



Intimate Talk Between Parents and Their Teenage Children: Democratic Openness or Covert Control?

- **Yvette Solomon**
Lancaster University
- **Jo Warin**
Lancaster University
- **Charlie Lewis**
Lancaster University
- **Wendy Langford**
Lancaster University

ABSTRACT

In so far as modern families subscribe to an ideal of democracy, then adolescence is a time in which the democratic ideal in the family becomes an object of explicit focus as parents and teenagers strive towards a renegotiation of their relative positions. Teenagers need to develop their adult identities and a sense of agency, while at the same time, parents who have invested both personally and financially in their children must reconsider this relationship and come to terms with the reality of the returns from that investment. Intimate relations imply both democracy and equality: in what Giddens (1992) calls the 'pure relationship', individuals continuously re-evaluate the relationship in terms of the satisfactions which it delivers in their 'project of the self'. This paper argues that the twin ideals of democracy and intimacy necessarily clash in parent-teenager relationships, resulting in a further complication of the negotiation processes already identified in previous research (Brannen, 1999; Brannen et al., 1994; Hofer et al., 1999). While both parents and their teenage children subscribe to the discourse of openness and honesty as the route to both intimacy and democracy, there are tensions within the concept of openness because both parties have opposing goals in the trading of information. For parents, information gain means the retention of power and control, while for teenagers, withholding information from their parents ensures their privacy, power and identity.

KEY WORDS

democracy and intimacy / family relationships / parenting / teenagers

There is only one story to tell about the family today, and that is of democracy. The family is becoming democratized; and such democratization suggests how family life might combine individual choice and social solidarity.... Democracy in the public sphere involves formal equality, individual rights, public discussion of issues free from violence, and authority which is negotiated rather than given by tradition. The democratized family shares these characteristics ...

(Giddens, 1998: 93)

Giddens's view of democracy in the family is important and influential. It derives from and supports a strong ideal image of the family which is particularly persuasive for the parents of teenagers as they strive to parent successfully in conditions of extended transition to adulthood and of greater perceived risk (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Gillies et al., 2001; Jones and Wallace, 1992; Langford et al., 2001). Teenagers for their part aim for greater emancipation and autonomy, as Beck (1997: 162) suggests:

... the model of a life of one's own has established itself almost automatically behind the walls of private life as a significant way of life for young people.

How real and how achievable is the democratic ideal in family life? In this paper we shall argue that families with teenagers are some way off from Giddens's democratization and will necessarily remain so because of the structural and psychological power imbalances between parent and child. As Jamieson (1999: 477) argues, the pure relationship between parents and children is unattainable, because 'much of personal life remains structured by inequalities'. We explore here the nature of such inequality in terms of the dynamics of intimacy between parents and teenagers. While both subscribe to a discourse of openness as the route to both intimacy and democracy, they experience their relationships in such a way as to ensure that they have opposing goals in the trading of information. For the parent, information gain means the retention of power and control, and the gaining of intimacy at the expense of democracy; for the teenager, the withholding of information is the means by which they gain privacy, power and identity, but at the expense of intimacy. The data we present here show that strength of parental investment in children is such that the ideal of democracy must inevitably be subverted.

Discourses of 'Intimacy' and 'Democracy' in Parent-Child Relationships

The pure relationship described by Giddens (1990, 1991, 1992) is a commitment made on the basis of choice and sustained personal reward. A 'consequence of modernity', it entails the transformation of intimacy towards personal trust relations which are closely tied to the reflexive project of the self. Trust is supported by mutual disclosure, and intimacy correspondingly requires an equality of self-disclosure. Such a relationship, with its necessary interdependence of intimacy and democracy, is, Giddens claims, available to parents

and children. What this implies is that children are in a position to renegotiate the terms of their 'contract' with their parents, an account apparently supported by writers such as Brannen et al. (1994: 181):

... if parents want 'close relations' with their children to continue into adulthood, they must, as part of their reflexive endeavours, re-create ties on the basis of equality and reciprocal liking, trust and understanding.

Similarly, Hofer et al. (1999: 2) cite individuation theory as a framework for describing the dynamics of parent-adolescent relationships in which the young become more autonomous while retaining connectedness with their parents:

During this transformation [i.e. the re-negotiation of relationships and roles], parents' and adolescents' interactions are characterized by conflict as well as intimate closeness The unilateral exercise of authority which satisfied the demands of childhood must be transformed into greater equality in which parents and adolescents acknowledge one another's competence and recognize their mutual dependence in their relationship.

Nevertheless, differences in power between parents and children remain. Parents do not necessarily give up their responsibility or their attempts to influence their children although they may appear or aspire to do so. Echoing Walkerdine and Lucey's (1989) observations of the 'pseudo-democracy' employed by middle class mothers with young children, Brannen et al. go on to say that the control mechanisms that parents use do not fall into disuse but simply undergo a change: communication strategies play a key role in shifting control from the visible forms of childhood to the invisible forms of adolescence. This change is mirrored in young people's behaviour, where resistance to parental control takes the form of withholding information, or threatening to do so.

