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WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES ON THE CONTEMPORARY
FAMILY IN IRISH SOCIETY

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Abstract

The concept of the family is constantly changing; new theories and ideas are frequently being discovered and shared. The way the family is seen in Ireland has transformed over the last few decades. Due to this the aim of this research study is to understand how a small sample of Irish women views the contemporary family in today's society. Using a qualitative approach in the form of interviews, through thematic analysis it was found that what makes a family is love and support, that there have been many changes to the Irish family unit, such as divorce being legalised, the decline of the Catholic Church's influence, and the increasing power the media has, have changed the way women perceive the family, another thing that was found was that the bonds that build a family are not restricted to blood ties and legal contracts anymore. The final insight that was discovered was that the future of the family unit is unknown.

Introduction

Over the last 50 years there have been dramatic changes to the Irish family unit. From the size of the typical family to the different norms and values a family hold. There are a number of different factors that have caused these changes, which include; the women's right movement, the marriage bar being lifted, contraception and divorce being legalised, also homosexual activities being de-criminalised and the Civil Partnership Bill. Along with these factors, people's attitudes towards the family have changed. People are becoming more accepting of lone parent, blended or step families, cohabitation couples, child-less marriages, gay and lesbian families, and the fact that that gender roles within the household have shifted. These changes have had an effect on the family, in relation to the way people see the family unit, and also how they define the contemporary family within Irish society. An issue for sociologists and their studies on the family is that the family is so private, yet it is crucial to understand the family because people live in social organisations that are labelled family. Also that because for the majority of the population, family is an important aspect of their lives (Steel, et al, 2012, p.69).

Definition

For most people, the family is an incredibly important aspect of society. The image of the family is used in political campaigns and by the media (Steel, et al, 2012, p.1). According to The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the family is seen as a 'Natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the state'. This definition states what a family is entitled to, however it does not address who makes up a family unit, or what is a family. The family itself can be completed to define, as there are so many different views of the family, such as; the husband is the bread winner and the wife is the home maker (Steel, et al., 2012, p.12). Or that the family is a heterosexual first time married couple living together under the one roof with children (Share, et al, 2012, p.186). This idea of the family only includes heterosexual married couples with children. This excludes a large spectrum of other types of families, for example, homosexual couples, lone parent families, or families of choice. An article by Rikach and Skick describes the family as 'A unit whose members are connected biologically, psychologically and spiritually' (Rikach & Skick, 2014, p.5). Now this view of the family allows for a broader idea of what is the family. For sociologists, who study society and how it functions, the family is an important institution to study (Steel, et al, 2012, p.1). The term family varies from person to person and contains different meaning in different cultures. Every aspect of a person's life affects how they see and define the family. Different social events or personal lifestyles change the way people view the family (Cheal: cited in Allan, 1999, p.61). To one person family may mean: mother, father, and children. Whereas to another, family could be seen as: blood relatives, pets, lifelong friends and neighbours.

A Functionalist View on the Family Unit

It is one thing to define the family unit, it is another matter to understand what family means, more so, the purpose of a family. The sociologist Talcott Parson, functionalists, discussed the idea of socialisation, referring to the concept of how children learn social norms of the society they live in; this is primarily done within the home, as is considered the beginning of personality development (McDonald, 2014, p.96). With this theory, one purpose of the family is to teach children how to behave in society. The person who provided this teaching of socialisation was the mother, as it was her duty to tend to domestic responsibilities within the household, and childrearing was as part of that (Share, et al, 2012, p.182). Another concept from Parsons is personality stabilization, indicating the emotional support purpose of the family (Giddens & Sutton, 2013, p.422), that the male or husband does work outside the home to provide for the family, and the female or wife works inside the home, tending to household chores and childrearing (Morgan, 1996, p. 99). Strong gender roles are another aspect of functionalism, males are raised to be competitive and instrumental, while women are raised to be empathetic and affective (Share, et al, p. 182). Like all things related to the family, depending on the culture or society, the purpose of the family changes, yet a solid theme within western society is that the family is to provide care, love, and support for each other (Steel, 2012, p. 118).

The Traditional Family

In the past, the family unit was seen as a large extended family, with one or more generations living in the same house or farm, whose members were connected through marriage or blood ties, with several children. In a pre-modern Europe, children began working on the family land around the age of 7 (Giddens, 2009, p.332). Sociologists did not begin researching the family until the latter half of the twentieth century. Sociologists first began to understand the roles of families in society from a functionalist point of view (Cohen & Kennedy, 2013, p. 232). In relation to the Irish family unit, the traditional family was seen as a large family living in a rural area, whose work was done inside the home or on the family land. The family unit was the easiest way to inherit property (Share, et al, 2012, p.187-189). In the past, marriage was based on three needs; procreation, raising children, and parental care and training (Chambers, 2012, p.15). During the 1960's in Ireland, the average age for women to get married was 28 and for men it was 26 (Central Statistics Office, n.d.).

The Catholic Church held great control over Ireland, especially in relation to the family, due to the Catholic Church's beliefs of the role of the woman within in the household. The Catholic Church emphasised that the role of the woman was to be a mother and home-maker (Share, et al, 2012, p.344). This is a very traditional view of the family, along with the idea of patriarchy, that the man dominates the family, and the woman is exploited (Share, et al, 2012, p. 181).

Over the last few decades there have been a number of events that have had an impact on Irish society that have changed the shape and structure to the Irish family unit. These changes include urbanization, feminism, gay and lesbian families, divorce and step families. All these allowed for greater accepting attitudes towards cohabitation couples and families, childlessness in couples, and lone parents. All of these topics will be discussed below.

