

Reflexive Society and Reflexive Relationships: The Changing Patterns of Family and Friendship in Late Modernity

Maidul Islam
Rozyana Begum

Abstract: *The conventional definitions and, meanings of marriage, family, family relationship, and kinship ties demand a serious relook as things are changing fast and drastically in the late capitalistic era. New structures and new designs of social relationships are coming up. This article deals with the nature of family formation and their margin of relationships based on secondary sources. On the one hand, late modern families offer greater freedom of life to its members and on the other hand they open up great deal of variations and flexibility while operating as a part of the 'risk society'.*

Keywords: sexuality, flexibility, family relations, decline of marriage, friendship, late modernity, risk society.

Introduction

Sociology is about the study of society and social relationships. Since its origin, it has been concerned with human's inter-relationship with society, and social disintegration. Friendships and family relationships are undergoing tremendous social change under the impact of various factors such as industrialization, urbanization, and modern education. Personal relationships have taken new dimension in late modernity. Therefore, great transformations in partnership, family, family formation, sexuality and intimacy are recognized as important subjects in family studies. With commercialization, and globalization new forms of individual relationship within and outside family are taking place in most of the Western societies. Though the pace of change in society at large and in family varies from one society to other, it has been impacting the friendship and family affairs. Formal and informal relationships are also changing in the context of capitalism. This characterization provides us a new avenue to examine the newly emerging social fact.

This paper explores the dynamics of friendship and family relationships in the context of late modernity. It would also explain the changing pattern of inter-personal relationship in the light of late modern sexuality.

Family in the late modern era

Many social analysts have observed that the traditional family patterns and values are now substantially changing to keep pace with modernity. The dominant character of this era is the discovery of individualization. Individuals have acquired greater autonomy because individuals have become segregated from families. While enjoying greater autonomy they now take personal decisions to shape their family relationships. In the context of decision making, individuals are being more flexible than before. Thus, one can decide to marry or to cohabit while others can choose to live alone or to divorce the partner. Individuals have a greater right to control the life style he/she leads. Cheal observes that in the Western societies, marriage rates are falling sharply. The general trend is that people get married for the first time late, divorce and cohabit with new partners. They have fewer children and there has been a marked increase in the proportion of people living by themselves or living alone with dependent children (Cheal 2008:34). Therefore, the definition of family should be changed in the context of such complex relationships. We get a similar tone in the study of Finch. She argues that keeping the more extensive volatility of contemporary relationships in mind the family relationships have to be redefined and positively established on a more regular basis as new sexual partnerships are formed, as cohabitation gets reconstituted as legal marriage, as children leave (or do not leave) their parent's home in different ways and at different stages, and as more people experience periods of living alone (Finch 2007:69). There are also many problems in cohabitation and marriage. Marriage is a social and legal bondage of one's life. For persisting strong ties, husband and wife depend on their commitment to the relationship. Besides, raising children is another cause of social integration or surviving of ties among man and women. The relationship in cohabitation is often fragile. Allan points out that 'of course, marriage still carries with it legal obligations and responsibilities that are not attached to the same extent to cohabitation. Yet, in many societies, the growth of cohabitation is resulting in a greater institutionalization of the cohabitation at the same time as marriage itself is becoming deinstitutionalized' (Allan 2008:3). Coleman has found out that in the UK about 60 percent of all first marriages are