While these accounts acknowledge the presence of, or potential for, conflict rather than negotiation between parent and child, a full understanding of the parent-teenager dynamic requires that we examine conflict and contradiction *within* both parents and children. We began this paper by observing the high currency value of the idea of negotiation and democracy in modern family discourses. Rather than withholding information, young people often do want to discuss their personal thoughts and feelings with their parents – parental support in the growing up process is characterized by teenagers in terms of increased talk (Langford et al., 2001) – and rather than seeking information, parents often do want to respect their children's privacy, as Gillies et al. (2001: 33–4) show:

Parents discussed how occasional silences and secrets were necessary ... some parents were explicit in their desire not to discover too much about the lives of their teenagers

In some of the cases discussed by Langford et al. (2001), teenagers neither resented nor resisted parental control, welcoming it instead as providing clear boundaries or a 'fair cop'. Clearly, there are some contradictions here: a process

which strives to balance equality and mutual dependence, and autonomy and emotional connectedness, might be expected to result in complex interaction patterns in which individuals hold contradictory aims and attitudes rather than unidirectional ones. While Brannen et al.'s account acknowledges the presence of conflict between parent and child, it underplays the role of conflict within individuals. Influenced by Bernstein (1971, 1975), Brannen et al. characterize parents as lying along a continuum between those who believe that teenagers' status transitions are individually achieved and those who consider them as normatively ascribed, with control strategies which are directly related to these beliefs. While this analysis makes the important contribution of pointing out that communication acts as a means of control, it presents a purely linear link between parental beliefs about adolescence and particular communicative control strategies. The same is true for accounts such as Forgatch and DeGarmo's (1999) description of cohesion and conflict in families with adolescent children: conflict is constructed as part of the dynamic between parent and adolescent, never as part of the intra-individual dynamic. Such accounts imply constancy of purpose in parenting practices, driven by implicit or explicit values and beliefs about parenting. Our data, however, suggest that both parents and teenagers can hold contradictory values and aims about their relationships which mean that they not only act inconsistently but have incompatible aims which make that inconsistency inescapable.

The Concept of Openness

The data which we report here were gathered in Rochdale, near Manchester. The study was a ten-year follow up investigation of families who had been selected from the electoral role to form the Economic and Social Research Council's Social Change and Economic Life Initiative (SCELI) in the mid-1980s and now had a child aged 11–16.¹ From the 216 households identified in this way, 94 respondents were located (following 375 visits made by Hilda Scattergood and Penny Collins to establish contact)² and were given the same interview as was presented in the 1986 SCELI study. They were then invited to participate in the phase of the study which is reported here. Seventy-four agreed and 70 families were interviewed (four proved hard to contact after this initial contact) and in 66 households all the available parent-figures and 11–16 year olds were interviewed. Twelve families were British Punjabi and were interviewed by Salma Ahmed; data from these interviews are discussed and analysed elsewhere (Langford et al., 2001). Interviews with the remaining 58 families, all of whom were white, were undertaken by the authors and produced the data that are analysed here. The sample consisted of 56 female parent figures, 53 male parent figures, 43 daughters and 40 sons. The teenagers were all aged between 11 and 16, with a skew towards the younger 11–13 band in the girls and towards the older 14–16 band in the boys. The respondents came from a range of backgrounds: in keeping with national cohort studies (e.g. Ferri and Smith, 1996) 68 percent of the teenagers

lived with both birth parents while the other 32 percent lived in a variety of other household types (e.g. single parent, adopted or blended families). In 55 percent of households, two adults were employed with at least one in full-time paid work, in 22 percent one adult was employed in full-time paid work and in 23 percent no adult was employed in full-time paid work (in four cases the mother was engaged in part-time work); 34 percent of households held at least one white collar worker, and 43 percent were blue collar.

In each household individuals were interviewed one-to-one by a member of the research team. Wherever possible two team members visited the family and interviewed respondents concurrently but on some occasions the same researcher interviewed all the family members. Respondents were reassured that no information would be passed back to other family members and that, if extracts of transcribed interviews were to be used, they would be made anonymous. While the major focus was on fathers' role in families with teenagers, the interview asked respondents for their accounts of daily household activities, the effect of parental employment patterns, parent-teenager joint activities, closeness, communication patterns and change in family relationships, the experience of fathering and the meaning of family and the teenager's future in work and parenthood. Following methods developed by family researchers such as Noller and Callan (1990, 1991), and building on the classic observation of 'divergent realities' (Larson and Richards, 1994) in the experience of adolescents and their parents, we used the opportunity of interviewing both parents and teenagers to gain their perspectives on the same events (for example, what goes on in the household on a daily basis) and experiences (for example, patterns of closeness and special relationships within the family). We also used a multiple perspective technique in which respondents were asked not only to give their own views but to reflect on the likely responses of other family members to the same question.

All the interviews were transcribed in full and names were changed to maintain anonymity. Using a grounded approach the interviews were explored on the NUD*IST (QSR, 1997) system to develop themes concerning descriptions of the family over time, 'closeness' in relationships, everyday and 'special' family events, and patterns of overt and covert parental discipline (see Seale, 2000, for an analysis of techniques similar to those employed here). This was done largely by assigning relevant pieces of text to categories and repeatedly exploring these categories so that themes emerged and connections could be developed. Repeated reading of the transcriptions confirmed our impression while carrying out the interviews that almost all the respondents approached the interviews with a sense of commitment and openness. On some issues, like who the children were 'closest' to in the family, the teenagers appeared reluctant to breach a confidence or to appear disloyal to 'the family' or one of its members. However, the interviews were full of the types of contrast between each family member's perspective that we were searching for. As West (1999: 544) shows, adults claim to want equality with teenagers through 'openness, trust and respect' about personal matters, including sexuality, but such disclosure from young people frequently meets with

a limited acceptance which constrains further communication. In the following sections of the paper, we present a case that communication was understood differently by parents and teenagers, with major consequences for the twin ideals of intimacy and democracy.