Urbanisation

Urbanisation, along with industrialization are said to be two major factors in changing social life, also that in a large way urbanisation has altered and weakened the traditions of family ties. Urbanization is the process of which families moved from agricultural communities to live and work in towns and cities. Before urbanisation, when people lived and died in the same community, also there was greater control over the population. People were able to live freer life's and become more flexible in relation to social norms and how to live (Cheal, 2002, p.73-74). It was during this time that individuals were transforming into self-absorbed and materialist creators, that the respect of traditions and respect for social norms began to fade (Chambers, 2012, p.14-15). Although urbanization began towards the end of the 19th century, it was not until the 1960's and 1970's that Ireland has become a more urbanised society. With people moving from rural to urban settings, there was a high demand for houses and people who had previously migrated, had returned because of the employment opportunities (Considine and Dukelow, 2009, p.45-46). This was a large change for the Irish family unit as families moved out of the farming areas to live in towns and cities.

Feminism

Along with the changes the urbanisation brought, there was a bigger event that changed the family unit. This event was and to some extent still is the feminist movement. During the 1970's Ireland embraced feminism. This movement changed not only the shape of the Irish family, but Irish society as well. During this time, women challenged the assumptions Irish people have towards gender roles inside the home and also the work place (Considine and Dukelow, 2009, p.141). Feminist wanted women to have equal rights as men do in relation to work, the family, and the law (Share, et al, 2012, p.183-184). The feminist approach to the

family disagrees with Parsons functionalist approach. Compared to the loving and caring idea Parsons brought forward, the feminist theory stated that there was a lot of loneliness and inequalities within the family. In particular to the unequal power in domestic settings, between men and women, showing women to be the lesser of the two (Giddens & Sutton, 2013, p. 421). Feminist argue that women hold little decision making within the home (McDonald, 2014, p.98-99).

The feminist movement brought great change to Ireland and other western societies. For Ireland in particular, in 1932 the Irish government introduced the marriage ban, which permitted women from continuing working in civil sector jobs once they entered into marriage (Redmond and Harford, 2010). Then in 1973, this marriage ban was lifted. Before the feminist movement, contraception was banned in Ireland. In 1979 the then minister for health Charles Haughey allows for only married couples avail of contraception with a doctor's prescription (Considine and Dukelow, 2009, p.63).

Changing Attitudes Towards Gender Roles

Along with all the events that have changed the structure and possibilities of the family unit, people attitudes are also changing. A study carried out by Margret Fine-Davis (Attitudes to Family Formation in Ireland, 2011) found that the attitudes of gender roles have been altered due to several reasons, such as, women in the labour force and households now having two sources of income. Women are becoming more financial independent and no longer need to rely on men for support. In the past, men were seen as the protector and provider for the family unit and now it has changed with men and women both receiving almost equal wages. Another factor that is mentioned in this study is that men can be as good nurturers as women are. That men are more involved in taking care of the children and household chores. The

idea that men are the bread winners and women are the home-makers is thought less of in Irish society today. People's attitudes towards gender roles within the household are changing and all these alterations have had some impact on family life, for example, in the past the male members of the family did manual chores, while the female members did the cooking and cleaning, now it is accepted that these roles are reversed. Gender roles are becoming more fluid and people are more open to this new idea.

Diversity in the Family Unit

Even when individuals share similar ideas about the family and family life, each family differs from the next within a society (Cheal, 2002, p.19). Diversity in families is becoming more common. Such families living a diverse life are gay and lesbian families, divorced families, step-families, cohabitation couples and families, childlessness in families, and lone parent families. Each of these will be discussed below.

Gay and Lesbian Families

Another change to the family unit is the growing acceptance and legal rights gay and lesbian people have. In Ireland in 1993 homosexual activities were de-criminalised, in the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act (Considine and Dukelow, 2009, p.442). The family is constantly becoming more diverse and gay and lesbian couples are seen to be leading the way in new changes of family life (Chambers, 2012, p.48). Under the Civil Partnership and Certain Rights and Obligations of Cohabitants Act 2010, Ireland introduced Civil Partnership. This Act gives same-sex couples similar rights as heterosexual married couples have, yet not in relation to raising children (Citizens Information, 2013). The sociologist Jeffery Weeks

suggested that gay and lesbian couples, in some respect, have an advantage over heterosexual couples in terms of the power balance and can shape their relationship to avoid inequalities (Giddens & Sutton, 2013, p.406). However same-sex couples are experiencing discrimination. Ireland will hold a referendum in May of 2015, which addresses same-sex marriage equality. If this is carried, the Irish definition of the family will have to be changed

Divorced Families

The general idea of the family unit took another turn in 1997, when divorce was legalised in Ireland (Considine and Dukelow, 2009, p. 71). According to the 2011 census since 1997, 87,770 people have become divorced (Central Statistics Office, 2012). Since the 1960's in America and the 1990's in Ireland, divorce has become a more socially accepted way of dissolving a marriage and in today's society, divorce is seen as an optional way out, if one member is un-happy in the marriage (Cheal, 2002,p.76). Where children are present, the effects of marital break down can be complex to understand. Some may feel a sense of relief that their parents have decided to end an un-happy marriage, whereas others, may have difficulties adjusting. Studies show that children of divorced parents have low levels of self-esteem and academic achievement also higher levels of depression. In the long run, children of divorce tend to have negative attitudes towards marriage (Richards, 1999, p. 263-264).