preceded by unmarried cohabitation (Coleman cited in Therborn 2000: 197). Basically, revolution in sexuality has emerged in recent time in most of the industrial countries and other countries of the world. Therborn further notes that culturally and legally, there has occurred a secularization of sexuality, liberating it from religious or other aprioristic normative rulings as 'sinful'. Sex now is quite common outside marriage for sheer pleasure, without intentions of procreation (Therborn 2000: 207). But interestingly, the divorce rates in Muslim populations in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore are decreasing. Jones observes that the divorce rates have been increasing in the West, but among the Muslim populations of Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia they have actually been decreasing (Jones 1997:103). The sexual revolution has happened in the Western countries because of the rising tide of urbanization, industrialization, modernization, and female participations in work force. However, the large sections of divorced people later remarry or cohabit with new partners who were also married before. Even, they may have children of their own. As a result, Beck-Gernsheim notes that more and more children grow up with one non-biological parent and these step families appear to be a variant of the bi-cultural family (Beck-Gernsheim 1998:65). Beck-Gernsheim further points out that in such unions the values, rules and routines, mutual expectations and everyday practices- from table manners and pocket money to television viewing and bedtime hours –are negotiated and agreed upon (Beck-Gernsheim 1998:65). Furthermore, decreasing social pressure to maintain the marriage relationship, increasing the importance of individual self-interest, economic freedom of women, are some of the causes that add more flexibility in personal and sexual relationships. Another scholar Allan argues that we are witnessing a strong social endorsement of more flexible and less permanent relationship and even though many people still believe in life-long heterosexual marriage as an ideal, there is now not only more tolerance of alternatives, but also an acceptance that diversity is inevitable given the character of present-day life-style (Allan 1998:698). Besides, marriage between men and women is one kind of understanding where one can develop his or her relation in a sophisticated way. Thus, Beck & Beck-Gernsheim observe: 'In living together a man and a woman build up a universe of shared attitudes, opinions and expectations covering everything from trivial day-to-day matters to the great events in world politics. This develops in verbal or non-verbal dialogue, in shared habits and experiences, in a continuous interplay between one's other half and oneself. The shared image of the world is continuously being negotiated, shifted, replaced, questioned and reaffirmed' (Beck & Beck-Gernskheim 1995:50).

Personal relationship is not only limited in heterosexuality or marriage but it also runs into many other forms of sexuality. The transformations in sexuality are emerging as a new dimension of relationships which is, in turn, demands new way of defining family relationships. Kinsey has observed that a very high proportion of men, as well as a substantial proportion of women, have taken part in homosexual acts at some point in their lives (Kinsey cited in Giddens 1992:13). Another study of Kinsey points out that only about 50 percent of all American men were, in his terms, 'exclusively heterosexual' - that is, had neither participated in homosexual activities, nor felt homosexual desires. Eighteen percent were either exclusively homosexual or persistently bisexual. Among women, 2 percent were wholly homosexual, 13 percent of others had engaged in some form of homosexual activity, while a further 15 percent reported having had homosexual urge without having acted on them (Ibid). Nevertheless, the numbers of gay, lesbian, bisexual are increasing in recent times. It is worthy to note that the selection of sex partner depends much on the men and women concerned. The women, in particular, are getting greater autonomy for satisfying their sexual desire, which is something that was unthinkable a few years back. Giddens has termed this phenomenon 'plastic sexuality', which means diversity of sexual practices among people (Giddens 1992:27).

Kinship ties are also changing day by day in the era of late modernity. Processes like industrialization, urbanization, modernization and the changing family patterns leave their mark on the kinship ties. Besides, greater geographic mobility, often resulting physical separation often loosen kinship ties. With ever increasing individualism in 'organic solidarity' people are becoming more 'rational' and they see relations more in functional terms (Durkheim 1984: 31-40).

Many argue that industrialization and urbanization are impacting the composition of and size of the households. The widely held belief is that the joint family is breaking down and nuclear family is emerging in urban area especially in India. But, Shah observes that 'the urban situation needs to be understood in the light of migration on the one hand and the developmental process of households on the other. It starts with a single individual, mostly a man, moving into a town then he brings his wife and children to stay with him later at an opportune time. This is the main reason why the urban areas include a high percentage of single number households' (Shah 1998:74-75). Shah also points out that 'all immigrants in a town, however, do not remain immigrants forever. Many of them settle down as its permanent residents in course of time. In this process they practice the usual norm of

household formation and thus forming joint households' (Ibid). It is thus possible that the non-Western societies would present alternative models of modernity and social relations to that of the Western patterns. The members of the family and kinship groups can perform diversified roles and activities while the relations go on shaping and reshaping themselves.