Central to our analysis is the concept of 'openness'. It was prevalent in the data, invoked spontaneously by a majority of respondents regardless of background, who referred, variously, to 'deep conversation', 'long soulful discussions', 'long talks', 'heart-to-heart', 'having a laugh', 'gossiping' and 'one-to-ones' when answering the questions 'what's important about being in a family?', 'what do you most enjoy doing with [mother/father/target child]?', 'who does [target child] go to when upset?', 'how have relationships with [parents/target child] developed over the years?' and 'who is [target child] closest to in the family?'. Of 221 responses to this question alone: 'what's important about being in a family?' 101 emphasized the family as a site for trust, 'being there' and talk, while others centred on the role of the family in support and the affirmation of identity. Its frequent occurrence lends weight to Jamieson's (1998: 161) claim that:

... it is quite possible to demonstrate a greater emphasis on being-like-friends, being 'pals', as the ideal for parents.... in both the stories of experts and popular culture. In public stories, the good mother is not only, or even primarily, providing practical care and a secure sense of being loved but she knows, understands and responds to her children's inner selves. In some recent public stories about fatherhood, neither the disciplinarian patriarchal father nor a more indulgent father-provider has done enough to qualify as a new sensitive father with a deep knowledge and understanding of his children. These public stories support the view that parents and spouses are or will be like friends to each other, having broken with the past of each-in-their-place, playing out a family role.

These prescriptions for successful parenting are echoed by Rachel and Ken Worthington,³ who described each other's parenting roles in terms of the equation of open communication with intimacy:

Rachel: He doesn't really talk to them that much really – he doesn't have any heart-to-hearts really.

(mother, p/t doctor's receptionist)

Ken: Rachel will talk to the kids more than I will; as I say, she's a lot closer to the kids in that respect than I am.

(father, f/t self-employed car mechanic, of son John, aged 14 and daughter Jane, aged 13)

A similar value of open talk was evident in the teenagers' accounts. Here, a young woman compares her relationship with her parents to those of her friends:

Mandy: Like I know some of my friends they get embarrassed about talking to their mum and dad about things like that but it doesn't bother me.

Wendy: It doesn't?

Mandy: No, but they're open about things like that anyway, so they're easy to talk to.

(Mandy Dent, aged 15, mother *f/t* school caretaker, father *p/t* care worker)

The ideal of open communication between teenagers and their parents was clearly important to the respondents in this study and was particularly noticeable in teenagers' accounts of their changing relationships with their parents. Their accounts predominantly referred, as Mandy Dent's above, to the sharing of secrets, disclosure and honesty. What exactly did respondents mean by an 'open' relationship? Within the context of the renegotiation of parent-child relationships, 'being open' was used to signify two interdependent goals: the closeness of the relationship in terms of intimacy, and – importantly – the possibility of equality between parent and child.

Closeness was associated with companionship, something that respondents perceived as increasingly possible as children became physically and emotionally mature and potentially capable of a more reciprocal friendship with a parent. This was particularly (but not exclusively) so in same gender parent-teenager pairs. Friendship relies on a reciprocity which includes mutual disclosure and many respondents invoked this type of relationship as an ideal in changing parent-child relationships:

She's a mum but she's also like a best friend as well. So I can tell my mum like anything ...

(15-year-old Sarah Corner, mother retired shop manager, father *f/t* warehouse worker and *p/t* self-employed builder)

Linda Barnes expresses something similar from the parent's point of view:

I mean even come in one night, oh she started going out with this boy and she give him a kiss. She even come round and told me that. So they do tell me everything. It is not as though they hide anything.

(Linda Barnes, *p/t* cafe worker, husband unemployed, of daughter Lucy, aged 13)

Other mothers enjoy sharing 'secrets' with their daughters once their are older:

We'll just sort of talk. You know and we'll talk about things and she will tell me secrets. She will tell me things which I think I am quite privileged [to hear].

(Irene Baxter, unemployed, disabled mother, husband unemployed and disabled, daughter Kate, aged 14)

Mutual disclosure brings about a more equal status between friends, and parent-teenager relationships are described as potentially attaining the status of friendship as a result. Thus Mandy Dent (15) reports her relationships with her parents as moving into a new equality because she talks to them more openly about personal things:

... we have got closer, it depends on what you're talking about really. Um, cause like I can really talk to my mum about anything so it just depends. But I think as I've

experienced other things as I've got older then I can talk about it more. Um, yeah, I'd say we have got closer, yeah.

Her greater experience gives her more confidence to contribute as an equal with her parents. For Sarah Corner (15), her new friendship with her mother is also constructed in terms of a growing control over her own life and equality of status which is granted by her mother:

And then my mum will – like – give me advice and I can, she says 'I'll give you advice but you don't have to take it', she said 'I'll give you my opinion but you don't have to approve of it', so she gives me her – like – say. She says what she thinks but if I don't agree with it then she says I don't have to do it.