Step or Blended Families

With the growing divorce rate and re-marriage, step or blended families are becoming more common (Steel, et al, 2012, p144). A step or blended family refers to the legal marriage or cohabitation of a couple with one or more children living in the same household who are biological related to one partner, but not the other (Cheal, 2002, p.162). In the past, step families were formed due to the death or abandonment of a parent. In recent times, step families are formed after a divorce or separation. In Ireland men are more likely to re-marry than women, 39% of men re-marry and only 28% of women (Central Statistics Office, 2012). Irish society is becoming more open to the idea of step-families.

Cohabitation Couples and Families

In Ireland and across the globe in western societies, it is becoming more common for couples to live together before entering into a marriage. Some see this new phenomenon as a negative thing that it results in the decline of marriage. On the other hand, some sociologists argue that there is a strong connection between cohabitation and the declining break-down of long term relationships (Chambers, 2012, p. 45). From this point of view, couples who live together tend to have longer lasting relationships than those who live together once they are married. A cohabitation couple are more accepted by society and no longer brings that sense of judgement as it did in the past (Allan and Crow, 2001, p.28). One reason why couples choose to cohabit instead of getting married, is that they simply do not believe in marriage, and decide to have children, or not have children outside of wedlock (McRae, 1999, p. 184-185). A study carried out in 2011; found that the main factor for cohabitation was the financial issue (Fine-Davis, 2011, p.8). The concept of cohabitation is more socially accepted in today's society, when you compare it to the past.

Childlessness in Families

Childless couples can be said to be both involuntary and voluntary firstly involuntary childlessness refers to when a couple cannot have children because of fertility issues or because they cannot afford to have and raise a child together. Whereas voluntary childlessness, occurs when a couple can reproduce and financially raise a child, but simply chose not to have any (Gobbi, 2013, p.964). It is a growing aspect in western societies for couples to refrain from having children, or waiting till later in life to begin having children (Steel, et al, 2012, p.144). It was during the latter half of the 20th century that the stigma around childless couples began to decline (Charles, et al, 2008, p.26) and attitudes changed. A study carried out by Merz and Liefbroer (2012) about attitudes towards voluntary childlessness, found that depending on the individual, culture, age and religion attitudes around childlessness couples varied. That people with more traditional values see it as a negative thing, while those with modern values are generally okay with and open to the idea of couples not having children. (Merz and Liefbroer, 2012, p.595-597). In Fine-Davis's 2011 study, found that men had a stronger need to have children for fulfilment than women. Both men and women are focused on careers and waiting till later in life to have children, never the less, although concern still exists around childless couples, it is no longer a main issue if a couple chose to not have children.

Lone Parent Families

A lone parent takes on the responsibilities of both the mother and the father, lone parent families are formed due to divorce, separation, death or abandonment of one parents. Lone parenthood is believed to be one of the biggest changes to the family structure over the last two decades (Gonzalez, et al, 2011, p.17-19). In Ireland's History, if a woman was expecting

a child and had no partner (death of a spouse was excluded), the woman had no choice and was forced to work in and be abused by the nuns and priests of the Magdalene laundries. These laundries, originally set up to protect woman who became pregnant outside of marriage, yet somewhere along the way became a punishment. Then in 1996, the last of the laundries was closed (Markarushka, 2012). Since the closure of the laundries, Ireland has not only changed attitudes around lone parents, but also laws, and there is more protection for lone parents and resources available to them. These resources are child benefits (Citizens Information, 2014). According to the 2011 Irish census, 186,284 women are lone mothers, and 29,031 men are lone fathers (Central Statistics Office, n.d.). Although fathers are more involved in raising children, still women are more likely to be the head of a lone parent family.

Theories Surrounding the Family Unit

Anthony Giddens, an English sociologist theory of the transformation of intimacy, is an important concept that notes the changing patterns in a family. His idea; that people are becoming more open about their emotions, and are giving voice to their intimate thoughts. A significant aspect of this theory is that marriage is no longer a social expectation or a social norm, but is based on a loving relationship between two people, that marriage is an emotional bond between people and not a legal contract (Cohen & Kennedy, 2013, p.232-233). Compared to 50 years ago, in Ireland, when marriage and raising children was for practical reasons, such as inheriting land and producing people for work. Giddens suggests that now, marriage is more of an intimate bond between to people (Giddens, 2009, p.371-372).

The normal chaos of love examines marriage, family patterns, and also personal relationships. It is based on the changing family, that the factors that were once shaping the family, such as politics and traditional guidelines are no longer influences. People are now voluntarily entering into marriage rather than out of necessity. This work was carried out by Beck and Beck-Gernshein, who found that the conflict that arises between the sexes is caused by family work, freedom to achieve personal goals, and love. The cause of this conflict is due to peoples desires to find true love and are increasingly becoming more hopeful of finding this love (Giddens, 2009, p.372-374). In recent years, there is more of an emotional investment in marriage and childrearing, not just for practical reasons.

Another theorist that apposed functionalism is David Popenoe, who was a neo-functionalist that stated that all the diversity the family unit has experienced, it is not necessarily a positive thing. Also that the contemporary family unit have new scripts on how to structure their lives, that are still connected to Parsons theory of the women being the nurturing character in the household (Steel, et al, 2012, p.40-41).

What is Family in Contemporary Society?

