest predictor of a wide range of poor outcomes in childhood and into adulthood. But family care also matters.

Relational care cannot be reduced to low income; a consistent relationship has yet been established between the quality of parental attachment and family income. Emotional care is an enabler of other forms of child development. Childcare helps families and mitigates educational disadvantages before school, particularly for children most disadvantaged at home. But even if it were universally available in its highest quality forms, it could not replace good family relationships.

While research increasingly supports this idea, it is not new. For early thinkers on child wellbeing, deprivation was seen in terms of 'the loss of family life'. Those children that suffered most, and would cause most concern for wider society, were not necessarily the poorest, but those children that lacked an attachment, or a close consistent bond with an adult. For attachment theorists such as John Bowlby, close consistent relationships in early childhood serve as a 'secure base' from which self-efficacy and independence spring. One of the most important benefits of secure attachment is the ability to make and sustain good relationships as adults.

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Adults need families too

While family disadvantage is felt more acutely in childhood, it is by no means unique to that stage. Like economic poverty, emotional poverty has an intra- and inter-generational legacy: one of the major problems with not experiencing good, strong relationships as a child is it makes it harder to make them as an adult, and a parent. This is a problem because adults need care and relationships too.

Liberal egalitarians tend to see the question of 'dependency' needs—for example for disabled people—as a minority issue, the exception or boundary to a presumed autonomy. In reality, however, there is a spectrum and flow of inter-dependencies throughout the life course. While some people need more care, or need it for longer than others, everyone needs some care. Throughout life, we are all sick at times and of course we will become old. But even when we are not physically dependent on others, we are psychologically reliant upon partners, parents or adult children. Indeed, neuropsychiatrist Daniel Siegel notes that 'scientific studies of longevity, medical and mental health, happiness and even wisdom point to supportive relationships as the most robust predictor of these positive attributes in our lives across the life span'.[6]

So often it is the support of a consistent relationship with another adult that enables those who have suffered setbacks in the normal course of life, like losing a job, suffering loss, depression, becoming temporarily ill or disabled, even getting into trouble with the law or developing an addiction, to bounce back. Yet questions of family care, seen to be extreme cases of 'dependency', are relegated as an exception to the usual questions of justice between mutually independent people. This is ironic because individuals who are not inter-dependent on each other through family relationships are those most likely to become heavily 'dependent' on the state.

The risk of poverty varies widely by family form. In the United Kingdom, hardly any children with two parents who can work are in relative poverty, even if one is working part-time. Of course, some of this simply reflects the number of potential earners in a family. This is also partly a product of the ability to share care too: an equal division of domestic labour assumes two adults by which to divide it. And it could also reflect something less easily measured: that what makes people more likely to find stable, productive work is also what makes people more likely to make stable, productive relationships. What is clear is that countries with high proportions of children in lone parent families have to work much harder to reduce child poverty.

While the social and emotional skills learnt primarily through families increasingly help explain why income inequality persists over the generations, changing families also helps explain the overall rise in income inequality. While changing labour market structures have increased wage inequality, across rich nations changing family structures have exacerbated them. High rates of single-parent families play a large part in the high household inequality found in both the United States and the United Kingdom. With many mortgages also now requiring two incomes, we should expect divides in wealth to multiply and solidify too. Forming families, or not, is a major part of the 'pre-distribution' of economic inequality.

Relational care, then, can be thought of as a primary good or core capability. We need family care and relationships no matter what else we want in life. And while access to relational care might be deemed part of a 'private' sphere, it significantly shapes accepted, public disadvantages, such as in education or income. Family care is one of the original ideas of early intervention: as far as there are effective inoculations against social problems or exclusion, quality, stable

family relationships appears to be one. And having and forming a close, caring family is the socially mobile's secret weapon.

The growing gap between the rich and poor in family life

Family relationships are in this way shaping 'traditional' inequalities, around work and income. But inequalities in the access to good family life are themselves widening. This is true of family time and resources: while better educated parents in general can now invest more time in parenting, for example, the opposite is true of less educated parents. Yet it is also true in terms of family type. As W.B Wilcox has shown, since the 1980s, on average, while children from university-educated homes have seen their family lives stabilise and improve; children from less educated homes have experienced the reverse.

The gap in children's opportunities by family type is substantial: even if we control for low-income, on average, having a single parent significantly raises the chances of having poorer outcomes as a child compared to having married parents. When socio-economic factors are controlled for statistically, the difference being married itself (compared to cohabiting) is reduced by half, but still statistically significant.[7] The problem is changes in family structure and quality are far from independent of socio-economic factors. As the authors note, at the time of their child's birth, married couples are around twice as likely to be in the highest household income quintile and over three times less likely to be in the lowest household income quintile.

Controlling for all other factors, this research is important in telling us that if one otherwise similar couple got married, it would have a limited impact on their child's outcomes by age seven, warning us off using simplistic incentives in tax or benefits systems to encourage marriage. What it obscures is how strongly being married as parents is related to social class, and how both are related to children's opportunities.