In tune with Beck's (1992) individualization thesis, both Mandy Dent and Sarah Corner couch their new found sense of independence in terms of their parents' recognition of their ability to have a life of their own outside of the family and to make choices about it. More than half of the teenagers in the sample commented on their parents' growing tendency to treat them more as adults, implicitly recognizing the democratic ideal. They expressed pride in being treated as a person in their own right and their closer relationships with their parents, attributing the change to more talk with mothers (especially girls) and to diminishing parental control (especially boys). Parents, too, frequently expressed an explicit aim of moving towards friendship relationships with their teenage children: increasing openness meant increasing companionship with their newly adult child. Pat Finch appreciates this:

I mean, you know, as they grow, you can get to the stage when you can enjoy them as companions.

(Pat Finch, p/t printer, husband f/t printer, of Susan and Emma, aged 14 and 12)

Similarly, Clare Sharpe enjoys the change to a more companionable relationship with her sons. Interestingly, though, she relinquishes her parental identity at these times:

The most enjoyable part of my relationship with them at the moment is when I can take me 'mum's' hat off for a bit, you know, we can actually go out and do things together as three adults, or young adults, or an old adult [laugh].

(Clare Sharpe, f/t self-employed acupuncturist, non-resident father f/t senior planning officer, of John, aged 15 and Greg, aged 16)

Similarly, Adam Golding describes how he is able to have a more adult relationship with his son (although not his daughter) now he is 'one of the lads' and 'like another mate':

It's just nice being with one of them ... I could be just like, another mate. Well, not with Diana but Fred. ... We can have a laugh ... we'll play pool or darts.

(Adam Golding, f/t printer, wife p/t care worker, daughter Diana, aged 13, son Fred, aged 11)

Companionship and the conscious shift towards a new parenting style which may not be that of a parent at all but, rather, a more experienced friend, is also an ideal for Irene Baxter, who describes how she tries to hand over control to her daughter, 14-year-old Kate, who we have already seen shares 'secrets' with her mother:

You try and give her advice, not to say – 'Oh you can't do that', but just talk to her and let her try and work things out too.

Relationships between teenagers and their parents are characterized by a renegotiation of control over the child's life which incorporates issues regarding their choices, identity and independence. In common with discourses of democracy and intimacy, talk is perceived to be the most important marker of teenager–parent communication and indicator of closeness (Warin et al., 1999). The ultimate marker of independence is perhaps talk about growing up and sexuality, which symbolizes a high degree of intimacy between parents and their teenagers, in addition to representing the child's transition to becoming, in this respect, an equal in the eyes of adults. Some parents and teenagers referred to conversations about sexual matters as indicative of the close nature of their relationships. In a few noteworthy cases, they pointed in particular to the significance of such conversations between fathers and daughters, perhaps because they run counter to gender role expectations and therefore represent closeness all the more forcibly. In the context of a discussion about who his daughter goes to when she is upset, Ken Smith, volunteered:

I knew about her periods before her mother did. Because she come to me.
(Ken Smith, unemployed, wife unemployed, daughter Denise, aged 12)

He is clearly pleased and proud that she chose him above her mother, showing perhaps a 'competitive intimacy' borne of the internalization of the 'good parent' discourse. Such is the significance of talk about adolescent change that, while Pamela Ivory appears to express pleasure in the fact that her daughter is very open about sex in conversation with her father, she also expresses disappointment that she wasn't selected as her daughter's confidante:

I've been quite envious really at times because she's told him things that she would have told me and she's not even mentioned them to me.... I've been quite surprised really that she hadn't confided in me but she'd tell Malcolm.... like I said she's very open, ... but they did sex education [at school].... she was quizzing Malcolm more than she was quizzing me, ... she was going to Malcolm for things, I mean she was asking him in more detail about periods and he was brilliant ... and I thought it was nice really.

(Pamela Ivory, p/t school lunch assistant and childminder, husband f/t printer, daughter Kirsty, aged 11)

A parallel case of disappointment is illustrated by Don, Pat Finch's husband, who repeatedly expressed strong ideals about the need for openness in his family and conversations about growing up as symbolic of these:

We talk about everything, absolutely everything. There's nothing that we do not talk about.... We actually do talk about them growing up, changes in hormones, body, sex, you know Yeah we talk about everything.

(Don Finch, f/t printer, wife p/t printer, daughters Susan, aged 14 and Emma, aged 12)

However, he goes on to contradict this account, expressing deep regret that his daughters do not confide in him about such things as periods:

Initially ... they could always talk to me ... if there's now a problem, be it like period problems, health problems or things like that, they do tend to go to Pat. Anything to do with their body, I'm now excluded you know. And great, I'll accept that, I understand I really do, I understand ... they go to Pat which I understand you know and I mean I would never ever force them you know, if they don't feel comfortable with it, and what teenager would want to come to their dad, you know, and say look I'm having trouble with my periods or something. ... You're lucky if you get through that one aren't you, really. ... It's like I'm just being pushed away a little bit you know. I've always been very very close'.

Don Finch's equation of talking about bodily change with closeness is striking here; he appears to attribute his daughters' reticence on this matter to a failure in parenting on his part.

