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## BEYOND DEMOGRAPHY: HISTORY, RITUAL AND FAMILIES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Family life in the twenty-first century is characterised by anxiety and uncertainty about what it means to 'be family', and indeed what the functions of families are. The stability provided by external sources such as church, state and community is being steadily eroded as families become increasingly secular and diverse. In this monograph it is argued that family rituals provide a strong potential and actual source of strength, meaning and stability for families. A short history of families and family change is offered, with the caveat that there is not one, nor a linear, history of families in Western society. The current status of many families now as sites of intense demands for emotional fulfilment, along with the elevation of children's powers, the intensity of the parent-child relationship, and the tensions between individual and collective identities, is described. The potential for family rituals to be powerful mechanisms for meeting the needs of families in the twenty-first century is discussed first by a consideration of the history and social evolution of rituals from public ceremonies to private and sometimes implicit patterns of behaviour. Their functions in developing, sustaining and modifying family meaning and identity are described and linked with the small body of existing research that examines their roles as sources of family resilience.

# 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The concept of family is deeply embedded in our lives at individual, communal and social levels. Some form of families has always existed and, like the air we breathe, their existence is taken for granted. All societies at all times have encompassed groupings of individuals responsible for the social and biological reproduction of these societies. Yet, unlike the air we breathe, the definition and nature of families are vigorously contested, perhaps more so in the twenty-first century than ever before. This contesting encompasses an unprecedented focus on the meaning, importance, imputed demise and renegotiation of families and family lives. The institution of families is credited with responsibility for the wellbeing and potential downfall of nations, with the health and ill-health of communities, and the flourishing or dysfunctioning of the individuals that constitute it. The heat and light that accompany debate about families are potent evidence of the centrality of the place they occupy at all levels, from individual to national.

Paramount in much discourse about families is anxiety about their very existence into the future. Commentators such as Popenoe (1993) take a particularly pessimistic view of family life, suggesting that families are no longer able to carry out even the pared-down functions required of them. Families, he suggests, have changed from being multi-functional institutions providing education, religious guidance and work, to having just two functions – childrearing and the provision of affection and companionship; and their ability to carry out even these is severely compromised by diversity and instability. Perhaps the ultimate breakdown of family structure is seen in the groupings of children and adolescents living without parents on the streets in some South American cities, raising themselves without the input of adults. This scenario was compellingly fictionalised in the novel *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding (1954). Yet, as we will see, this is not a new phenomenon. Other commentators point to the statistics reflecting family transitions, diverse (and often by implication dysfunctional) family forms such as lone-parent and same-sex parent families, and voluntary childlessness, as evidence that the family as a secure institution is breaking down.

A major suspect in the purported demise of the family is the rise of individualism in Western societies. This is often depicted as the triumph of individual selfishness over communal beliefs and values, and there is no doubt that the structures of many institutions address the needs of individuals rather than families. Examples include the demise of the family wage, lack of family-friendly workplaces, and shift work. Beck-Gernsheim (2002) describes the tension between recent calls by governments to support families and family values, and the pervasive encouragement to get on in the world as an individual. She points to ‘flexibilisation’ and deregulation of labour in the UK, for example, as movements incompatible with family life.

Why is there such widespread concern about families? One reason may be that despite their pared-down functions there is heightened acknowledgement of their fundamental importance to societies, perhaps magnified by the impression of imminent demise. There is also a self-consciousness about one’s family and of belonging to the specified group that is relatively new historically; in the past, families and households were regarded more pragmatically than today. The diversity and perceived instability of this group has generated both an awareness of its importance and a level of anxiety in face of uncertainty. The ‘taken for granted’ nature of families has changed.

A second reason is that, in the twenty-first century and the one preceding it, families became centres of meaning and identity in ways they had not been in the past. This is particularly so as external sources of meaning, at least in the Western world, diminish in their impact and importance. Ours is an increasingly secular society, where communities and churches define less and less who we are and what we should believe. Instead, our families have become the sites for instilling (or not) values and moral frameworks. At an individual level, then, we are acutely aware of both the blessings and curses of our families in relation to our individual wellbeing. And with individualism has come both choice about who we are as individuals, and simultaneously a more self-conscious search for connection and belonging to our families.

There is no doubt that today’s statistics give rise, if not for alarm, then at least cause for attention to the state of our families. There is also a strong tendency for some of those who agonise over the fate and state of families to yearn for a return to earlier eras when God was in his heaven and families were havens in a heartless world. Those adhering to this perspective suggest that if only couples were married, and women out of the workforce, then family life would return to the largely imagined golden state of the 1950s. An alternative perspective, taken by writers such as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim

(1995), Coontz (2000a, b) and Giddens (1991), is to acknowledge what seems to be a 'normalisation of fragility'; to view families as flexing rather than breaking, and to examine both how families have come to be as they are today and to focus on factors and strategies that foster the wellbeing and flourishing of families and of the individuals in them.

In this monograph, the second stance is assumed. The chances of turning back the clock to the conditions that prevailed in the mid-twentieth century are almost non-existent, given the radical social and economic changes of the past 50 years. Firstly, the contribution of an historical perspective to an understanding of how families have become what they are today will be discussed. Secondly, the history, definition and functions of rituals in families will be addressed. Finally, the implications of rituals for families in the twenty-first century will be discussed. Most literature on family history and rituals is based in European and North American settings; however, as far as possible, the relevance of these two strands of enquiry to the New Zealand context will be discussed.



## 2.0 HISTORY OF FAMILIES

Family (def.): Those that live in the same house, including parents, children, and servants; father and mother and children; such a group including other relations (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*).

Much of the concern expressed about the state of families takes as its point of reference the 'nuclear' family of the mid-twentieth century. Yet the lens of history reveals that the predominance of this family form was a comparative blip. The longer perspective offered by history is not only of intrinsic interest; it also enables a calmer evaluation of today's debates and anxieties than does a shorter timeframe. An historical perspective can illuminate a lot of what is not new about today's families, as well as delineating what new issues are being confronted.

A potent source of anxiety about modern families is the apparent proliferation of diverse family forms. This is accompanied by the concern that children, in particular, may be disadvantaged by being raised in a grouping other than what, for Western Pākehā societies, is the gold standard represented by the nuclear family. The nuclear family comprises two heterosexual married parents and their children, living in a household by themselves. Yet Western society, along with all other societies, has always at any one time encompassed many family structures, all of which function to facilitate social and personal reproduction (Coontz 2000a, b). As Coontz suggests:

...on the one hand, the [historical] evidence argues against any universal definition of 'the' family, whether it is based on structural, functional or psychological criteria. On the other hand, in almost all societies, families seem to be a basic unit for coordinating personal and reproduction and redistribution with larger societal patterns of production and change (Coontz 2000a).

As Coontz also points out, contemporary angst about diversity is not because it exists, but because it is increasingly evident and even legitimised by significant proportions of society and by policy. The *Civil Union Act*, the Domestic Purposes Benefit and no-fault divorce laws are all direct or indirect exemplars of legal support for families other than those that are 'nuclear'.

History also casts light on *who* constitutes 'family'. Despite current emphasis on legal or biological ties, families in eighteenth century England and North America were made up of whomever resided in the household, and it is notable that this is the current first definition in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. This usually included non-related individuals who might be boarders, distantly related family members and apprentices, while biological kin such as children often resided in other households and were regarded as members of those 'families'. Private spaces for parents and children, whom we today regard as the legitimate family, were not considered important; houses being open spaces for everyone in the household.

In the early nineteenth century, there was a proliferation of families of strangers (groups with no biological ties) for other reasons, based on beliefs or religious convictions. John Gillis (1997) describes the formation of communities of spiritual families in North America and Europe. Some of these communities were explicit rejections of conventional family groupings; Joseph Smith, for example, the founder of Mormonism, established polygamy as a family structure within a spiritual framework.

Families of strangers were also formed as a result of the rejection of religion and these, too, took forms other than the conventional patriarchal one that characterised earlier families. Gillis (1997) describes the Owenites as:

...extended families based on the basis of egalitarian brotherhood and sisterhood rather than on patriarchal principles. Marriage choices were to be free of all property considerations, and divorce was allowed when love was absent – provided that the offspring of the union were taken care of – in their own case, by the community (p. 69).

More generally, Gillis points out that there was a sustained period of experimentation with family forms and structures in the mid-nineteenth century that parallels that seen today, and was most likely to be a response to uncertainty about family life arising from the industrial revolution.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought with them social changes that had a fundamental impact on families. One of the most significant was the introduction of compulsory education in the Western world. Children who had once learned at the knees of their parents now went

to school and gained an education that fostered the challenging of the power of parents and, in particular, fathers. As a result, families were forced to transform from hierarchical structures to more egalitarian forms in which decisions were both shared and negotiated. By the twentieth century, patriarchal power structures between couples began to yield to the companionate marriage, formed on the basis not of economic or other pragmatic reasons but of love. Marriage partners were seen as just that – partners – who provided companionship, love and emotional nurturance. Families became personal (emphasising feelings and individuality) rather than positional – based on roles, status and hierarchies. Skolnick (1997) describes the "psychological gentrification" of Western families, encompassing a "yearning for warmth and intimacy in family and other relationships" (p. 173).