We do not know whether the relationship between family structure and child outcomes is causal, let alone what might be causing what. It is plausible that family care affects children's access to education and income, and that economic circumstances shape adults' ability to access a good family life. Marriage itself is just one imperfect indicator of the quality and commitment of family relationships. Just as family income is one imperfect indicator of what people really care about, be that choice, resources, capability, utility or social status.

The evidence does show that in liberal welfare states at least, different family structures are drawn from very different socio-economic groups. In the United Kingdom, if your father was a professional, your chances of being born to unmarried parents rose only slightly between 1980 and 2000. But if your father was unskilled, those chances rose significantly. Even of those births to unmarried parents registered jointly by both parents in 2009, the Office for National Statistics data shows only 8 per cent were in the higher professional or managerial classes.

This class divide in family form is similarly sharp in the United States, where, between 1997 and 2001, only 3 per cent of births to women with a four-year college degree were in cohabitations; compared to nearly a third of births to women who did not graduate high school.[8] Indeed, in America, for white, college-educated women, there has been no change at all in the rate of childbearing outside marriage since 1982.[9]

Beyond childbearing outside marriage, there are broader signs of a growing social divide in family quality and stability. Research from America finds that while many unmarried parents think it is best to

bring up children in marriage, their relationships struggle in the face of major problems, with many in extreme poverty and nearly two-fifths of fathers having been in prison.[10] In the United Kingdom, teenage parenthood is even more strongly associated with low-income than in the United States.[11] Lone-parenting too is more likely to occur in already lower socio-economic groups and younger parents, and is increasingly the result of the breakdown of cohabiting relationships. Even your chances of divorcing relate to your social class. In the United States, around a third of couples in the top income quartile divorced between 1980 and 2000. Over half of low-income couples divorced over the same twenty-year period[12].

If only major changes in the shape of families were in fact being driven, as conservatives have derided and liberals have assumed, by some middle-class feminist revolution.

Just families?

Liberal egalitarians, with their focus on economic distribution, have largely pushed questions of care beyond the boundaries of justice. Some think that questions of justice do not even apply appropriately to families and relationships. The suggestion is that 'the ethics of care applies to our relations with dependents, while the ethics of justice applies to relations amongst autonomous adults'.[13] Meeting emotional and care needs requires empathy and compassion; relationships rather than abstract rules. Certainly, family, care and relationships are a valued part of the good life, and ends in themselves. Yet, family relationships prove so important to other aspects of social justice that they cannot be parked as the exception to philosophical rules. Far from being an issue only in infancy or for those with acute disability, needing care is a common human experience. Family relationships affect not just quality of life, but chances in life. They are a product not only of free choices, but unequal resources, time and capacities, not simply money. Family care and emotional wellbeing are certainly ends in themselves; outcomes many value personally. But they are also important means to usual, public, social justice ends.

Recognising the importance of family care for social justice need not mean proclaiming a single, 'traditional' or religiously sanctioned model of the family. On the contrary, it would mean extending the definition of families more widely. For example, that family institutions like marriage come with major advantages is one argument why denying gay and lesbian couples equal access to it is unjust. Furthermore, prioritising quality, committed relationships demands more not less gender equality. More equal gender roles, for example, have been associated with increased marital quality.[14] But it is inconsistent to expect full shared parenting from middle-class fathers, and so little from low-income, non-resident fathers. Among the prerequisites for more equal parenting and partnerships are two involved parents and lasting partnerships.

Many aspects of family change do represent radical improvements from the oppressive gender roles historically reinforced through families. Yet these trends in family instability, with their stark social gradients, do not appear to reflect some mass rejection of state-sanctioned patriarchy of the postwar family, or women freely opting to eschew otherwise committed partners and active, contributing fathers. Overall, family life has improved in recent years. However, if our concern is fair chances, the question is not whether families have got better or worse. It is whether families could be better for all.

Precisely how families could be better is the key conundrum for social policy. The challenge is how to reduce inequal-

ities *in* family life while also promoting gender justice *within* families and social justice *between* families. It is also how to reduce all aspects inequalities in family life—without 'leveling-down' the best of families, and while protecting the private aspects of family life, fundamental to many people's idea of a good life. Unless we give up the powerful idea of justice altogether, however, public policy (as in other non-ideal circumstances) must recognise family care as a primary good, and the inequalities in access to good family life. For unless societies can safeguard a decent minimum of family care, progress to address disadvantage and social exclusion will likely remain marginal. Unless societies 'level-up' access to good family life and care, we should expect social mobility to continue to fail to materialise *en masse*.

Defending and championing families as institutions, a role long claimed by conservatives, therefore needs to be taken on by progressives. A new generation of egalitarians should be as troubled by the shortage of decent relationships as that of decent jobs; concerned about the distribution of care as well as income. They should be as wary of the 'hollowing out'[15] of family institutions as that of public institutions. So long as the gap in good family life is left to grow, even a minimal idea of social justice will escape us.

Notes

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