Similarly, Robert Hutchinson responded that he found dealing with his adolescent daughters a difficult feature of fatherhood:

Girls [laugh] yeah, girls are a problem, not understanding young girls when they go through that tunnel where they come out the other side.... I don't like not knowing what's going on.... You become a monster, everything you say is wrong, so you don't say anything ... most people I know don't want to just walk away from it, they want to be able to contribute but can't do and I think that's why you get frustrated because you literally can't do, because everything you do, or say is wrong for a short period of time.

(Robert Hutchinson, runs family masonry business f/t, mother p/t secretary in business, son Peter, aged 16, daughter aged 18, not in target age group)

Jim Scott, however, explicitly blames hormone changes when he describes his daughter as saying 'I'm not talking to you, I'll go and talk to mum':

I put a lot of this down to the time thing, growing up with her plus this pre-menstrual thing, she's growing up, her body's changing and previous to that we've had you know, better discussions but I think this last 6 months she's changing bodily wise you know.

(Jim Scott, f/t engineer, wife f/t staff nurse, daughter Sally aged 13)

Sally, on the other hand, says she is 'just friends' with her mother and that her mother understands her better than her father:

I don't know, because she was a girl when she was younger and my Dad's just - weird. He doesn't understand properly.

Conversations about 'personal stuff', as 15-year-old Mandy Dent calls it, also represent the child's transition towards a status equal with adults. For example,

Gerry Sweet describes his 'friendship' with his daughter as special because she can talk about personal things as if they are on the same level, again supporting the image of a good parent as someone whose children talk to them:

She was talking to the doctor for ten to fifteen minutes and then she comes out and she goes 'Dad, did you know what she asked about?', I said 'What?'. 'She said, "Have I started my periods?"'. And I went, 'Ugh!' [laughs] – you know what I mean. I don't think she could have done that to anybody else. We've got that friendship and we talk on that level type of thing.

(Gerry Sweet, unemployed, disabled father, wife unemployed, of daughter Sally, aged 13)

More often, though, relationships between parents and children were constructed in terms of shared gender identity and common experience which fostered companionship. Irene Baxter, talking again about her relationship with Kate, also comments on how she likes to talk woman to woman with her daughter:

She is older than her years sometimes. We talk women's things.

Joe Dale (aged 14, father f/t engineer, mother unemployed) says that he talks to his dad about 'Um, mainly men's things, shaving and stuff like that', and Joanne Sanderson comments that her son would tell his father first about things like:

'I kissed my girlfriend today' that type of giggly thing, you know, ... no qualms whatsoever. [Why would he tell that to him and not to you?] I don't know, I don't know. Maybe chap and chap you know, the boys stick together.

(Joanne Sanderson, f/t small business, husband f/t small business, son Neil, aged 11)

Mandy Dent emphasizes that, while she can talk more openly to both her mum and dad because she is growing up, she can talk more easily to her mum because of their common experience of bodily changes:

She's probably been through it all herself when she was younger [because she's] a woman.

Conversations about growing up are highly significant, then, as indicators of emotional closeness and a convergence on friendship relations between parent and teenager. However, while respondents clearly perceived them in this light, they need not be significant in this respect. As Jamieson suggests, intimacy in parent-child relationships need not, in fact, be about disclosure at all: 'A sense of unconditional love, trust and acceptance may be sustained with caring actions and relatively few words. Studies suggest that a good relationship between some parents and their growing-up children requires increasing silence on the part of the parents rather than an intense dialogue of mutual disclosure' (Jamieson, 1999: 489). That this may be the case for some families, at least, is underlined when we inspect the data further: there is evidence in some parents' and teenagers' accounts which suggest tensions within the concept of openness and contradictory goals when teenagers and parents share intimate talk.

Tensions Within the Concept of Openness

Giddens's ideal of family democratization (1998: 93–4) resonates clearly with the ideal of openness described by our respondents:

Democratization in the context of the family implies equality, mutual respect, autonomy, decision-making through communication.... Much the same characteristics also supply a model for parent–child relationships. Parents of course will still claim authority over children, and rightly so; but these will be more negotiated and open than before.

The important claim made here by Giddens is that it is possible for parental authority to be retained within a context of genuine negotiation through open communication between parent and child. While Giddens considers democracy and intimacy to be complementary in his ideal of openness, our data suggest that, in fact, they can be contradictory. This is because Giddens' thesis disregards the fact that any renegotiation of power and control within teenager–parent relationships begins from a base of power inequalities, as Jamieson (1998: 162–3) points out:

Parents cannot start as equals to their children, and no matter how democratic they try to be it will necessarily remain a relationship between superordinate and subordinate for many years. ... Parenting is necessarily embroiled in practical, financial and domestic arrangements which typically give parents power over children in addition to the power of any greater knowledge, social skill or wisdom parents may have as a result of their older years.

The different starting points of parent and child in terms of the extent of power they possess may lead them to have different views of what is meant by openness and the goals of communication. For teenagers, increasing equality can mean increasing recognition of their identity as separate adults with agency capable of making their own choices and having their own private lives. For example, 16-year-old Robin Emerson says:

As I've become a teenager and as – like the – er ... with both the parents what they say isn't final any more – they can make mistakes.... So I can question their judgement and act on my own instead.

(Robin Emerson aged 16, father f/t research chemist, mother p/t doctor's receptionist)

As we have already seen, for the majority of teenagers, ideals about closeness were encapsulated in a construction of their relationships with their parents in terms of a companionship characterized by diminishing parental control and increased talk. Peter Hutchinson contrasts the roles of father and friend, saying that

If I thought every dad should be like mine, I'd expect them to be more like a friend rather than a dad.