There is a need for a new definition of the Irish family unit. The large extended family, with heterosexual couples entering into marriage for the first time and having child (Share, et al, 2012, p.186), still lives on, but there are other types of families in today's society that are excluded from this definition. Over the last few decades, the structure and patterns of the family unit have changed. There is more diversity and acceptance in families in contemporary Irish society (McDonald, 2014, p. 93). The family is changing, people are becoming more open minded about 'what is family' and 'who makes up a family'. There is now a greater

understanding of family in today's society, that a new, more open and acceptable definition of the family is needed.

With all the changes that have occurred in Ireland in the last 50 years or so, there has been very little to no research carried out in recent years to understand the family in today's society. There have been studies on the family formation in Ireland research carried out to understand and reflect upon divorce, and gay and lesbian families' issues. However, an overall research study aimed to understand what women's perspectives of the family is something that has not yet been challenged.

Aims and objectives

The above points out the number of different ways the Irish family unit has changed in the last 50 years. People's ideas and beliefs about the family have been altered due to all these events in Irish society. The aim of this research study is to not only investigate, but also understand if these changes have in fact changed Irish women's views and definitions of the family. 50 years ago, in 1965, Ireland did not have contraception, divorce, gay and lesbian families, or couple who lived together outside wedlock. It was seen as the norm, for young people to get married, buy or build a house and have children, now with more opportunities, resources and protection; people are able to make choices that tend to go against the traditional values and beliefs of the Irish family. This research study aims to understand what women's perspectives of the contemporary family are in Irish society. To examine how all these alterations have affected women's attitudes towards the Irish family unit. Also to identify the different changes that a sample of six Irish women found to be the biggest changes to the concept of family. Along with all this, the researcher aims to gain a greater insight into the different forms family takes within today's society.

Methodology

Type of Design

For this research study a qualitative approach was employed to understand what women's perspectives on the contemporary family unit are in Irish society. This approach was chosen for this research study to gain greater insight into the participant's perspectives on the topic, through the use of individual interviews and a two person interview this insight was obtained through the use of a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach allows for the researcher to get more of a person answer from the participants rather than the 'yes' or 'no' options that a survey only gives. Also this approach was used as it suited the general research question and the researcher prefers this style of research. Interviews in a qualitative approach uses smaller samples sizes, but can give greater understanding of not only the 'what' but also the 'why' and 'how'. This approach was adapted because the topic of the family can be very personal for people, and for this research interviews were more beneficial than surveys.

Thematic analysis was adopted for this research study. This form of analysis was chosen because it allowed the researcher to record patterns and themes gathered from the data that was obtained during the interviews process (Spencer, et al, 2014, p.271). Using NVivo9, the researcher created 60 nodes from the four individual interviews and the two person interview. From those nodes, though a narrowing down process and an in-depth analysis of the nodes, five strong individual themes were chosen for this research study. In relation to the data collection stage of this research study, semi-structured interviews were created to gather an in-depth and rich understanding of the participant's perspectives of the contemporary family are in Irish society. Semi-structured interviews were recognised as the most appropriate way of revealing the data. The researcher then developed a qualitative interview schedule containing 16 questions with a number of sub-questions with additional questions ready if the

interview were to head in a different direction. An interview schedule was developed to address the general research question of this study, also to help guide the interview process. A copy of the semi-structured questions can be found in appendix one.

When deciding on what form the data would be collected, the researcher originally chose to carry out six individual interviews, as the interviews began, the researcher found difficulties in obtaining information from the college student on an individual basis, so the idea of a two person interview was adapted. This allowed for the students to have more of a discussion rather than an interview. Also this provide more insight into the topic, as the two participants seemed more comfortable talking with each other, rather to a complete stranger.

The Participants

In order to understand what women's perspectives of the contemporary family are in Irish society, six females were interviewed to gain greater insight into this topic, four of which were individual interview and two participants partook in a two person interview. A purposive sampling method was adopted to ensure each participant met the requirement and were suitable for the general research question of this study. To do this, the researcher confirmed that each participant had not partaken in any form of family studies course in an academic setting. The six participants that were chosen were, ranging from the age of 19 to 30 years old. Originally, the gender of the participants was not considered, as the comparing the different genders perspective was not an aspect of this research study. However, as the interview process began, no men were willing to freely give up their time, therefore the perspective changed to women participants. The participants varied from full-time college students to people in full time employment, and the majority of the participants were located through lecturers at Dublin Business School, and the remaining were found through the use of social media. Each participant received and signed a consent form, informing them on their rights as a participant in this research study, also an information sheet that gave the participants an understanding of this research study. A copy of the consent form can be found in appendix two.

Procedures

There were a number of different stages of the interview process, each stage was planned in advance to allow for a smooth interview. Firstly, on organising a time, date, and location, the researcher arrived early, to ensure the room temperature was adequate and to arrange tables and chairs to provide comfort and to allow the interview to flow with ease. Once the participants arrived, there was a brief introduction, and a casual conversation about how the participant's day was going. This was done to create a relaxing environment and to establish a rapport. After which, an explanation about how the interview process will go, and also about the research topic, giving the participants an understanding of what to expect. Before beginning the interview, the researcher clarified the rights the participants have when taking part in a study, and then the consent form was explained and signed. Once all of this was completed, the interviews began, with an easy question to ease the participants into the interview. Each question was discussed in detail, allowing the participant's time to understand and answer the question at their own pace. Each interview went smoothly, and all the questions were answered. When the interview finished, there was additional time for the participants to ask any question they may have about the research topic. When all this was done, a new topic, which was un-related to the research, was introduced by the researcher, to allow the participants time to transition out of interview mode and back into normal life. The final stage of the interview process was that each participant was thanked.