The Social Anatomy of Friendship

The discussion of friendship is as important as the discussion of family and kinship. Friendship is the way of developing one's inter-personal relations. Like families or family relationships, friendships have also rules, regulations and negotiation. It is also regarded as other oriented and reciprocal rather than self oriented? Sometimes, friendship shapes the social identity of the persons involved. Allan argues that 'friendships are at one and the same time responsive to, and constitutive of, social identity. As sub cultural theory has long recognized, we select our friends and associates from a pool of similar others and through shared involvement cement those similarities further. Thus, mediated through compatibility and lifestyle choices, and intertwining with structural location, friendships and other such ties serve to shape as well as reinforce social identities' (Allan 2001:334). Telfer notes that friendship results from 'shared activities' as well as a 'long term desire'. She further points out that 'friendship can enlarge our knowledge throughout the whole gamut of human experience, by enabling us in some measure to adopt the viewpoint of another person through our sympathetic identification with him. Through friendship we can know what it is like to feel or think or do certain things which we do not feel, think or do ourselves. And our knowledge is not merely knowledge by description, but knowledge by acquaintance, derived from our sympathetic sharing of his experience' (Telfer 1971:240). There are so many other factors that make and shape or break friendship relations. Thus, C.S. Lewis has noted that the outlook which values the collective above the individual necessarily disparages friendship; it is a relation between men at their highest level of individuality. It withdraws men from collective "togetherness" as surely as solitude itself could do; and more dangerously, for it withdraws them by twos and threes. Some forms of democratic sentiment are naturally hostile to it because it is selective and an affair of the few. To say 'these are my friends' implies the others are not (cited in Douglas 1996:615). Kant, on the other hand, has pointed out that 'friendship is not of heaven but of the earth; the complete moral perfection of heaven must be universal; but friendship is not universal;

it is a peculiar association of specific persons; it is man's refuge in this world from his distrust of his fellows, in which he can reveal his disposition to another and enter into communion with him ... The more civilized man becomes, the broader his outlook and the less room there is for special friendships; civilized man seeks universal pleasures and a universal friendship, unrestricted by special ties' (Ibid). Most importantly, in twentieth century, one can notice a greater flexibility in friendship. Because of the internal and external migration in urban area, the structure of friendship is rapidly changing. Social networks or network theory play an important role for organizing inter-relationship with one another. But, we cannot sure if this is the only way to social formation. Pescosolido & Rubin comment that the network theory is the only way to conceptualize the social life. At the same time, they suggest that the networks add to a multifaceted repertoire of understandings of new social formation (Pescosolido & Rubin 2000:62). New social, familial and friendship structure might be found in this new form of network system. The people of 21st century are more flexible to maintain their relationships. On the other hand, it is more fragile than before. Most importantly, the level of tolerance and mutual understanding, in late modernity, among friendships and families are also playing a pivotal role to influence the social network system. The freedoms in the sexual world of women have led to the development of new dimension between sexuality and friendship. 'Since individualization also fosters a longing for the opposite world of intimacy, security and closeness and most people will continue – at least for the foreseeable future – to live within a partnership or family. But such ties are not the same as before, in their scope or in their degree of obligation and permanence. Out of many different strivings, longings, efforts and mistakes, out of successful and often unsuccessful experiments, a wider spectrum of the private is taking shape. As people make choices, negotiating and deciding the everyday details of do-it-yourself relationships, a 'normal chaos' of love, suffering and diversity is growing and developing' (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 99). So, do-it-yourself relationships of today ranging from family to friendship are acquiring rich variations and flexibility.

Liquid sexuality in late modern digital era

Family and friendship relationships are influenced by another factor, namely, the electronic communication. People can diversify their life in many ways en route mass media, e.g., facebook, twitter, cell phone, instant messaging, and email and in the process keep in touch with scattered family members