Because to a large extent the concept of family in European societies three centuries ago included non-kin, and because households were predominantly economic units, family ties were accorded scant importance. Families existed in the present, and were closely identified with day-to-day life and the people one lived and worked with. Family time – the time that family members spent in each other's company – was abundant, informal and semi-public. This is in striking contrast to the time famine that many families experience today, where time spent together is increasingly hard to find. John Gillis suggests that the heightened awareness, celebration and angst about families today is precisely because family time is a scarce and precious commodity. "Home," he says, "is less a physical location than a mental construct, a thing of dreams as well as memories, present even in its absence" (Gillis 2002).

## 2.1 FAMILY HISTORY IN THE NEW ZEALAND CONTEXT

Historical literature about families comes predominantly from North America and Europe, and has some relevance for Pākehā families who are descended from these cultures and have tended to follow those societies demographically. New Zealand, though, is clearly different in its coming together of two cultures with different values, practices, structures and histories in relation to families. In this regard New Zealand resembles North America in some ways, since Native American culture came up against the different values and practices of early European colonists. For Native Americans, as for Māori, kinship was the primary basis for establishing institutions. Domestic, family-based functions were minimally delineated from public or political functions. Coontz (2000a) points out that "North American Native Americans had no institutionalised courts, police, army or other agencies to tax or coerce labor. Kin obligations organised production, distributed surplus products, and administered justice" (p. 21); this was also the case for Māori in New Zealand.

Joan Metge (1995) describes the changing meaning of whānau in her book *New Growth from Old. The Whānau in the Modern World*. There appears to be agreement amongst scholars that in the late eighteenth century, before significant contact with European society, the whānau comprised a three-generation family group – an older man and his wife, and some or all of their descendants, including spouses and their children. It was also a social and economic unit that managed production, consumption and day-to-day domestic life. The head of this unit was the oldest male. There is some suggestion that the individual, and the parent-child unit, had few functions within this wider unit. The whānau as a whole, rather than parents, had rights over children.

The coming of Europeans brought about inevitable changes, including legal restraints on Māori customs of adoption, marriage and guardianship. It was not until the passing of the Child Youth and Family Act in 1989 that whānau were recognised in law. Significantly, too, the economic context changed so that individual Māori worked for wages outside the whānau and iwi. Whānau ceased to be economic units of production.

Whānau in the mid-twentieth century were described by Metge, and by Winiata, Hohepa, and Kawharu, as:

...ancestor-oriented ... on the basis of descent traced through both male and female links ... their members were distributed among several different households... Group members managed their day-to-day affairs on a household basis but acted together as a group to sponsor life crisis hui and to care for whānau property (cited in Metge 1995:40).

Metge added that her observations suggested that participation, or not, in group activities was also relevant in regard to holding whānau membership.

Urban migration, intermarriage and other social factors have changed the structures and functions of families and whānau for Māori. Metge identifies five meanings of whānau inherited from ancestors, three of which have significance for Māori today. They are those who are all descendants of an ancestor, the sole criterion for membership being descent; descent plus active participation in the group; and a descent group that includes spouses and adopted children. This is the *te pa harakeke* model, the flax bush in which each child is represented by a *rito*, a new shoot, between two predecessors who are parents. The parent-child unit is part of the larger flax bush (whānau) that shares common roots and derives strength and stability from being a part of the larger whole.

Metge identifies new meanings for whānau in use at the end of the twentieth century. They include the parent-child family by itself; a group of kin, often city-based, who form for convenience rather than through descent; the 'elastic band' group that comprises large numbers of people often only distantly related; an assembly of people of like-mind and interests gathered for a common purpose; and an action group mobilised for a particular event such as a job interview.

Metge discusses the current tension for Maori between whānau as a descent group, and whānau as an extended family that includes the descent group but also partners and others. She also identifies the five functions of whānau in today's world:

- > Support and succour (including economic support)
- > Care and upbringing of children (the responsibility of the whole whānau)
- > Care and management of group property, including buildings, taonga, and knowledge
- > Organisation of hui, especially tangihanga
- > Dealing with internal conflicts and problems.

Overall, the history of whānau has both similarities and differences to Western family history. The group as an economic unit has changed – for Pākehā through the industrial revolution, for Māori through the influence of European society. Urban migration has meant geographical distance for family and whānau members. Māori put continuing emphasis on the importance of descent, something which (as will be discussed later) is a relatively late aspect of European families. Conversely, legal ties such as marriage have not had the same importance for Māori as they have for Europeans in defining family members. Perhaps most importantly, many whānau retain the role of extended family members in childrearing, economic support, decision-making and group interests in ways that are not so evident in European families.

Likewise, New Zealand shares with other countries the influence of more recent immigrant groups whose family values and practices differ from those of both indigenous and European cultures. It is possible that for immigrant groups family ties become more intensive than in their countries of origin as they seek to find a place in a new society, and to find support from their own groups. The complexity of family structures and households in New Zealand today is a result of rich culturally and socially diverse histories, practices and beliefs.

## 2.2 CHILDREN IN HISTORY

Curiously, historians have often approached the history of children separately from that of the family. The focus has been on attitudes to childhood (see, for example, Aries 1960) and child abuse (de Mause 1974), with the history of families running, at best, in parallel. There is, too, considerable debate amongst scholars about many aspects of the lives of children in the past (Cunningham 2005). There are, however, some relatively undisputed facts.

One is that levels of infant mortality dropped dramatically in the twentieth century. Prior to then, mortality rates ranged from 100 to 250 per 1,000 live births in Europe and North America. By the end of the twentieth century they were 11 per 1,000 births in Europe, and seven per 1,000 births in North America.

Infant mortality in Europe was at least partially the result of abandonment of children. In the mid-nineteenth century 100,000 children per year in Europe were abandoned at or near birth. And at the beginning of that century, 50 percent of children were put out to wet nurses; that rate had dropped to 41 percent by mid-century. Both of these factors meant that children were not raised by their biological parents, although many who were put out to wet nurses were claimed back at one or two years of age.

Many abandoned infants went into foundling hospitals and were regarded by the state as useful to be trained as soldiers or to replenish populations where they were low. We can surmise that nurturing and care were often minimal in foundling hospitals, and there was little awareness of the need for early stimulation or of the importance of early stable relationships with carers.

Poverty and illegitimacy contributed to the abandonment and wet nursing of babies; families could not afford to raise their infants, or women were too ashamed to acknowledge their birth outside marriage. Another factor was that artisan women went back into employment after birth rather than breastfeeding their infants, since they could not afford to leave the workforce. Although orphanages in New Zealand are within living memory for many of us, it is difficult to imagine the situation less than two centuries ago when such large numbers of children were raised in foundling homes from birth.

A second undisputed aspect of childhood 200 years ago was that children constituted a high proportion of the overall population. At that time one-third to one-half of the population was under 15 years old. They were, it seems, highly visible on the streets of towns and cities partly because of their numbers, and also because houses were often cramped. Their days were spent on the streets in preference to being inside, and many of these children were almost totally unsupervised. Some tried to get work in jobs such as in mines or as chimney sweeps, and there was no form of protection available for them.

There is robust debate about the nature of parent-child relationships at this time, with some arguing that children were valued predominantly for their economic contributions. Surplus children could easily be apprenticed out to supplement household income in families where the work was household-based, and some suggest that because of high infant and child mortality rates, the loss of a child was not felt in the ways it is today. Other scholars believe that there were close emotional bonds between children and parents and that despite high levels of infant mortality, the death of a child was deeply mourned. There is little doubt that stringent economic circumstances made it difficult for parents to care for infants if they had to go back to work after the birth. It is, though, impossible to know how keenly the rather frequent loss of a child was felt.

### **2.2.1 Schooling**

Schools, usually privately run, were established in Europe and North America well before the mid-nineteenth century. They were available predominantly to the middle classes and their primary purpose was not education, although reading and writing were taught. Their main function was to teach religious education, and schools were established in some countries as early as the sixteenth century in order to meet this end. In countries where there were close alliances between church and state, religious education was also encouraged for the poor, as a way of ensuring that the population knew their catechisms and that children grew up as civilised believers. It was, too, a short step toward schools becoming instruments for instilling national identity. An advisor to Marie Therese in 1770 wrote:

Observe the major goal of public education, the true source of love for the fatherland: to instil into the hearts of children the certainty that their welfare is inseparably joined to the welfare of the state and that the laws are wise, the trespassers unfortunate and foolish people (cited in Cunningham 2005:123).