For the location of the interviews, as four of the participants are Dublin Business School Students, an empty lecture hall was used. This allowed for a quite space to carry out the interviews. For the other two participants, who were found through the use of social media, the locations of the interviews were in their homes. Due to the fact that the researcher could not control any disturbances, issues with people and family pets entering the rooms arose.

The equipment required for this research study is: a Dictaphone to record the interviews, for this research a ZOOM H1 version 2.0 Dictaphone was used and a 2GB Micro SD memory card. The software used to analysis and store data was NVivo9, also a password protected USB, that contains the transcribed interviews and any personal information of the participants obtained during the interview stages of this research study. Along with a consent form and information sheet.

Ethical Issues

Ethical issues arise in all forms of research, the only way to avoid them is to identify what ethical issues may be present before data is collected. For this research study, a number of ethical issues were highlighted. Firstly, the welfare of the participants. The participant's welfare is one of the most important things to consider when carrying out research, which is why the researcher of this study kept in mind throughout the interviews and the data analysis. Due to the nature of this research study, certain questions asked during the interviews may have had a negative effect on the participants. To overcome this, the researcher designed general questions, that aimed at best to not be triggering for the participants, also the researcher was aware that if a sensitive issue arose for the participant, that a break would be held, or a new topic was be introduced, or the interview would end.

Another ethical issue to avoid is deception, before any interviews began, the researcher informed each of the participants about the study, about the angle chosen for this topic, and why this topic of the family was chosen. Along with this, each of the participants was interviewed voluntarily and signed a consent form before beginning the interviews. The third ethical issue highlighted is the rights the participants have to withdraw from this research study at any stage they if they so wish, right up until the research is to be submitted. The confidentiality of the participants is an important factor to be considered, that is why the real names of the participant have not been mentioned in this report. All personal information such as names, ages, and contact details that the participants gave are in a secure location.

For the two person interview, certain ethical issue where kept in mind throughout the interview. Due to the fact that the family is sensitive topic, and discussing family ideologies can be difficult for some, the researcher ensured the two participants taking part in the group

interview were comfortable with each other. Also that they did not have to share information about their families in front of the other if they did not wish to.

To ensure the questions asked during the interviews were ethical agreeable, the researcher of this study met with their supervisor before carrying out any interviews.

Findings

Through the thematic analysis of the data obtained in the interviews, five themes were discovered, they are as followed: the family is a love and support system, how and why the family has changed in Ireland, bonds that build a family, the diversity of the family, and the finale theme is the future family. Using extracts form the four individual interviews and the two person interview, each of these themes will be discussed below.

The Family is a Love and Support System.

When asked what does family means, the most common answer was that the family is a support system, that loves each other, and that family are people who take care of each other no matter what the situation.

Family means support and love to me – Jane.

Through the idea that the family unit is made up of people who support each other, there is a level of safety within the format of the family unit, that when all else fails, a person's family will stand by them, and that person will be there for his or her family in return. This is done not out of obligation, but rather out of the concept of wanting to be there for your family, that you are willing to give up your time and energy to support a family member through difficult times.

You're willing to be there for them when things get tough and when things are good, you're still there for them – Sian.

Family means many things to people, families take different forms depending on the culture they are a part of, and the traditions they hold. For the six women that took part in this research study, family is a group of people that are there for you when you need them the most. That all families have problems, but they can come together and support each other.

Well one that's there for you when you need them, and that kind of work together through all the problems and issues that all families have – Demi.

One quality a family holds is that they love each other. Love is a central theme in all families, people now have a say in who they choose to begin a family with, there are no set structure or guides to how a family is formed, once love is present, for these participants, nothing else seemed matters.

Love is love, people can marry whoever they want and everything else –Jane.

The notion of unconditional love, that no matter how far apart people are, or are experiencing difficulties with accepting life changing decisions, family love each other for who they are.

There are no conditions or boundaries to the love of a family, or at least there should not be.

It appears that all families fight and at times have negative feelings towards each other, yet that unconditional love keeps them together. From the insight to the family that was received, it has emerged that what family means, is love.

Unconditional love. Unconditional love, you love them, even when you hate them-Sian.

How and Why the Family has Changed in Ireland.

Another theme that arose from the interviews was: how and why the Irish family has changed. When asked about how the Irish family has changed, the majority of the participants declared that gender roles have shifted, that the mother is no longer the main care giver. That with women entering into the work force, the structure of the family has been transformed. Along with this, it is becoming more common for the father to stay at home and care for the children.

Mothers now go out to work, they don't stay at home. And fathers now can stay at home and look after the kids – Louise.

An alternative cause for an adjustment to the Irish family is divorce. Divorce being legalised in the 1990's was also found to be the cause of how the family has changed. Divorce allows for unhappy marriages to dissolve.

I suppose divorce changed a lot of things, it gave people a way out... they have the opinion of getting out, or sticking around – Sian.

These are two causes of how the family has changed, other issues such as more single parents, and step families were also discussed. The gender roles and divorce were the key reason for how the family has changed for the participants. The second part of this theme is; why the perspective of the family has changed. For this, two things were found, they are as followed.

The Catholic Church used to have a strong influence on Irish society. Now, this influence has been weakened, and there are other factors that are shaping how the family unit is pictured.

It's mostly to do with the church, people are overcoming the restrictions of the church- Rose.

The control the Catholic Church had over so many aspects of Irish society, in relation to contraception, the woman's role within the house, and divorce. According to the participants of this study that control is no longer as important in terms of understand the family

Also the church doesn't have much of a say anymore in how things are run, so I think that's changed the whole family – Demi.