and friends. Using mass media people develop and maintain personal relationships; they make friends, get into marital ties and even develop intimate physical relationship in course of time. One hand, virtual friendships are emerging, on the other, these friendship ties are getting fragmented. The children who are engaged in social networking site for long hours a day cannot make even good relationships with peers and family members and thereby face the risk for social isolation, depression and anxiety disorder. Furthermore, many children who are addicted to social media show a greater tendency to be alcoholic or smoker to overcome monotony. In the modern era, thus, new forms of family structures are emerging - nuclear family, single parent family, childless family and so on. In these types of families, most of children are vulnerable. Sometimes, parents have less time to take care their sons and daughters. In their lonely world they find social media as a trusted company. They are thus exposed to advertisements of tobacco, alcoholic beverage in social and electronic media and these advertisements ignite their passion for them. A study, done in 1990, shows that 56 per cent of the students in grades 5 to 12 had admitted that alcohol advertisements encourage them to drink. Also, the girls who had watched more hours of TV at ages 13 and 15 drank more wine and spirits at age 18 than those who had watched fewer hours of TV (Ray and Jat 2010: 564). Another interesting development is that most of the children get into sexual relation under the influence social media. For instance, in the US, approximately 47% of high school students have had sexual intercourse and of them 7.4% report having sex before the ages of 13 and 14% have had 4 sexual partners (Ray & Jat 2010: 564). The explosion of media also carries information not only about heterosexuality or child sexuality but also about many other forms of sexuality. One can thus notice a contrast between old and new sexual behaviors. For example, among the women and men over forty, fewer than one in ten had engaged in oral sex during adolescence; for each successive generation, the proportion increases (Giddens 1992: 11). Giddens also states that among the current generation of teenagers, although not universally practiced, oral sex is regarded a normal part of sexual behaviour (Ibid). Thus, modern parents are more conscious about the sexual behaviour of the children right from their childhood. One study shows that parents initiate conversations about sex with daughters more often than with sons and especially when their daughters' progress towards puberty (Gentile et. al. 2012: 474). These sexual events which are exposed by social media affect not only children but also the spouses. For example, one study found that men who take interests in the centerfolds in adult magazines judge women, including their own wives, to be less attractive than did men who

had no interest in the centerfolds (Coyne et. al. 2012: 389). Yet another study has found that men became less satisfied with their sexual relationships after viewing sexually explicit movies (Ibid). Similar result could be found in the women also. Another study brought to light that women reported being less sexually satisfied with their current partners get attracted towards popular romantic media, books and television programs on intimate relations (Ibid). Information technology is also a vital force to influence the diversified patterns of intimacy especially in sexuality in late modernity.

In lieu of a conclusion

In this paper I have dealt with some aspects of changing family and friendship relations. In post-modern time these relations are being exposed to new technological and social forms and new modes of communications and as a result the relations are taking multidimensional and diversified turns. One notable transformation is the late modern intimacy and changing approaches to sexuality which significantly influence family and friendship ties. As a result, one can also notice more flexibility or fluidity in daily lives. Increasing divorce rates, the losing faith in the institution of marriage, the decision of not having children in living relations, lone parenting, rise in numbers of single-person households bear significance in shaping new interpersonal relations (Budgeon 2006:2). The increased focus on sexuality in conjugal and friendship relations indicate the expression of modern self. Most notably, in the era of reflexive modernity, the relationships are going to be reflexive, fluid but at the same time, these relationships are often fragile, temporal and often conflicting. The new relations would leave a destabilizing impact on the traditional norms, values and culture of a society. Industrialization, urbanization and modernization are the key factors of social change or societal development. But, at the same time, these factors lead to the formation of 'risk society'. According to Beck, there is 'relationship conflict' in many phases of life between men and women (Beck 1992:104). Beck (1992) and Giddens (1994) argue that 'the theory of the risk society is further characterized by threats to identity and the risks emerging from the collapse of inherited norms, values, customs and traditions. In contrast to primary, industrial modernity, which was characterized by the safety, security, predictability and permanence of inherited traditions, such as class location, gender roles, marriage, family, lifetime employment and secure retirement, the risk society is characterized by a dislocation, disintegration and disorientation associated with the vicissitudes of detraditionalization'. Beck

further points out that 'liberation from the rigidity of social rules and inherited traditions can be empowering, but at the same time, can generate isolation, alienation, fragmentation and discontent. Without the safety and security of pre-existing traditions and predetermined social identities, individuals have no choice but to make choices about their self-identity, their relations with others and about how to plan and live their lives. Making choices entails taking a personal risk and for many risk-averse individuals, this results in a perilous condition referred to as risky-freedoms' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, cited in Ekberg 2007:346). The paper has been based primarily on Western experiences and the insights of the Western scholars; our responsibility therefore would be to look at non-Western societies and draw a comparative view of the East and the West. I have dropped hints that the Indian scholars would contest the views of the Western scholars on changing family and friendship relations while being grounded on Indian reality. One can also test the Western theories in the social and cultural situation that a country like Bangladesh offer.

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