School also provided a babysitting service for parents who could afford to pay, and some children as young as two years old attended school. Attendance generally varied according to demands for labour in the home, and on hardship since fees had to be paid. In general, labour needs took precedence over those for education, and boys were more likely than girls to be sent to school. This was in part because girls were needed for domestic duties in the household. It was also, though, considered more important for boys to be educated.

### **2.2.2 The rise of the romantic view of childhood**

Until the eighteenth century, childhood was not clearly demarcated from adulthood. This is evident in art from the early periods, where children are depicted as mini-adults, and they tended to be

considered adult as soon as they could work. The eighteenth century brought with it a profound change, at least in the middle classes, to views of childhood. Locke (1693, in Yolton and Yolton 1989) and Rousseau (1762, in Bloom (tr) 1974), in particular, were influential in delineating childhood as a phase in its own right, to be celebrated and fostered rather than being seen simply as a preparation for adulthood. Cunningham (2005:58) argues that this change was brought about largely by the secularisation of childhood, which was accompanied by a decline in the belief in original sin. Calvin's advocacy of infant damnation held considerable influence over parents. As described by Randolph Foster:

...the cause of ... reprobation and consequent damnation was their simple, inherited corruption. It was what belonged to them in their conception – what was engendered in the womb – what was given to them when being was given to them ... they were consigned to damnation when they were not a span long – unborn infants – and for what belonged to them as such, without reference to what they would be (Foster 2003).

It is notable that a belief in original sin has not disappeared entirely. The Presbyterian Church, for example, did not relinquish the doctrine of infant damnation until the twentieth century. And more recently the possibility of children having a 'lower nature' has been raised in debates around child murderers (see, for example, Margaret Bendroth 2000).

In the romantic view, nature was seen as more important for the development of the child than God. Rousseau was particularly emphatic on this point; he advocated allowing children to grow up in accordance with nature, with as little interference as possible from adults. Rousseau was also the champion of mothers, in contrast to Locke and others who saw fathers as pivotal to 'healthy' development in children. Rousseau encouraged breastfeeding, and discouraged swaddling of infants as being against nature.

Toward the end of the eighteenth and into the early nineteenth century, poets, and in particular Wordsworth, completed a transformation that was to have ramifications to the present. This was the change from children being born with original sin, to children bringing with them at birth innocence and godliness. Wordsworth's *Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, with its memorable line "Heaven lies about us in our infancy", had an enduring impact on attitudes to children, especially in the middle classes. Its overall result was the elevation of childhood, with adults reminiscing about their own lives, and the strong belief that childhood should be a carefree stage of life. This was a clear demarcation between childhood and the responsibilities of adulthood.

In the mid-nineteenth century philanthropists, adopting the romantic view of childhood, had as their motives for their endeavours the saving of children for the enjoyment of childhood. This was a move away at least partially from the utilitarian and religious motives for supporting children that had previously prevailed. Organisations such as Barnardos and the British National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children worked to save children from situations and conditions that prevented them from experiencing carefree childhoods. Some of the actions of these groups look misguided from a modern perspective; children were removed from homes deemed unsuitable, and even sent to faraway countries if it was thought their chances of having a happy childhood were enhanced by migration.

Running parallel to saving children for childhood was the concern about children in the workforce. Schooling was still not compulsory in the second half of the nineteenth century, and many parents preferred their children to be working for economic reasons. Several Acts were passed in the nineteenth century, including the *Ten Hour Act* in 1847, saying that children should work no more than 10 hours a day, followed by the *Factory Act* of 1878 that said that no children under the age of 10 should be employed, that education was compulsory for children up to the age of 10, and that women should work no more than 56 hours a week.

### **2.2.3 The twentieth century**

By the beginning of the twentieth century schooling in Europe and North America was almost universal. Compulsory schooling for five-to-10-year-olds in the UK was followed by other countries. By this time, too, much of the work of 'saving children' from poor conditions and dysfunctional families, done mostly by philanthropists, began to be taken over by the state. The motives for the energies put into this again became mixed; as well as concern for children, state intervention had interests in civilising children and in ensuring the development of good citizens. Intervention in the lives of families took place through education. Morality, and an emphasis on good habits and obedience, led to a situation described by Stephen Heathorn in the UK as "a near-systematic process of national-identity construction (Heathorn 2000).

There was international interest, too, in reducing infant mortality and, as we have seen, this was successful. In the first decades of the twentieth century, advice, often from health professionals, came in abundance to mothers who were now seen as the conduits for good development of their children, although they were not regarded as necessarily competent enough to care for their children's health needs themselves. Medical services in the form of health checks, dental services and food, were provided through schools.

Early in the twentieth century a specifically scientific approach toward childrearing began to take precedence, influenced strongly by the behaviourism principles of John Watson. Parents were exhorted not to spoil their children and advised that babies should not be played with, or shown affection, but to be taught good habits and obedience. This scientific approach was exemplified by Cyril Burt's dictum that "superintending the growth of human beings is as scientific a business as cultivating plants or training a race horse" (Cunningham 2005). It was not until after World War II that this thankfully short-lived parenting philosophy gave way to a more liberal attitude to childrearing, in the shape of Dr Benjamin Spock, whose book *Baby and Childcare* was the best-selling book in the twentieth century (Spock 1946).

Parents have, in the twentieth century, been subject to barrages of advice about how to rear their children and this onslaught continues. There is not space here to elaborate on the sometimes extraordinary swings in fashion in regard to childrearing. The outcome, for many parents, is all too often guilt and uncertainty and even a retreat from parenthood for some adults in the face of its perceived demands. This is perhaps especially the case for middle class parents who are particularly vulnerable to the exhortations of the writers of how-to-parent books.

At the same time, lower mortality and fertility rates have led to the situation where parents have fewer children, closer together in age, who become the focus of intense attention. They are a major source of emotional gratification for adults who, with some justification, may regard the parent-child relationship as more durable than the parent-parent relationship. The rise of the 'emotionally priceless' child, predominantly but not only in middle class families, has led for many parents to a lifelong intensive involvement with children that is probably unique to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and is made possible by low fertility and comparatively high living standards.

There is the paradox that the intensification of attention on children and parenting has led on the one hand to some adults retreating from parenthood while others will go to extraordinary lengths to have children in the face of infertility. For some families, too, despite the availability of contraception, children are unplanned and the source of economic and psychological stress that can lead to neglect and worse. The contemporary stressors of having both parents in the workforce can combine with a paucity of emotional and economic resources to render parenthood an overwhelmingly negative experience for some adults.

#### **2.2.4 Children and power**

Children have also, in several ways, become extraordinarily powerful. In contrast with earlier centuries they have in most cases ceased to be economic assets and have become significant consumers to whom advertising is unrelentingly targeted. Not only do children hold considerable economic power, they also hold emotional power as parent-child relationships have changed. Although there are exceptions such as in some church-based groups, parents are less likely to discipline their children than a generation ago, and are much less likely to expect them to contribute to family work or income. The emotional gratification that parents now ask of children in place of the economic assistance required earlier leads many parents to be anxious about upsetting their children and disrupting the emotional tie. This is particularly apparent when parents have separated and non-resident parents fear alienating their children by disciplining them, but it is an unfortunate feature, too, of families where both parents are working full-time and time with children is regarded as fragile and precious. Children, too, have increased legal powers with the passing of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCROC), which enshrines their rights to be full participants in matters that are relevant to them, including in their families.

Ironically, the rise in the power of children in families, and the much-needed acknowledgement of their rights as children, has led to a blurring of the distinctions between childhood and parenthood that were set in place by the romantic view of children. Innocence has been replaced by rights and, by implication, responsibilities. As Cunningham suggests:

The peculiarity of the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries, and the root cause of much present confusion and angst about childhood, is that a public discourse which argues that children are persons with rights to a degree of autonomy is at odds with the remnants of the romantic view that the right of the child is to be a child. The implication of the first is the fusing of the worlds of adult and child, and of the second the maintenance of separation (2005:205).

## 2.3 CONCLUSIONS

History presents us with some clues about today's families that might help in understanding both why they have come to be as they are, and how they are both different from and similar to families in the past. Firstly, it is apparent that 'family' is identified in ways that more closely resemble family forms three centuries ago than those one century ago. Those who matter to us in emotional and often practical ways are seen as kin despite not being related to us. Non-related kin groupings do not usually form around shared economic enterprises (although this still happens in some instances). They are more likely to be formed around a nucleus of meaning, and a sense of belongingness. Groupings of unrelated people form and call themselves families in order to provide the core functions of families – nurturance, support and meaning. For Māori, contemporary manifestations of whānau also include non- or distantly related kin who form groupings in order to carry out the functions of childrearing and mutual support, as well as others (see p. 9). A major difference between 'fictive' kin and those related by blood ties is that fictive kin are chosen, and are less and less likely to be bound to us by legal ties as the significance of formal marriage declines.