An additional reason as to why the family has changed is the impact the media has had on the country. People are exposed to so many different forms of media, from Television, radios, and billboards, that it affects their lives and can influence how they comprehend things.

The media has a lot to do with it, now more television programs are showing different types of family instead of the traditional family we're so used to seeing –Demi.

A question was asked about what television shows represents a positive image of the family, one participant said 'Friends' expressing that a popular program that she grew up watching, changed the way she views the family. Along with media, celebrities have adapted peoples' ideas of the family.

When Angelina Jolie adopted her kids as well as having her own, it's like 'oh, that's a big family - Katie.

People are taking note of what famous people do, in relation to how they live their live and how they raise children. That it appears to be, along with television programs, adjusting the way we see the family.

The Bonds that Build a Family

When asked for a definition of the contemporary family, the first thing the participants stated was the structure of the family that a family is made up of parents, children, and extended family.

Family is made up of usually four characters maybe more that are related through blood, marriage, or adoption – Jane.

The members of a family are crucial in shaping who we are as individuals, they are our primary support system, and they have experienced our lives alongside us. Yet, the members of a family are not the only thing that makes a family. Another concept or way to see the family unit is through the bonds that are built over time. Although blood ties are important, there is much more to understanding what makes a family in contemporary Ireland. When asked what makes a family, compared to being asked for a definition, the answers received, were that a family need not be blood relatives.

A group of people not necessarily blood related – Katie.

Another concept about the family unit was that, what or who make up a family is rarely reflected upon.

A close bond that's you just feel without really thinking about it... A close bond that you just can't explain' – Sian.

For this participant, what makes a family is not restricted by blood ties or legal contracts, what makes a family is an emotional connection to someone or a group of people, which you cannot explain or define, it is merely a strong feeling towards a person that you love. There is no questioning or evaluating this emotion, it is simply felt. This connection to a person or a group of people can develop due to a number of different reasons, one such reason is a shared

experience with someone. Growing you with a person, who you are not related to in itself can be a shared experience, as you have a life time of memories together. Also going through an emotional event such as the loss of a parent or friend, can bring people closer.

Also friends, and family friends, who have been through a lot with us – Rose.

The participants believed that people who have supported you, who have help you through difficult times, and those who are not necessarily blood related, but are more than friends, are what make a family. Yes blood tie are important, but there are other factors that are involved in shaping a family. The family is no longer just the biological members of a family, now family can include a large number of extended people in a person's life, such as; friends, neighbours, and family friends are now being considered family.

I think you can have really good friends, or even like neighbours, that you'd consider family because you've known them all your life – Demi.

These bonds are ever growing, as we meet new people and experience new things in life, the people standing by us throughout it all, so how go from friends to family. As spoken about above, these connections and bonds are not reflected on, they are simple felt.

The Diversity of the Irish Family Unit

One phrase that was present throughout the four individual interviews and the two person interview was diversity. There are so many different types of family in Ireland, from step families, to gay and lesbian families. There are lone parent households and un-married couples with children. The very structure of the family has changed. It is no longer just the nuclear family.

The structure... there's more, different types of families, not just the nuclear family anymore - Katie.

Ireland has come a long way over the last 50 years, as a country that struggled with different issues that were once believed to be threatening to the formation of the family unit, yet these changes have created a more inclusive and diverse society.

More diverse, more rights for everyone - Demi.

The main concept in relation to diversity that was found in each interview was that gay and lesbian couples and families are more open and are more likely to be accepted in Irish society. Along with this, that due to the acceptance, the way people see the family unit, is changing because of gay and lesbian couples and families.

Gay couples... are starting to find their places in society as well. I think there are a lot of things at the minute that are, in Ireland, changing the way we see the family - Sian.

The lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community, are finally finding their place within Irish society. That it has taken Ireland and the Irish people a long time to get here, but Irish society is now open and understand to the LGBT community, especially where children are involved.

It's about time, in this day and age, that gay people are allowed to have children. I think Ireland is a bit backwards so it's about time it comes forward on its open to having gay people and that they can have children – Louise.

When asked how the Irish family unit has changed in recent years, the overall consensus was that the LGBT community are becoming more visible in Irish society, that they have changed the way people see the family unit.

There is a move away from the traditional family, now there are more single mothers and obviously gay couples – Demi.

In relation the referendum on marriage equality Ireland will hold in May 2015, as a group, the participants all agreed that the marriage equality for the LGBT community will be introduced in Ireland. For the six participants of this research study, there was no question or concern that the referendum will go any other way, except in favour of equal marriage.

I'd be of mind that, that will pass, without any major issues – Sian.

For gay and lesbian couples to have children in Ireland, brings complexity in relation to the law, yet, for this research study, a common agreement was that Ireland is becoming more accepting to the idea of children being raised by parents of the same sex.

There are gay families now that are more openly having children, which is good – Katie.

Although each participant was asked separately, excluding the participants in the two person interview, when asked if these changes have had a negative or a positive effect on the family, as if they were in harmony with each, they all responded that the changes to the structure of the Irish family, in relation to the LGBT community, divorce, step families, and lone parents, was a positive change.

Oh, I think they're positive- Katie.

The Future of the Irish Family Unit

The finale two questions of the interview were based around the idea of the future family, these two questions were chosen as a way to ease the participants out of interview mode.

Through the thematic analysis, the answers received presented a new theme.

Firstly, when asked what they think the family of the future will look like, although there was some uncertainty,

It could be anything – Rose.