(Peter Hutchinson, aged 16, father runs family masonry business f/t, mother p/t secretary in business)

Although many teenagers expressed this kind of view of their parents, they frequently stated a preference for choosing friends of their own age as confidantes when they were upset. Why? The data suggest that, in fact, some teenagers implicitly recognized that their parents have mixed motives in inviting open communication. Richard Baxter, the son of Irene Baxter who we quoted earlier talking about sharing ‘secrets’ with her daughter, comments that his mother only engages in conversation in order to ask him business-type questions, whereas he wants to have ‘a proper conversation’. He is aware that they have different goals for talk, and that hers are about collecting information that will facilitate her parental control:

She could get more into detail about something rather than just issue orders or questions. ... I can't have you know a conversation it's just really one word answer questions. I prefer it if you know she asked like questions like how's the film I went to see and who was in it and stuff you know more like have a friendly chat but it doesn't really happen.

(Richard Baxter, aged 16, father unemployed and disabled, mother, unemployed and disabled)

As we have already observed, friendship entails reciprocity, and reciprocal disclosure is an essential component of the ‘pure relationship’. In tune with Giddens’ optimistic view of relationships in modernity, Emma Monaghan points out that her own openness with her parents is dependent on theirs, and she appreciates the reciprocity that this indicates:

I am actually very open with my mum and dad, like I said I am very lucky, I can tell them almost anything. ... [Speculating on why she has such an open relationship] it's because they are very honest with me, I think.

(Emma Monaghan, aged 16, father *f/t* self-employed plaster, mother *f/t* head teacher)

However, Emma tempers this judgement with the following observation which – like that made by Richard Baxter above – demonstrates her awareness that she is not, in fact, in a position of reciprocal openness with respect to her parents at all. On the contrary, Emma recognizes the power that her parents have in obtaining the information which they want about her life. She implies that she does not even have the power to withhold information:

There is no point lying to my mum and dad because at the end of the day they will always find out, you know ... so they'll always find out [laugh] so I might as well be honest with them.

For some teenagers, the more information they disclose to their parents, the more they risk losing control over their private lives. As Jamieson argues, it is sometimes privacy that supports and maintains their adult status and their equality in relationships with their parents, not disclosure. David Jones, for example, states baldly that disclosure makes him vulnerable:

I don't really like talking about it with my dad ... he'd just call me a wimp or something like that, and not just in a joking way.

(David Jones, aged 16, father *f/t* hospital manager, mother *p/t* bank clerk)

Similarly, Judy Benson, for instance, does not want her mother to know about her life:

Jo: What do you least enjoy doing with her?

Judy: Talking about what I've been doing. I think she wants to be involved in what I do. Like when I come in ... she'll ask me what I'm laughing about, and if it's something that I don't really want to tell my Mum, I don't.

(Judy Benson, aged 16, mother *f/t* packer, stepfather *f/t* taxi driver)

We began this section by suggesting that democracy in the family is necessarily problematic when parents and children start off from unequal power bases. Our analysis so far suggests that, while the majority of teenagers subscribe to an ideal of openness and disclosure as a passport to adult status, equality and good relationships with their parents, some voiced dissatisfaction on reflection and hinted that disclosure was problematic – parents could use the information thus gained to reassert parental control. Yet parents also strongly supported the ideals of openness, increasing autonomy for their children and a move towards companionship. What might be the root of these contradictions? One answer to this question is that parental investment in children is such that many parents find it very difficult to relinquish control over their children as they approach adulthood. Writers from both sociological and psychological perspectives (Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Larson and Richards, 1994) have described how social and economic developments in Western Europe in the late 19th and 20th centuries have brought about a change in the value of children. Children are no longer an economic asset – indeed they represent a financial outlay which parents cannot expect to recoup in material terms at all – but instead are valued as an investment of self as well as of economic resources: parents gain, not wealth, from their children but identification with them and a corresponding satisfaction from their successful development into adulthood. Indeed, the more fragile adult relationships become in the context of late modernity's growth of individualism, 'the more a child can become the focus of new hopes ... the ultimate guarantee of permanence' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 73) with consequent 'psychological utility' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 105). As Giddens (1998: 92) puts it, 'we now live in the era of the "prized child"' – this is a child who can deliver meaning and significance to life.

However, as Smart and Neale (1999) point out, what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim fail to identify is the difference between 'the *perception* of a child as provider of permanent unconditional love and the actuality of parent-child relationships' (Smart and Neale, 1999: 17–18, original emphasis). While Smart and Neale's concern is with the complexities and contradictions of intimate relations involving children after marriage has ended, ours is with their devel-

opment at the end of childhood. As Jamieson (1998: 161) observes, the public story of convergence towards the pure relationship in the democratization of the family is most strained in the arena of parent–child relationships. While it can be made to fit Giddens’ criterion of voluntariness, parenting is perceived as no more voluntary now than it has been in the past, and there is no evidence to suggest that parents are any more likely to see parenthood as something to be abandoned when rewards are not as high as expected. In an age where the transition to adulthood is financially and socially prolonged (Middleton et al., 1994; Morrow and Richards, 1996) what becomes of the ideal of intimacy as children travel through adolescence? Although parents and children may aspire to the ideal of open communication and all that it entails, both parties may have ambivalent feelings about the reality. Teenagers in this situation are caught in a double bind. If they disclose personal information with the aim of gaining recognition of their new identities as emerging adults and companions, they risk giving their parents the wherewithal to maintain their parental authority. Consequently, their only source of power is the withholding of information about their lives, activities and their feelings. For their part, parents are also caught in a double bind. In their attempts to foster democratic and open relationships, they may be undermined by their own ambivalent feelings about the loss of parental status and control. If they pursue a course of information-seeking, as Richard Baxter perceives his mother to be doing, parents risk the closeness of the relationship with their child. However, it is an equally risky course if parents ignore their children’s moves towards independent adulthood.