A difference related to this is that those whom we think of as intimate family members often do not live in the same household. A common example is the situation of parental separation where a child's parents live in different houses but constitute his or her family. Another phenomenon is that of 'living together apart'. In some cases partners choose to live in different houses at the same time as being in a relationship. In others the demands of careers mean that partners work in different cities for the majority of the week. Another situation is that in which one partner works in industries such as mining or on oil rigs, and spends weeks or months away from the family home.

Secondly, the roles of children in families have undergone profound changes. No longer are children economic assets to be put to work as soon as they are able; nor are they susceptible to early death, as child mortality rates have plummeted. Perhaps most significantly, children's positions of power in families have changed so that families are no longer 'positional' – based on hierarchies of power from the father downward – but personal, with roles constantly under negotiation amongst children and adults. For many families, children are emotional assets that are the source of both profound gratification and great stress and anxiety.

Thirdly, the need for belonging and meaning in families appears to have increased as the time spent with family members, however they are identified, becomes scarce. There is a heightened self-consciousness at both the individual and group level about who constitutes one's family, and about how it provides a collective identity. Social conditions in the twentieth century enabled many families to have separate houses and private spaces; paradoxically, changing social conditions have reduced the time spent in those spaces together to the point where, as Gillis (1997, 2000) suggests, that time is elevated and endowed with particular value. The nucleus of families comprises meaning and emotional nurturance rather than function, although provision of material support to members remains a key challenge. It is to a far greater extent than in the past an individual rather than a collective enterprise. A fundamental imperative for a family group, therefore, is to find ways of establishing a sense of belonging amongst its members. This, indeed, may be a critical challenge for today's families. As external structures diminish, the need for internal cohesion around values and meaning becomes more necessary. Gone is the impetus for cooperation around a shared economic enterprise, and gone is the dominant script of the nuclear family with its prescribed roles and hierarchies. Instability of households, through separation and re-formation of structures, is almost normative. How, then, do families create a sense of identity and meaning, a microculture that is both unique to the group and links it with other families and communities? We turn to an examination of rituals as a way in which families might constitute, identify and stabilise themselves emotionally.

## 3.0 FAMILIES AND RITUALS

The family without ritual would be so deeply impoverished as to scarcely be considered a 'family' at all (Auslander 2002).

Each family co-constructs its own unique intimate culture, blending the specifics of its constituent personalities, its particular ecological niche, and its own history of shared events (Serpell et al 2002).

### 3.1 A SHORT HISTORY OF RITUALS

The use of the word 'ritual' traditionally refers to the performance of solemn rites associated with religious observations, and it is in this sense that we usually think of rituals – as religious or cultural ceremonies carried out in formal settings with high levels of structure and prescription. In all cultures, rituals can be traced through antiquity as patterns of formal, symbolic behaviour that convey serious and agreed meaning for both participants and observers.

Religious rituals embody important elements of continuity and in their many forms remain paramount as foci for reinforcement and celebration of shared values and of cultural and spiritual beliefs. Religious rituals convey stability and emphasise the fundamental importance of shared beliefs, often through their formalised and relatively unchanging patterns of behaviour and words. Some provide a framework for the marking of transitions; births, initiations to new statuses, marriages, and deaths of individuals who hold important positions in societies, are observed by solemn and often ancient rituals. The identification and induction of the Dalai Llama in Tibetan culture is an example; so, too, are the milestones in the lives of monarchs and other heads of states that are publicly and solemnly observed. In some cultures the transitions of the seasons are celebrated with ritual, especially where members of the society depend on seasonal changes for their food production and overall survival. The Māori New Year, Matariki, is a New Zealand example of a seasonal ritual (see [www.taitokerau.co.nz/matariki.htm](http://www.taitokerau.co.nz/matariki.htm)).

Rituals marking transitions and the passage of time have moved gradually from being the province primarily of public occasions, to becoming central aspects of the lives of families and individuals. Baptism, marriage and death are marked by public or semi-public rituals in the form of, or resembling, liturgical commemorations in their solemnity and in the involvement of public figures such as priests, and in their conveyance of beliefs and the performance of patterned and widely understood behaviours. Infants in Western societies may be baptised with behaviours that symbolise acceptance into a church community; traditional marriages similarly invoke religious beliefs, as well as reflecting values that are widely recognised in communities, such as the purity of the bride, signified by her dressing in white. Funerals likewise encompass beliefs that the deceased is moving on to another world, as well as framing the grief of families and communities and marking the transition from life to death.

Although these familiar rituals of passage seem traditional, they are comparatively recent. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that they began to have meaning and function at the level of families (White 1996). Before that time, baptisms were community occasions with the child being received into the family of the church, and parents were not necessarily in attendance. Marriages, too, were community-based and often linked with the joining of property or other resources. Even death was, in many cultures, marked briefly and with little ritual. As noted in the previous chapter, families and households before the mid-nineteenth century were comparatively informal groups that were orientated to their present existences, rather than dwelling on the past or the future. As John Gillis says (2000:3), "...notions of family time and family place, so central in our day, had no meaning for most people". The marking of life course transitions was not relevant in families where age was comparatively unimportant and lives were more fragile than they are today.

From the mid-nineteenth century until the second half of the twentieth century formal rites of passage at the family level in Western society became firmly established. Baptisms were carried out in churches using traditional liturgy; however, baptism was a family affair involving parents and extended family members, and Godparents who were friends or relatives charged with the moral guidance of the infant. Birth dates became not just recognised, but celebrated annually. Marriages, too, developed as a blend of respectability and celebration; and death was observed within a religious framework, often in



an extended manner with designated periods of mourning. In Western societies un-baptised children and unmarried couples came to attract disapproval, and funerals were almost universally performed in the context of a church or other spiritual place. The impetus for this rapid rise in formal and informal family rituals started with Protestant families in the UK, Europe and North America, but spread to Catholic and other Christian groups as well.

Family rituals were then, by the mid-twentieth century, semi-public or sometimes private occasions usually imbued with religious meaning. In comparison with a century earlier, there was an astonishing increase in the number, frequency and intensity of ritual observation. Why did this happen? Several scholars have turned to a consideration of time as offering an explanation.

### **3.1.1 Linear and cyclical time**

Time's arrow is the intelligibility of distinct and irreversible events, while time's cycle is the intelligibility of timeless order and law-like structure. We must have both (Stephen Jay Gould 1987).

Family history suggests that until the mid-nineteenth century, before the onset of the industrial revolution and of compulsory education, families and households lived with a loose and flexible sense of the passing of time. It was only as families ceased to be the sites of economic production, men moved into factories and other work places and children went to school, that the past and the future became salient. Linear time: that marked by clocks and calendars, became a dominating factor in the lives of families and individuals and forced their attention to both past events and future possibilities. It also, in combination with other factors, led to a form of social and chronological conformity so that life transitions such as leaving school, leaving home, attaining adult status, marrying, becoming parents and becoming old, happened or were expected to happen at about the same ages for everyone. Indeed, there are still many transitions marked by chronological time, such as ages of legal drinking, marrying and being eligible for superannuation.

Gillis, White and others argue that this intense focus on linear time has fuelled the recognition and commemoration of transitions such as birthdays, educational milestones, marriages and deaths. They suggest, too, that families have created another kind of time in order to counteract the 'time famine' arising from the pressures of linear time and its imperatives. *Cyclical*, or memorial time, constitutes the ritualisation of the times families spend together. It provides, in principle, opportunities for family members to step outside the straps of linear time and to reflect, find or reaffirm meaning for themselves as a group. In particular, it enables the temporary blurring of distinctions between past, present and future that are the preoccupations of lives lived in the fast lane of linear, chronological time.

### **3.1.2 Sentimentalisation of rituals**

Between 1850 and the 1970s, the family rituals that developed and intensified as a way of both marking transitions and stepping aside from linear time were often characterised by high levels of sentimentalisation. Elaborate preparations and the packaging of gifts were accompanied by the giving of cards replete with richly sentimentalised verses for all occasions. Consumerism was both a mover and a beneficiary of these sentimentalised rituals, helping to create and to sustain such celebrations as Mothers' and Fathers' Days and Valentine's Day. Elizabeth Pleck (2000) describes the formality and pageantry that came to characterise American family rituals. Weddings became white; wedding anniversaries became occasions for formal celebration. Pagan aspects became integrated into these formerly Christian festivals such as Christmas and Easter, with the inclusion and elevation of Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. And in parallel with the intensified focus on children in general, many of these occasions became particularly child-centred.