As the family unit is becoming more diverse, as spoken about above, there are no limits to the future family, it can be anything. There is a structure to the family, but it is becoming more flexible and inclusive to different forms of families.

There will be loads of different families, and we'll be so much more open minded – Jane.

The final question of the interview was more of a personal question, asking the participants to describe the family they would like to have in the future. Again there was a level of uncertainty, that there was no set guideline to what their family of the future will look like.

Well, I don't know... not a clue – Rose.

Growing up, people tend to have an idea about what type of family they will have, now, that there is more opinions and choices, people are free to think about what life they would like to have, and that their life, or family is not shaped by social expectations. This allows for some reflection and discussion about what a person wants for them. People are talking about how they see their future family, that the model of getting marriage and having children is no longer important.

I really don't know... this is coming from my sister, she can see me just not giving a damn, being such a lose mum – Jane.

On the topic of having and rising children, there was a strong divide between those in favour of having children and those against. Children were mentioned in almost all of the participant's future, for some, having children was a definite thing, that they will have children in their future

Like kids and a husband... I can see myself being a house wife – Louise.

Whereas, for the remaining, the idea of having children was something they did not wish to do. For these participants, having children is a possibility, but not something they want.

I wouldn't be planning kids, at all, in any respect - Sian.

One view about the future family was happiness. When asked about their future family, it did not matter if children or marriage would be a part of it, as long as the participants were happy, that is all that matter to them.

I intend on staying close to my family, keeping a bond there and just being in a happy relationship – Sian.

I not really sure, just a happy family I suppose – Demi.

Discussion

The purpose of this research study was to understand what women's perspective on the contemporary family are in Irish society. Through a qualitative method approach the findings were that women see the family as a loving, supportive system, the factors that changed the family and why, that the family is becoming more diverse, that the family is no-longer restricted by blood ties, and also that there is a level of uncertainty when it comes to the future family.

In relation to the family being about love, this supports the work of Anthony Giddens that the family is increasingly transforming into a more emotion intimate connection (Giddens, 2009, p. 371-372). In the past, the family was a unit that the purpose was to reproduce the next generation, a way to inherit land (Share, et al, 2012, p. 187-189), and for socialisation of the children (McDonald, 2014, p. 96). In more recent years, according to the participants of this research study, the family provides that unconditional love. It would appear that the family has evolved from the practical values of the unit, into an emotional loving connection between people that have little reflection involved. What is family, family is love. From a functionalist point of view, Talcott Parsons discussed personality stabilization that a purpose of the family unit is to provide support for the other members (Giddens & Sutton, 2013, p. 422). As the family is a support system was such an important theme in the findings of this research study, it shows that although Parsons work on the family was somewhat the first of its kind, and has been criticised by the feminist approach to the family (Giddens & Sutton, 2013, p.421), his work still relates to how women see the family in contemporary Irish society. The family are people who stand by each other and support each other through the difficult times.

In relation to how the family unit has changed in Irish society, it was suggested by the participants that gender roles within the household have altered the way people see the family. The role of the women in the family was to be the care giver (Morgan, 1996, p.99). In more recent years, the mother has entered the work force has caused the dynamics of the family to shift and it is clearly seen from the participants of this research study's view point. As the participants believe that the father is taking over some of traditional mother roles.

To prevent an unhappy marriage and family life, the participants considered divorce to be a positive change in Ireland. As it allowed for couples to have a fresh start, according to the participants, divorce gives people a choice, to stay in an unhappy marriage and work through any issues, or have the marriage dissolved. This in some way reflects the work of Anthony Giddens theory of the transformation of intimacy, as Giddens suggested that marriage is now a loving commitment between two people (Giddens, 2009, p. 371-372). So when that love feeling fades, divorce occurs.

It is seen in the literature review and is present in the findings that the Catholic Church held such control over Ireland (Share, et al, 2012, p.344). From the participants interviewed it is visible that the control the Catholic Church had has been weakened that other factors such as the media and social moments are now influencing the way people imagine the Irish family to be. As contraception, divorce, and civil partnerships for gay and lesbian couples are now available in Ireland. This strong influence that has been replaced by the media is now shaping how these six women perceive the family unit.

Another central topic for the six women who partook in this research study was the bonds that build a family are no longer restricted by blood ties and legal contracts, such as marriage commitments and adoption. That emotional connections with lifelong friends, or people one has shared a significant event with, are essential in forming family bonds. This idea reflects

the work of Rikach and Skich, who define the family unit as a group of people who are biologically, psychologically, and spiritually connected to one another (Rikach & Skich, 2014, p.5). showing that people's belief about the family has changed in the last few decades, as an older definition of the family is; that family members live together, with parents of both sexes, with children (Murdock, (1949) cited: Steel, et al, 2012, p.2). It would appear that family in contemporary society are more open to extending that family bond to those outside the general structure of the family unit. Friendships are a significant structure for building family bonds. That a life event shared with a person or a group of people can form a family like bond. This corresponds with the idea of family of choice, although that can be linked to gay and lesbian couples, it can also be said that people who are not biologically related, who wish to enter into a loving and caring relationship without legal contracts or blood ties (Cheal, 2002, p.155). People are now finding that bond with people outside their family.