Parents’ goals in seeking openness from their children, whilst appearing to be about attaining a companionable relationship, may be largely driven by the use of the information-gaining process to maintain parental control. Denise Minton supports her husband’s attempts to elicit personal information from their daughter:

He will come straight out and ask personal things, ... important things that we should know, I mean, not being nosy, but important things that we should know.
(Denise Minton, unemployed, husband f/t taxi driver, of Lucy, aged 12)

Similarly, Peter Jones, father of the reluctant talker, David, quoted above, comments that talk with his sons is often about surveillance:

It’s a mixture of making plans so you’re happy with where they’re going and what they’re doing or checking or challenging.
(Peter Jones, f/t hospital manager, wife p/t bank clerk, sons David and Daniel, 14 and 11)

Even where parents’ goals are in the direction of emotional support and closeness, they may nevertheless be subverted by a conflicting need to exercise parental control. Joseph Maclaughlin has mixed motives for his belief that problems need to be communicated to him; he is concerned for his daughter’s psychological welfare, but he is impatient to take control and ‘sort’ her problems himself:

I've tried to make it so that, if she does have a problem, she's not bottling it up and keeping it to herself, you know, talk about it, get it out in the open. If there's things like that, that's like a one to one either way; she'll either talk to me about it or she'll talk to Mary about it. But you know, we always tell her, 'Don't keep it to yourself, get it out in the open, and we'll sort it for you'.

(Joseph Maclaughlin, unemployed and disabled, wife unemployed, of Hannah, aged 12)

Information-seeking for the purposes of parental control and information-seeking for the purpose of closeness are competing goals. In the case of Paula Killington, these goals are taken to extremes. On the one hand, she values her daughter's openness, and relates with pride that, in a discussion at school, Amy alone said that she would ask her mother for advice on contraception in a school discussion:

She'd come to me – any problems with anything. She is very open with me.

These are ideals which are echoed by fourteen-year-old Amy:

I can talk to her about anything ... [it's a] very open family.

On the other hand, however, Paula Killington's need to maintain parental control leads her to seek further information in covert, rather than 'open', ways. She goes on to describe how she gets to know about Amy's life:

Amy has been going out with him for about 12 months and she hasn't kissed him.

Jo: You know that?

Paula: I've been in her diaries ...

and:

I let them go in town for the first time about 18 months ago with their friends and I ended up following them for an hour around town.

(Paula Killington, f/t sales manager, non-resident father f/t taxi driver, daughters Amy and Louise, aged 14 and 13)

As the case of Paula and Amy illustrates, communication between teenagers and their parents may be motivated by contradictory goals. In this respect the data illustrate the 'Janus-headed character of communication in parent-child relationships' (Brannen et al., 1994: 183–4).

Conclusion

'In the context of the pure relationship, trust can be mobilized only by a process of mutual disclosure' (Giddens, 1991: 6). There is a clear disjuncture between the quest for intimacy as encapsulated by Giddens's 'pure relationship' and the lived reality of the inequalities between parents and children, in which mutual disclosure is undermined by the struggle for control. Both parents and teenagers portray intimate talk as an important part of the move towards inde-

pendent adulthood and parent–teenager friendships. Both genuinely subscribe to a corresponding discourse of democracy. Our data show, however, that explicit goals for openness can be compromised by conflicting underlying goals relating to the renegotiation of power between parents and teenagers. Intimate talk is symbolic of emerging adulthood, but at the same time, parents and teenagers may struggle for power through the eliciting and withholding of information. Some parents, while genuinely subscribing to a discourse of democracy, openness and intimacy, at the same time need to maintain their own parental identity and protect their investment of self in their child. They do this at the expense of their children’s growing adult identity as they exercise control, protection and authority through the obtaining (sometimes illicitly) of information which they do not reciprocate. Reciprocity in communication is generally missing from parent–teenager relationships; parents’ disclosure is far less and is expected to be less. So, as Jamieson (1998: 163) points out, the relationship moves further away from friendship, not towards it:

The overwhelming majority of parents do not treat their children as if they were equal but protect their children from their own thoughts and feelings. Even child experts who advocate attentive, listening, responsive parenting, do not advocate a mutual disclosing intimacy between parents and children, because children are to be protected from adult worries and burdens.

As Beck (1997: 165–6) suggests, while negotiation may be the order of the day, we are some way from democracy in the family because of a ‘*mutual ignorance of one another’s real lives*’:

In a very central sense, it is not quite possible (yet?) to speak of a ‘democratization of the family’. The old authority structures may indeed be damaged, and certainly their paint is scuffed; negotiation is becoming the dominant pattern, as a demand.... However, the elements of a dialogue, of virtual exchange of roles, of listening and taking responsibility for one another remain under-developed.