Pleck has identified a change, in the 1970s, toward what she describes as a post-sentimental phase of ritual celebration. As well as reflecting a reaction against excessive and ultimately meaningless sentimentality, this change coincided with other social changes. Families were becoming more diverse as divorce levels rose and ethnic intermarriage became more common, so that the rote sentiments expressed on these occasions became less and less appropriate. Most significant though was the movement of women from the home into the workplace. Women were primarily responsible for the organisation and orchestration of family rituals; by being in the workforce they had less time to devote to these tasks, and at the same time had money to spend on outsourcing the production of rituals. Pleck characterises the post-sentimentalist approach to ritual as minimising displays of emotion, as in funerals, and the shifting of responsibility for the pageantry from inside the home to external sources

such as caterers and public venues. This, of course, was possible only for middle-class families, and poorer households experienced considerable pressure to try to attain these material heights. She suggests, too, that rather than having the role of affirming family values as they had in the past century, post-sentimental rituals feature individualism, pluralism, consumerism and therapy – in other words, they serve the values of an individualistic, self-oriented era. What may be happening, however, is that informal and internally-generated forms of ritual may be increasing as a response to increasingly meaningless and individualistic sentimentalisation of florid celebrations, and may be meeting the changing and diverse foci of meaning and identity for families.

## 3.2 WHAT IS A FAMILY RITUAL AND WHAT DOES IT DO?

As discussed above, formal and public rituals have, through antiquity, been the frameworks for and the carriers of meaning in all societies. In the social context, their functions have been comparatively clear. They involve an action component in the form of an organised group behaviour, and they have a symbolic component. Their primary role is to communicate and to reinforce symbolic meanings widely held and understood by members of the culture or society. At the family level, rituals in the twenty-first century encompass formal, semi-public and religious aspects and, increasingly, informal, secular and self-generated components. It is the proliferation of the informal and secular that is of particular interest in this discussion of the importance of family rituals. Why does ritual continue to be a central aspect of family life, and why are people turning to secular frameworks for performing rites?

### 3.2.1 Definition of rituals

A reading of the vast literature that addresses rituals indicates that definitions are widely varied, so much so that some commentators have suggested that the term has come to be meaningless. The definitions contain many contradictions and are usually specific to the discipline within which they are being discussed. Ritual in theological writing, for example, looks definitionally very different from ritual in therapeutic literature. There are, however, some commonalities that can be identified and are relevant to a consideration of the definition of family rituals. Rothenbuhler (1998) has suggested some definitional aspects of rituals from the perspective of communication theory used here as a starting point for considering rites in families.

1. Rituals involve actions, not thoughts. Furthermore, these actions are in some sense performances, based on pre-existing conceptions.
2. Rituals are conscious and voluntary. At some level, performers know what they are doing and have some choice about whether or not to perform.
3. The actions involved in ritual are non-instrumental, or a-rational – they are not performed in order to achieve a rational end.
4. Rituals are serious, embodying meanings, even when they are playful and humorous.
5. Rituals are collective, social activities. The term ritual is often used for individual patterns of behaviour or habits, or routines performed in private; however, the term as used by Rothenbuhler, by other scholars and in this report, refers to social behaviour.
6. Rituals are subjunctive rather than indicative. They signal what could be, what might be, or even ought to be, but do not indicate what is.
7. Rituals embody effective symbols; Rothenbuhler suggests that at their most parsimonious, rituals are forms of behaviour with 'non-intrinsic' significance. Behaviour that is ritualistic, then, carries meaning beyond that of the behaviour itself.
8. Ritual behaviour is customary behaviour. It is relatively invariant and stereotyped. It is also regularly recurring.

From these characteristics, Rothenbuhler arrives at the following definition:

Ritual is the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behaviour to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life<sup>1</sup> (1998:27).

Many of these characteristics are helpful in defining family rituals. However, some do not seem to be accurate. For example, it can be argued that some patterns of behaviour are seen only in *retrospect* to carry meaning and thus qualify as rituals. They cannot, then, be based on preconceptions and neither, at the time they occur, can they be described as a-rational. As an example, family members and

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1 This reflects Durkheim's view of rituals as the following quote demonstrates: "The most barbarous and the most fantastic rites and the strangest myths translate some human need, some aspect of life, either individual or social" (Durkheim 1912:14-15).

especially children may look back at patterned activities such as preparing for and going on an annual holiday, or weekly trips to the movies as a family, and regard them in retrospect as very significant activities that held meaning for them as part of their families. Similarly, not all behaviour that might be classified as ritual is customary or stereotyped. It may occur only once, yet be highly ritualised as a framework for a significant event in the life of a family.

Rituals, too, may not always be subjunctive. Although they may frame reflection, there are times when they are also affirmative. Family rituals are thus symbolically imbued patterns of behaviour that may embody meaning either explicitly and intentionally, or retrospectively and implicitly as an outcome of their ability to foster communication, reflection and affirmation of shared understandings.

### **3.3 THE FUNCTIONS OF RITUALS**

Families, as we have seen earlier, are today more likely to be systems of meaning than systems of functioning. The inclusion of behaviours (or words), to which are attached meaning, is therefore fundamental to the definition of rituals used here. Subsumed under this overarching concept of rituals are three partially overlapping functional aspects: to develop, convey and, where needed, to modify meaning; to link individual family members into a shared inter-subjectivity or understanding about their identity as a family group; and to provide opportunities for families to reflect, to bring together past, present and future, and to convey reassurance about stability and continuity.

#### **3.3.1 Ritual as carrier of meaning**

The performance of family rituals is imbued with the affirmation of values and beliefs that hold importance for the participants. In many but not all instances the meaning of what is happening is evident. A marriage or commitment ceremony embodies both a transition from one state to another (single to coupledness) and the solemnity of making a commitment to another person. A graduation marks a change in status from student to graduate, and carries the seriousness and the joy that accompanies the transition. Birthdays, too, involve the sometimes implicit symbolism of increasing age. Commemorations such as Christmas and Easter vary in the explicitness of their symbolism, depending on the degree of religious and traditional content involved. In all of these, the meanings framed by the ritual are both explicit and, usually, agreed. However, it is notable that in addition to the obvious metaphor or symbolism involved, there is an increasing tendency to partially or sometimes totally replace the traditional content and structure with new elements that personalise the commemoration for the participants.

#### **3.3.2 Ritual as shared inter-subjectivity**

In many situations, including those where the meaning of ritual is at one level explicit, meaning at another level may not be so clear. What is being developed and conveyed is what it means to be a member of *this* family, what values and beliefs are being shared, and what the identity of *this* family is. Rituals, then, have the function of providing a framework within which inter-subjective agreement about family identity and shared values is fostered. This may well be taking place at the same time as the performance of a ritual with quite overt symbolism, and it also happens in those private and informal rituals that are unique to individual families.

There are other aspects, too, of this function. It is where positions are negotiated or renegotiated, and where new groups of individuals are working to establish themselves as a family group. It is in this regard that rituals have the capacity to both define and change shared understandings amongst family members. One example of this is when a family group is establishing itself, for instance when a lone-parent household is formed or when a stepfamily is formed. Another is when the roles of adolescents change in families, and need to be renegotiated and redefined.

#### **3.3.3 Ritual as linking past, present and future**

The third aspect – the linking of past, present and future – is a function of rituals that underlies both their effectiveness and their viability. They look backward to social order and shared metaphors at the same time as looking forward toward the needs and meanings for the people involved in the ritual. This aspect of ritual gives credence to the present, bookmarked by the past and the future. Barbara Meyerhoff has suggested that: "Ritual inevitably carries a basic message of order, continuity, and predictability ... by stating enduring and underlying patterns ritual connects past, present, and future, abrogating history and time" (Meyerhoff 1984:306). This function of rituals appears to meet the deep need for stability, especially when there is uncertainty around families and societies. This, too, is the

aspect of ritual that allows the opportunity for stepping outside the pressures of the present and of linear time, 'time out' to reflect on what has been and what might be and how they might have an impact on the present. Public and religious rituals in particular offer this capacity but it is also a characteristic of family rituals when they are effective.

Family rituals have evolved socially through the transitions from public and highly formalised commemorations to a complex mix of public and private, formal and informal, events. They are characterised here as symbolically loaded patterns of behaviour participated in by family members, and serving to contain, convey and modify meaning, foster shared understanding amongst family members, and to create a sense of continuity and stability.

### **3.4 DIMENSIONS OF FAMILY RITUALS**

At the family level, there are dimensions of family rituals that are both dichotomous and overlapping. The first is a comparatively straightforward distinction between rites of passage and calendrical commemorations. The second distinguishes between shared meanings and unique within-family meanings, and the third addresses the explicit and implicit facets of family rituals.

#### **3.4.1 Rites of passage and calendrical rites**

Shore (2003) has suggested that rituals celebrate two different kinds of rites: rites of passage, and calendrical rites.