The Irish family unit in contemporary society as perceived by six Irish women has progressively developed into a more diverse structure. There are different types of families that are accepted by society, families such as step families, lone parent families, gay and lesbian families, and cohabitation couples. A major aspect of the diversity of the family is the increase in acceptance for the gay and lesbian community. It is seen through the literature and in the findings, that Ireland and the rest of the western countries are becoming both legally accepting and socially accepting of the gay and lesbian community. The idea of the nuclear family has been altered; the nuclear family was seen as heterosexual married couple with children (Steel, et al, 2012, p.1). Now with the growing legal rights and general recognition of families of diversity, Ireland is becoming more open the structure of the Irish family changing. It is not only gay and lesbian families that are receiving acknowledgment; it is also step families and childless families. David Popenoe believed diversity in the family unit to be a negative thing, that too much diversity will have a damaging effect on the family and

children (Steel, et al, 2012, p. 40-41). Yet according to the participants of this research study, who believed all the diversity in the family to be a positive change.

The idea of the future family is limitless. There have been so many changes to the family unit in Ireland and the rest of the western countries that the family itself has transformed into a more inclusive, accepting and open unit. From the thematic analysis of the interviews, the concept of the future family was key in understanding the contemporary family. In relation to the structure of the family in contemporary society and also when compared to 50 plus years ago, when there was a general guideline to how the family was formed, there were known patterns and people knew what to expect. In recent years, because there is more diversity and choice surrounding the family, it is becoming more unknown just what the family of the future will look like. In particular for the participants of this research study, there was a level of uncertainty and to how they believed their future family will be. They had ideas of what to expect and what was to come, but each of the six female participants stated that it was their decision and their lives, that no-one was telling them how to structure their future families, once they were happy that is all they needed.

Limitations

Like ethical issues, for all forms of research studies, there are limitations. For this research study in particular limitations that arose were as followed: the same size, as the same size was only six participants and although great insight to women's perspectives on the family unit was obtained, a truer and stronger understanding would have been received if there would have been a larger sample size. Had there been a wider range of participants, from different forms of backgrounds, this could have provided more of an awareness of women's perspectives of the family in contemporary Irish society. Another limitation or a way of improving the same size of this research study is more time. If the researcher had more time there would have been more time to schedule additional interviews. Also with extra time with each participant there could have been further in depth understanding of women's perspectives on the contemporary family. Another issue with time is that the data analysis tends to be extremely time consuming in qualitative research. As this is a qualitative research study, the information received through the interview process, is open to interpretation and that depending on the researcher, certain things mentioned in the interviews may be understood differently. A criticism or weakness of this research study is the inexperience of the researcher. As this was the first time that the researcher carried out an independent and original study, there are flaws throughout and an overall level of uncertainty, if the researcher was more experienced, the weakness may not have occurred.

Further Studies

One way in which this research study can be improved in the future, is by understanding what males perspectives on the contemporary family are in Irish society. This should be carried out to provide a stronger picture on what family means to all genders, not just women. Also by expanding the age of the participants, by opening up the age of the participants a greater grasp of the family would be hoped to be obtained, as this study was restricted to participants aged 19 to 30, if older people have of been interviewed, they may have given a different view on the family, because they have experienced more in life. Another way to improve upon this research study in the future is by developing more personal questions for the interviews, this was not done for this research study, as the researcher felt that more personal questions may lead to negative feelings for the participants, but with a more qualified researcher, this could be done.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the family unit is a complicated sphere that is constantly changing. There can be no one solid definition to the unit as to each person the idea of the family means something different. For the Irish family in modern society, it is believed that the family is an unconditional loving supportive system that takes care of each other. There are many forms family can take, once that unconditional love is present that is all that matters. There have been so many events that have shifted the concepts of the family such as the feminist and gay rights movements that diversity has become a more accepted thing in Irish society. From the thematic analysis, one of the biggest findings was the uncertainty the participants have about the future. That once set structure of how the family should be is no longer there. People have a choice and say in how their future families will form. The aim of this research study was to understand what women's perspectives on the contemporary family are in Irish society, from the in-depth research it is clear that the family is forever changing and forever changed.

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Appendix - one



Women's perspectives on the contemporary family in Irish society

My name is Paula Mc Dyer and I am conducting research that explores women's views on the modern family unit within Irish society.

You are invited to take part in this study and participation involves an interview that will take roughly 40 minutes.

Participation is completely voluntary and so you are not obliged to take part. If you do take part and any of the questions do raise difficult feelings, you do not have to answer that question, and/or continue with the interview.

Participation is confidential. If, after the interview has been completed, you wish to have your interview removed from the study this can be accommodated up until the research study is published.

The interview, and all associated documentation, will be securely stored and stored on a password protected computer.

It is important that you understand that by completing and submitting the interview that you are consenting to participate in the study.

Should you require any further information about the research, please contact me at: 1656830@mydbs.ie or my thesis supervisor Naill Hanlon at: niall.halon@dbs.ie

Thank you for participating in this study.

Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix- two

Question for interview

- Q1. Describe the family (not your own) in a few words?
- Q2. What makes a family, is it just blood ties, marriage, and adoption, or are there other factors- events, emotional ties?
- Q3. Do you think there have been any changes to the Irish family over the last 50 years?
-what/how?
- Q4. Do you think these changes have been positive or negative?
-in what ways?
- Q5. What do you believe caused these changes?
- Q6. In your own words, can you describe the traditional Irish family?
- Q7. In your own words, can you describe the modern Irish family?
- Q8. In the course of your life, has your concept of the family changed?
-when you were a child, compared to now, what was your idea of the family?
- Q9. What events do you feel have changed the way people see the family unit?
- Q10. In the past, what do you think shaped the way we viewed the family?
- Q11. In more recent years, what do you think is now shaping the family?
-why/ in what ways/ can you give examples?
- Q12. What do you think the family of the future will look like?
- Q13. What do you think your future family will look like?