(Beck, 1997: 165–6)

While both parents and teenagers subscribe to the ideals of democracy and negotiation, their understanding of openness or disclosure may not be such that they enter into the kind of dialogue that Beck is concerned with. Parents and teenagers may desire openness; but in practice, they experience ‘closed’ness.

Acknowledgement

The research reported in this paper was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Notes

1. We thank Roger Penn and Brian Francis for their help in locating the sample.

2. Records were kept on why 112 of the missing respondents did not participate. These were: not traced (N=28), refusal to participate (N=22), did not agree upon a time for the interview (N=19), insufficient information on the original interview schedules to locate (N=18), child too old by the time contact made (N=15), moved out of area (N=7), wrong information about family provided in SCEL data (N=2), respondent deceased (N=1).
3. All names are pseudonyms.

References:

- Beck, U. (1992) *The Risk Society*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Beck, U. (1997) 'Democratization of the Family', *Childhood*. 4(2): 151–68.
- Beck, U. and Beck-Gernsheim, E. (1995) *The Normal Chaos of Love*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bernstein, B. (1971) *Class, Codes and Control Vol. 1*. London: Routledge and Kegan-Paul.
- Bernstein, B. (1975) *Class, Codes and Control Vol. 3*. London: Routledge and Kegan-Paul.
- Brannen, J. (1999) 'Discourses of Adolescence: Young People's Independence and Autonomy within Families', in M. Woodhead, D. Faulkner and K. Littleton (eds) *Making Sense of Social Development*. London: Routledge.
- Brannen, J., Dodd, K., Oakley, A. and Storey, P. (1994) *Young People, Health and Family Life*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Ferri, E. and Smith, K. (1996) *Parenting in the 1990s: Family and Parenthood Policy and Practice Series*. London: Family Policy Studies Centre.
- Forgatch, M. and DeGarmo, D. (1999) 'Two Faces of Janus: Cohesion and Conflict', in M. Cox and J. Brooks-Gunn (eds) *Conflict and Cohesion in Families: Causes and Consequences*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Furlong, A. and Cartmel, F. (1997) *Young People and Social Change*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Giddens, A. (1990) *The Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Giddens, A. (1992) *The Transformation of Intimacy*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Giddens, A. (1998) *The Third Way*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Gillies, V., Ribbens McCarthy, J. and Holland, J. (2001) *Pulling Together, Pulling Apart*. London: Family Policy Studies Centre.
- Hofer, M., Youniss, J. and Noack, P. (eds) (1999) 'Verbal Interaction and Development in Families with Adolescents', *Advances in Applied Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 15. Stamford: Ablex.
- Jamieson, L. (1998) *Intimacy*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Jamieson, L. (1999) 'Intimacy transformed? A Critical Look at the "Pure Relationship"', *Sociology* 33(3): 477–93.
- Jones, G. and Wallace, C. (1992) *Youth, Family and Citizenship*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Langford, W., Lewis, C., Solomon, Y. and Warin, J. (2001) *Family Understandings*. London: Family Policy Studies Centre.

- Larson, R. and Richards, M. (1994) *Divergent Realities*. New York: Basic.
- Middleton, S., Ashworth, K. and Walker, R. (1994) *Family Fortunes: Pressures on Parents and Children in the 1990s*. Child Poverty Action Group.
- Morrow, V. and Richards, M. (1996) *Transitions to Adulthood: A Family Matter?* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Noller, P. and Callan, V. (1990) 'Adolescents' Perceptions of the Nature of their Communication with Parents', *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 19(3): 349–62.
- Noller, P. and Callan, V. (1991) *The Adolescent in the Family*. London: Routledge.
- Qualitative Solutions and Research (1997) QSR NUD*IST. Victoria, Aus: PTY Ltd.
- Seale, C. (2000) 'Using Computers to Analyse Qualitative Data', in D. Silverman (ed.) *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage.
- Smart, C. and Neale, B. (1999) *Family Fragments*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Walkerdine, V. and Lucey, H. (1989) *Democracy in the Kitchen: Regulating Mothers and Socialising Daughters*. London: Virago.
- Warin, J., Solomon, Y. Lewis, C. and Langford, W. (1999) *Fathers, Work and Family Life*. London: Family Policy Studies Centre.
- West, J. (1999) '(Not) Talking About Sex: Youth, Identity and Sexuality', *Sociological Review* 47(3): 525–47.

Yvette Solomon and Jo Warin

| Are Lecturers in Education at Lancaster University.

Charlie Lewis

| Is Professor of Psychology at Lancaster University

Wendy Langford

Is a sociological researcher.

Recent work includes Warin, J., Solomon, Y., Lewis, C. and Langford, W., *Fathers, Work and Family Life*, Family Policy Studies Centre, 1999; Langford, W., Lewis, C., Solomon, Y. and Warin, J., *Family Understandings*, Family Policy Studies Centre, 2001, and Langford, W., *Revolutions of the Heart: Gender, Power and the Delusions of Love*, Routledge, 1999.

Address: Yvette Solomon, Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, Lancaster, LA1 4YL, UK.

E-mail: y.solomon@lancaster.ac.uk