Rites of passage are those occasions that mark transitions in the life course for families or individuals. They have traditionally included birth, baptism, marriage and death. To this list can be added in today's Western world pubertal rites, graduations, children leaving home, civil unions and other kinds of commitments, divorce, retirement, and major accidents and losses. Some therapists, for example, will work with families who have experienced an accident that leaves a family member disabled, to create a ritual that facilitates adaptation to the new situation they face. Although there is often a common theme in the commemorations of these rites of passage, they increasingly incorporate aspects that are unique to the occasion and to the people participating. There is, for example, no traditional ceremony for divorcing couples, yet increasing numbers have a rite of separation to mark the end of their commitment to each other. Included in this category are 'nonce rituals', that is those devised for a one-off occasion, such as a serious accident or loss. As Barbara Meyerhoff suggests, nonce rituals "do not have at hand those powerful, consensual, 'self-evident' basic symbols that convey the rightness which endows with authenticity and conviction any circumstance where they occur" (Meyerhoff 1992:131). Nonetheless, nonce rituals with their emphasis on the unique aspects of the passage are increasingly common.

Calendrical rites are those that are repeated, often annually. They include birthdays (although these can also be rites of passage, especially if they are notable decade birthdays), Christmas, Passover, Easter, Matariki (Māori New Year), Thanksgiving in the United States, and annual holidays that include patterns of behaviour that are significant for a family. Examples of other and more recent calendrical rites arising from rites of passage are wedding anniversaries and renewal of commitment vows. Many calendrical rites have meanings that are widely shared with other families in communities, such as Easter and Thanksgiving. They also incorporate aspects unique to individual families.

#### **3.4.2 Shared and unique meaning in rituals**

Most families recognise widely celebrated calendrical rites such as Christmas and Easter, and most families share some aspects of the structure and meaning of these celebrations with other families. Similarly, semi-public rituals such as christenings, weddings and funerals usually embody meanings that are recognised and shared by others.

Shared rituals serve to link families with a wider community or nation. The most common are Christmas and Easter and, in the United States, Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving, in particular, emphasises for the majority of United States families shared notions of sacrifice and grace. It conveys, according to Auslander (2002), a sense of integration into the 'imagined community' of families and the nation. Thanksgiving is celebrated simultaneously at the individual family level and the national level.

In New Zealand, such rituals are not so evident. New Zealand is, comparatively, a more secular nation than the United States so the religious symbols and metaphors associated with Christmas and Easter

are not widely recognised by the majority of New Zealand families. Nor do we have the equivalent of Thanksgiving as an event celebrating the history and shared values of the nation; Waitangi Day has not yet achieved that status.

New Zealand's shared rituals are predominantly secular. It can be argued that major sporting events link large numbers of families in a common time of shared behaviours in which meaning is both apparent and agreed. Sport, and particularly rugby, also embodies shared cultural rituals in the form of the haka, which in recent times has been adapted to include elements of several Pacific cultures.

At some level, too, many New Zealanders would agree on the significance and even the symbolism of summer holidays. These embody elements of going to a beach, camping or staying in baches and of leaving behind the pressures of everyday life. Similarly, there tend to be shared patterns of behaviour and secular meaning associated with Christmas and New Year which include Christmas trees, present-opening, Christmas dinner and seeing the New Year in at midnight. There is a diversity of cultural influences on these celebrations, with Anglo-Celtic and Pacific elements often incorporated.

In New Zealand there are events at the community level that might qualify as rituals, since they function to foster shared identity. These include regular street festivals and neighbourhood gatherings. They tend, however, to be informal and dynamic and do not necessarily come to embody agreed values or beliefs.

It is also evident that shared meanings associated with rituals are comparatively more explicit and understood in Māori culture. Māori rituals of greeting and meeting embody widely understood and revered patterns of behaviour that are far more common and established than in Pākehā culture, which is comparatively young and undeveloped. The incorporation of Māori ritual such as haka and *karakia* into the wider New Zealand culture is a dynamic and ongoing process that is contributing to the growth of a rich and complex national identity. It is perhaps symptomatic in Pākehā culture, of both our youth and diversity, that non-Māori rituals such as Christmas holidays are flexible and varied even as they are performed by a majority of New Zealanders.

The migrant nature of New Zealand society is also evident in the celebration of rituals that are associated with recent immigration. Diwali, the Hindu New Year, has since 2002 been observed publicly in Auckland and Wellington and involves many thousands of New Zealanders, both Asian and non-Asian. Diwali is based on the lunar cycle and is observed in October and November. It has moved from being a five-day private and religious festival to a public and secular celebration of New Zealand's multi-ethnic society. Similar Pacific festivals, and Chinese lantern festivals, are an increasingly common feature of New Zealand. Although the ritual elements of these are not common to all New Zealanders, their sharing by those outside the culture reflects the role of ritual in creating and communicating cultural identities that reflect the diversity of New Zealand.

Perhaps because of our youth and diversity, New Zealand also has a vibrant recent history of developing innovative and secular forms of ritual associated with events such as baby-naming ceremonies, weddings and other commitment ceremonies and funerals. There are secular celebrants for all of these events who combine, in varying degrees, formal or traditional elements with idiosyncratic aspects. What is notable about this is that it reflects a strong and ongoing desire for ritual as a framework for holding the enduring meanings associated with life events.

The idiosyncratic components of these commemorations represent the within-family aspect of rituals that are of increasing significance. There appear to be several reasons for this proliferation. One is the steady and historical erosion of external sources of meaning for families and individuals. The definition and articulation of value systems has moved from churches and communities to families and their members. No longer are there external anchors for guiding the ways in which people live their lives; instead, they face life as a planning project as they continuously form and re-form values and belief systems. Rituals and their attendant behaviours are able to construct, as well as to express, realities and meanings for families.

A second is that rituals have the power to imply stability and continuity when instability and uncertainty are prevalent. Families are facing the 'normalisation of fragility' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995) with increasingly diverse family forms being recognised, and increasing rates of transitions from one structure to another. Change at all levels is a feature of the early twenty-first century, and ritual provides a means of linking past, present and future in ways that can identify strands of continuity that are needed by families in an often discontinuous world.

Families put their own unique stamp on the ways in which rites are celebrated. The flexibility inherent in, for example, the forms of commitment ceremonies, means that alongside the agreed symbolism of commitment to another person there are remarkable variations in structure and process. The couple's children may be bridal attendants, the bride's male friends may be bridesmen and same-sex couples celebrate legal union with their own format. Couples may simply have a gathering of friends and family with whom to make their non-legal, informal commitments within a structure devised to be meaningful for them. Previously formal christening ceremonies now often take the form of a baby-naming ceremony conducted by a secular celebrant. The structure and content of baby-naming ceremonies is unique to the family, while at the same time encompassing the broad metaphor of receiving a child into a wider family or community.

There is another important form of calendrical rite that happens repeatedly and often in families, and represents unique as opposed to shared meaning. This is the patterns of behaviour that encompass aspects of day-to-day functioning in families, and at the same time are significant in fostering and reinforcing cohesion amongst family members. They range from the nightly ritual of reading bedtime stories to children, through regular family outings to movies or other events, particular foods eaten at particular meals, to highly significant and idiosyncratic patterns of behaviour associated with holidays and other occasions. Their content and process are characteristically unique to particular families, and provide a signifier of what it means to belong to that individual family. Thus, although many families have nightly rituals of reading to children at bedtime, the forms of those rituals will vary from family to family.

Rituals that include components both shared with the wider community and unique to individual families are explicit. So, too, are the unique within-family rituals established as 'family time'. They are in a real sense both intentional and explicit. They are often established and practised as demarcations of 'special time' from ordinary time and are the self-conscious family time rituals described by Gillis (2002) as ways for families to escape the demands of linear time. They tend to be repeated regularly, and at their best they reaffirm and strengthen family cohesion and a sense of belonging in family members.

There are, too, other forms of ritual that can be described as implicit and unintentional, at least at their onset. These often emerge from routines carried out by family members. Routines are defined as patterned interactions that are repeated over time (Wolin, Bennett and Noonan 1979). They are instrumental, and take place in order to achieve a functional goal such as preparing a meal, doing dishes and doing routine shopping. In many instances, however, these patterned behaviours acquire meaning for those who perform them, and can then be identified as rituals. They are implicit, emergent rituals that are sometimes acknowledged only in retrospect, although they can also take on meaning over the time that they are performed so that continuing performances are identified as rituals.

An important way in which routines become rituals is where they provide a framework for communication that might not otherwise occur. Preparing meals or doing dishes together may be one of the few times when individual family members can share experiences and ideas, and develop inter-subjective understandings of what it means to be a member of that family. The practical features of preparation and transportation for annual family holidays are behavioural routines that can also acquire meaning as something that is accomplished together in ways that are both unique and meaningful for the family.

Another way in which routines become changed into rituals is when their performance acquires significance as a way of coping with radical change associated with loss, accidents and other traumatic events. The ability to continue patterned behaviours such as eating meals together provides reassurance that things are 'as they should be' despite what has happened in the family. A key factor that demarcates the performance of routines from those of rituals when the distinction seems blurred is that the repetitive behaviour becomes performed for its own sake rather than to achieve an instrumental goal. Family members do the dishes together primarily so that they can talk, with producing clean dishes as a secondary goal.

The retrospective attribution of meaning to routines is not mentioned explicitly in ritual literature. It clearly involves memory, and shared recollections the significance of which is agreed upon by family members. It is unlikely that the events that are remembered as significant did not hold any significance at the time, although the extent of their importance may be realised only in retrospect.

In conclusion, family rituals are defined here as symbolically imbued patterns of behaviour that may embody meaning either explicitly and intentionally, or implicitly and retrospectively, as an outcome of their ability to foster communication, reflection and affirmation of shared meaning. It is suggested that they function to carry meaning for families; to foster inter-subjective understandings of what it means to be part of a particular family; and to link past, present and future. Rituals can embody meaning that is shared by the wider community, as well as meaning that is unique to a family group. They can be explicit in their function and performance, and they can also be implicit, arising from patterns of behaviour that accrue meaning for family members. For families in the twenty-first century, it may be the unique and implicit features of rituals that are the most significant for fostering identity and meaning.

## 4.0 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RITUALS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The examination of rituals is of intrinsic, conceptual interest in its own right, given their central place in history and culture. A question that is implicit in this report, however, is whether or not rituals are of measurable benefit to families in the twenty-first century. Research evidence that addresses this question is sparse (Fiese et al 2002), in part because rituals have been of most interest to scholars who do not collect empirical data, and also because operationalising rituals is difficult. In practice, they are often conflated with routines, and it is challenging to measure empirically the content and intensity of meaning that routines and rituals might hold for participants. Attempts to do this by developing measures include those by Fiese and Kline (1993) and Tomcho (2002).

The functions of rituals described in this paper (carriers of meaning, developing shared inter-subjective understandings, structures for rites of passage) link conceptually with established models of stress, coping and family resilience (eg McCubbin and Patterson 1982; Patterson 2002). Family meanings are seen as a central factor in family adjustment as demands are balanced with capabilities in families (Patterson and Garwick 1994). It is increasingly common for individuals who are forming partnerships to come to their relationship from very different cultures in their families of origin; these cultures may vary by socio-economic status, religion and ethnicity, as well as family values and attitudes. Differences in family cultures call for adaptations to be made, not just by the couple themselves but also by the wider family. These may be achieved in part through explicit rituals that incorporate important aspects of both family cultures into a wedding or other commitment ceremony. It is commonplace in New Zealand, for example, for Māori and non-Māori rituals to be parts of a wedding ceremony.

Just as importantly, at an implicit level, couples need over time to develop patterns of behaviour that are unique to them and confer identity and meaning on their partnership. They become part of a shared history that, if sufficiently important and strong, is likely to buffer partnerships through transitions such as parenthood, employment changes and other sources of stress. And it is these internal sources of strength that are increasingly more significant than external structures in fostering stability in relationships in families.

Although what it means to an individual to be part of a partnership and family becomes established and mutually understood over time, the ability of meaning to be flexible and open to change in face of challenges is also important and is seen as a component of family resilience. Patterson suggests that the role of meaning, when families experience crisis, is to "shape the nature and extent of risk, as well as the protective capacity of the family" (Patterson 2002:35). This may involve adjusting family meanings in the face of difficulties in order to adapt to changing circumstances; attributing positive meanings to situations has been found to be a crucial facet of resilience in families that, for example, are living with a child with a disability (Patterson 1991). This attribution is often accomplished through both implicit and explicit rituals.

There is some evidence that rituals are beneficial for the wellbeing of children and adolescents as well as for the family as a whole, and also for coping with transitions such as the establishment of new family structures.

### 4.1 CHILDREN AND RITUALS

It has been suggested (Fiese et al 2002) that family rituals hold little meaning for children, who do not understand the importance of symbolism until adolescence. This question has not, though, been investigated empirically, and there is some evidence that children thrive in various ways in families where routines and rituals are commonplace. Compan and colleagues (Compan, Moreno, Ruiz and Pascual 2002), for example, reported that children with mental health complaints were less likely than a healthy comparison group to eat with parents regularly, to share activities or to take part in family rituals. Rituals have also been found to serve as protective factors for children in families where a parent is an alcoholic (Wolin et al 1979; Fiese 1993).

In line with the functions indicated in an earlier section, rituals are also beneficial in providing a sense of continuity in families where there has been a stressful or traumatic event. In a recent study in which



children and parents in families that had experienced a death were interviewed, the continuation of routines and rituals was cited as an important coping mechanism by both children and adults. When the family continued to eat meals together and carried on other routine activities, they felt a sense of continuity despite their loss (Reynolds 2006).

Serpell and colleagues (Serpell, Sonnenschein, Baker and Ganapathy 2002) investigated factors that predicted literacy across two time periods, in a heterogeneous sample of children aged five to seven years, with mixed ethnicities and family income levels. Of special interest was the clear finding that aspects of the family culture, including investment in family routines and viewing literacy as entertainment (eg reading aloud in the family) were predictors of literacy outcomes where ethnicity and socio-economic status were not. Although rituals were not specifically mentioned, it is apparent that organised and regular group communication within the family conferred benefits despite ethnic and socio-economic differences.

## **4.2 ADOLESCENTS AND RITUALS**

Adolescence represents a life stage where there is a delicate balance between emerging individuation from families, and a continuing sense of belonging to the family. It is important, if rituals are to be beneficial for adolescents, that they are sufficiently flexible to foster the renegotiation of family boundaries and roles at the same time as affirming family identity. A study by Eaker and Walters (2002) suggests that family rituals can bridge these tensions if they are valued by young people. In a group of 20-year-old young women, they found a positive association between satisfaction with family rituals and psychosocial maturity (self-reliance, strong identity and work orientation). The authors suggest that "rituals may represent a specific, concrete reflection of family dynamics that is ... relevant to psychosocial maturity" (p. 412). Fiese (1992) also reported a positive association between adolescent identity (identity integration and lovability) and family rituals.

Rituals also provide a forum for the renegotiation of the roles of young adults in families. As they become adult, the responsibilities they may assume in the extended family can be elaborated and discussed, and it may be that the communication and positive effect that is present when rituals are working well provide a framework for acceptance of change in older family members.

In sum, the small body of research that exists that examines the measurable outcomes for children and adolescents indicates that rituals in families are related to a variety of indices of wellbeing, in both stressed and un-stressed families. It is probable that rituals are important elements of a complex interplay in families involving cohesion and optimal communication patterns, and are signifiers, when they go well, of wellbeing and positive coping mechanisms. The direction of effects in these complicated dynamics is not yet well understood.

## **4.3 RITUALS IN STEPFAMILIES**

Stepfamilies constitute an increasing proportion of household structures in New Zealand and elsewhere, as the rate of separation and divorce increases and adults subsequently re-partner. They are a diverse and complex household structure, ranging from the simplest form in which a biological mother and her children live with her new partner who is unrelated to her children, through to families where there are biological children from both former households as well as the couple's own children.

Stepfamilies are often in a state of flux, as children move between the homes of their biological parents. At one time there may be no children in the house; at another, the children of both parents may be present, calling for considerable adaptability in regard to sleeping arrangements. Stepfamilies are, appropriately in this regard, sometimes referred to as accordion families since they are called on to expand and contract as children come and go from the household.

There are, too, the considerable challenges of renegotiating existing relationships and negotiating new ones. Biological parents and children face the adjustment of having an unrelated person in their lives, and stepparents need to integrate themselves into the existing liaisons. Relationships amongst step- and half-siblings similarly need to be negotiated. The challenges, then, that accompany the establishment and continuity of a stepfamily household are considerable, and it is not surprising that their rate of dissolution is high.

Members of stepfamilies bring to the new household the microcultures from at least two earlier families. They initially have no shared history upon which to draw for meaning. Furthermore, children in stepfamilies often need to sustain family identities in two different households if they spend time with both biological parents. And because family boundaries need to be flexible in order to incorporate members living outside the household for some of the time, there is an ongoing tension between loosening boundaries so that this can happen, and having them sufficiently defined to maintain the coherence of the family. This means that there is negotiation about external boundaries (who are the members of this family?) as well as about roles and positions internally.

Two of the most important challenges are to forge a family identity amongst the disparate members and to foster and consolidate dyadic relationships in the family – in particular, the stepchild-stepparent relationship. If it is the case that the functions of rituals include adaptation to change, opportunities for communication and the forging of inter-subjective understandings about what it means to be a member of a family, then it is apparent that they are particularly relevant for stepfamilies.

Scholars who have addressed rituals in stepfamilies point out that family rituals are successful to the extent that they can incorporate aspects of rituals from the old families into new elements unique to the new household (Whiteside 1989; Braithewaite, Baxter and Harper 1998). So far, research in this area has examined the potential for rituals to make a real contribution to successful stepfamily establishment and functioning, as well as the usefulness of the stepfamily framework for understanding more about rituals. It has not, yet, produced empirical findings in this area.

Golish (2003) examined communication strategies that differentiated strong stepfamilies from those facing difficulties, in a study that suggests a key role for rituals. Strong stepfamilies were identified by all three interviewees (child, biological parent and stepparent) from the same household as being strong, while at least one family member in those facing difficulties saw the stepfamily as struggling. Composite communication strengths were identified that distinguished, in frequency of use, strong stepfamilies from the others. Those that are relevant to the functions of rituals included creating a common ground, supportive communication, fostering a sense of inclusion, openness and meta-communication and co-constructing a 'natural definition' of family. This last aspect is especially significant for stepfamilies as it encompasses the understanding that stepfamilies become cohesive only over time and in their own unique ways. A 'natural definition' refers to a low-key approach to incorporating individuals into the family, enabling them to develop a sense of identity at their own pace.

It is apparent that both explicit, and perhaps especially implicit, rituals are likely to be instrumental in fostering strengths in stepfamilies. The overt and intentional identification and celebration of family time enables mutual orientation to the family, supportive communication, a sense of inclusion and openness, and meta-communication. However, it might be even more important at the beginning to start with the low-key implementation of routines that foster communication amongst members and are likely to lead to the development of shared meanings and understandings that convert them to rituals. In stepfamilies it might be particularly important to encourage regular activities that include only two family members. If, for example, a stepfather takes his stepchild to sport every week, the opportunity is created for the development of understandings and closeness that will enhance both that relationship and the wider stepfamily relationships.

The fact that stepfamilies are so very diverse, and that there are no clear scripts or models that guide their formation, implies that rituals are particularly important in enabling the formation of an identity that is unique to that family and that fosters its stability as a group.

The implications for a role for rituals when lone-parent households are established are similar. The use of both explicit and implicit rituals to foster a sense of identification with the new family structure is an obvious strategy for strengthening and stabilising families.

## **4.4 NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF RITUALS**

Rituals are not always positive in their impact and there are several ways in which they can be negative experiences for individuals. Rituals enforced by families may be repressive and meaningless for some members. Cultural or religious observances may be experienced as restrictive, and the meaning of such ritual occasions may not be important to them, at least at some phases of

development. Similar restraints are felt by adult children who feel duty-bound to be with parents at Christmas and other celebrations.

On the other hand, rituals can be desperately disappointing if the expectations for them are high. In a rushed world, it is easy to idealise family gatherings and to hope that they will confer and confirm the intimacy and connectedness that is yearned for. All too often this is not the case, and family violence at such highly scripted times is all too common. Kerry Daly has suggested that "the past and future maintain the dream of family time, but the present is the site of our disillusionment" (Daly 1996).

Another way in which rituals can be negative in their impact is when they act to exclude individuals from the family grouping. This is evident in situations where disgraced members are not invited to major events such as weddings. Oswald (2002) describes the experience of gays, in which inclusion in rituals in their families of origin was experienced as a site of re-entry into the family. Same-sex partners were included only when parents and siblings approved. Rituals, then, can be seen as points of entry or continuing exclusion for family members who have been outside the family's level of acceptance.

It is perhaps the explicit and intentional nature of family reunions, weddings and other large family rituals that emphasises the possibility of disappointment and exclusion. Annual family gatherings can be accompanied by idealised visions of the past or of what the family is or might become, that lead to disappointment when they are not realised. In contrast, implicit rituals that arise without expectations are less likely to convey disappointment since they are not imbued with such high hopes, and may be more successful vehicles for fostering family belonging.

## 5.0 CONCLUSIONS

The state and status of families in the twenty-first century is highly contested, yet the lesson from history is that a great deal of what we anguish over about families is not new. The history of families is not linear, and we can identify eras in the past that hold many similarities with the present. There are, too, some unique features of today's families that are not so easily identified from past eras.

One key difference that emerges between now and the past is the awareness of diverse family forms. We have seen that diversity has often accompanied times of significant social upheaval as people strive to adapt to circumstances that are fluid and changing. It is evident from rates of family instability and dysfunction that we are in particularly unstable and unpredictable times now, and it is also the case that diversity in family forms is uniquely apparent because of the ease of communication and the omniscient presence of media. Anxiety about the state of the family is exacerbated when there is such pervasive knowledge about how different families are, and is particularly heightened when there is negative press about non-traditional families.

A second difference that is unique to today is the elevation in the roles of children in families. Never before have children had such potential or actual power over their own lives and those of their families. Although this may seem paradoxical in the context of current concern about the wellbeing of children, it is important to remember that recognition of childhood as a unique life phase, and concern about children, is comparatively recent.

Another unique feature of Western families today is the focus on intimacy and emotional support as essential for family life. Couples demand love, support, companionship and intimacy in their relationships, and strive to maintain this concentration of affect as a condition of their partnership. The dependence on one other person for this emotional support is a comparatively new aspect of partnerships.

There is, too, an unprecedented focus on the parent-child relationship as an emotionally intense one in place of the formerly pragmatic attitude to children. The majority of today's children, in probable contrast with those born two centuries ago, develop intense emotional attachments to caregivers from the early months. The work of John Bowlby has both illuminated and reified the significance of these early attachments, yet we can surmise that until the early twentieth century many children did not have the opportunity to form these relationships and, indeed, many do not today. Alongside the demand for emotional fulfilment from family relationships, there is increasing dependence on these intimate attachments for keeping the family group together. No longer do external constraints perform this role.

Both adults and children face dilemmas in their emotional lives. Adult relationships exist in a climate of instability, and their efforts to maintain and foster them compete with anxieties about their children and with demands of the workplace. For children, too: as they grow up, they are encouraged toward autonomy at the same time as being protected from what is regarded as an increasingly dangerous world. And the autonomy and power that they typically gain in adolescence is not accompanied by demands for responsibilities that existed when young people were required to contribute to household incomes.

It is perhaps little wonder that families struggle and sometimes fail in their efforts to form and sustain the sense of coherence that fosters stability. John Gillis is particularly pessimistic about this:

Our ancestors knew that perfection was not to be found in the midst of families; and they were careful to project onto gods and saints the virtues they despaired of finding close to home. But in our modern secular hubris we have dared to bring blessedness down to earth and close to home. As a result of the idealisation of our homes and families we find ourselves forever dissatisfied, forever air-brushing our memories, perpetually reliving rather than simply living our family lives (Gillis 2000:16).

Families, as he suggests, are asking a great deal of themselves in their efforts to meet the needs for intimacy and 'blessedness' from within, without the scaffolding of external constraints and against the contradictions and complexities of family relationships.

The functions of families in Western societies have, according to Popenoe (1993) and others, been pared down to those of childrearing and provision of affection and companionship. To this we might add, as the Families Commission does, the function of transmitting values and beliefs between generations. What do families need in order to carry out these fundamental and vital functions? They need ways of fostering positive and supportive relationships; they need tools for coping with the continuous change within which they are trying to function; they need tools for maintaining stability; and they need shared values that confer meaning for the family as a whole as well as for the individuals who belong in it.

It is argued here that family rituals offer a potentially powerful tool for meeting these needs. They, at their best, provide frameworks for the communication that is fundamental to developing shared meanings, establishing and nurturing relationships, coping with change, and for engendering the emotional and meaning-based cohesiveness that might enhance stability. Communication by itself may be of limited value if it is not accompanied by the behavioural structure that comes with rituals. Intentional, explicit rituals provide an overt framework within which these needs might be met, and indeed (and inevitably) books are available to help families to set these up (see, for example, *The Intentional Family: Simple rituals to strengthen family ties* by William Doherty 1997).

At least as significant for family wellbeing, it is argued here, are the bottom-up implicit rituals that emerge from routines and regular patterns of behaviour carried out by family members, and that come to hold unique significance and meaning for particular families. In contrast to top-down explicit rituals, the meaning and symbolism of implicit rituals arise from the activities and the communication that accompanies them and are, therefore, generated from the day-to-day lives of the group of individuals involved. The combination of top-down explicit rituals, and bottom-up implicit rituals, may be uniquely powerful in enabling families to adapt and organise their lives in constructive ways in the face of change.

There is much work to be done in order to understand how rituals function, and how they might be encouraged in families. Unlike Popenoe, this writer is an optimist. The vital signs of life are still present in families. There is a strong pulse, and a will to live and thrive. This will embodies the impetus to flourish with all the ambiguity, love, conflict, confusion and joy that belonging to a family group entails. No matter who constitutes that group, it deserves the full support and encouragement of a society if the society itself is to thrive. The diversity, richness and meaning that constitute today's families are to be celebrated; and their flexibility in the face of change is the strongest hope we have for their survival and health. Rituals may be a fundamental tool for fostering both flexibility and stability.

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