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Families and Relationships e-Special Issue Introduction

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Abstract

This 'Families and Relationships' e-Special Issue contains a selection of ten papers previously published in *Sociology*. In this Introduction, we first outline the broader sub-disciplinary context in which the paper contained herein can be located and explain the criteria we used to select them. The increased popularity of families and relationships as a focus of sociological study is reflected in the dominance of papers published in the 1990s and later. Our selection highlights the following developments within the field: the shift from the sociology of the family to a sociology of families; the debates surrounding late modern changes and the individualisation thesis; increased diversity regarding types of family and kinds of issue that have been researched; and continued theoretical development by extending the family practices approach and by widening the scope of study. We include reflections of how the papers in this e-Special Issue speak to developments in the discipline at large and in the field of families and relationships, as well as what the future might hold for the field.

Introduction

Families and relationships have been and continue to be central topics of sociology, though significantly gaining in popularity, under the guise of the sociology of families, intimacy or personal life, since the 1990s. Once dominant in this field were the functional approaches advocated by Talcott Parsons in his work on the family (Parsons and Bales, 1955). This approach to 'the family' was challenged by feminists from the 1960s onwards, with important work from the likes of Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh (1982) setting a new agenda for researching everyday gendered power relationships within families. At the same time, a growing number of sociologists questioned the existence of *the* family – understood to reflect normative ideals based on a white middle-class patriarchal family model – and elucidated the variety that existed in terms of how families were organised and led their everyday lives (Morgan, 1996). There has also been a shift to widen the scope of studies to include kinship (Finch and Mason, 1993) and to broaden the conceptual focus to intimacies and personal life (Jamieson, 1998; Smart, 2007). These shifts are reflected in our selection of papers for this *Sociology* e-Special Issue.

We have chosen ten papers that have been published in the journal since its first year of publication in 1967; the oldest selected paper was published in 1968, and the most recent in 2015. Our criteria for selecting papers were threefold. First, families and intimacies comprised the central focus of study. There were several papers considered for inclusion that did not make it into the final selection because they, though very interesting, were dealing with families and relationships as a vehicle to study something else, most notably class. Second, our aim was to show some of the trends in how families and intimate relationships have been discussed sociologically during the 50 years of *Sociology*. Third, we wanted to highlight not only key texts that have made a major contribution to the field, but also hidden gems that might hitherto not have received as much attention. This meant that we could not include all of the seminal papers on families and relationships published in the journal.

While working on our shortlist, we noticed some clear trends in the kinds of papers on families and relationships that have been published in *Sociology*. Despite our original aim of showing the history of research on families and relationships as it appears in the journal, we have only included one paper published before the 1990s. There are several reasons for this. First, in the early years of *Sociology*, only a few papers appeared that discussed families and relationships (the topic was more prevalent in the book reviews section). Second, during this early period the majority of the papers that touched upon the topic did not focus on families and relationships as such. Instead, 'the family' or the home provided merely the context in which the study took place, such as in Bernstein and Young's (1967) study of children's use of toys. Third, in line with the interest in class, the few papers that did focus on families tended to compare working-class families with middle-class ones, often from a deficit perspective (e.g. Wootton's 1974 paper on children's language acquisition). From today's perspective, such a problem-oriented view of working-class families seems not only outdated but goes against a principle shared by many sociologists, namely the wish to provide an outlet for the voices and experiences of those otherwise marginalised.

Overall, our grouping of papers in what follows is chronological, but not strictly so, because we have also grouped them according to theme. We focus on the following developments

within the field: the shift from the sociology of the family to a sociology of families; a focus on late modern changes and the individualisation thesis; increased diversity regarding types of family and kinds of issue that have been researched; and continued theoretical development by extending the family practices approach and by widening the scope of study. In the concluding section, we consider how our selection of papers reflects developments in the discipline at large and in the field of families and relationships, as well as what the future might hold for the field.

From a sociology of the family to a sociology of families

The few early papers published in *Sociology* that focused on family life took the family as a fixed entity which then impacted on other elements (such as class). Our first paper, Bell's 'Mobility and the middle class extended family' (1968), represents an interesting departure from this trend. The paper reflects its time in its focus on class and social mobility, as well as its (partial) focus on men. However, by paying attention to kinship, this paper also echoes future developments in the field, most notably Finch and Mason's (1993) work. Bell touches upon the feelings of obligation and expectation that are experienced between kin, how they might want to try to avoid such a sense of obligation, and the indirect ways in which these feelings can be communicated. Bell also observes that extended families are important in mundane matters and everyday life, not just in times of crisis – again presaging the increasing interest in everyday family life that followed in the wake of Morgan's *Family Connections* (1996). Rather unusually for its time, Bell's paper makes note of the gendered nature of family relationships, with a particular emphasis on father-son relationships. This unusual focus on men in families can be explained by Bell's subject matter, namely the role played by extended family members in social mobility. In other words, this paper is about money and status, which in the 1960s were associated with men more so than with women. Bell also observed class differences between the kinds of support that family members offer each other.

The trend of focusing on family life through the lens of class continued into the early 1980s (many of these articles have been included in previous *Sociology* e-Special Issues edited by Ryan and Maxwell, 2016 and Roth and Dashper, 2016). By the end of the 1980s however, more papers focusing on family began appearing. While class continued to be a central

theme, others emerged, including patriarchy, unemployment, extended kin, and reflections on intimate ties and gendered dynamics in family relationships. Meanwhile, critiques of studying 'the family' and of traditional sociological approaches to class were beginning to emerge from within feminist research (e.g., Jamieson, 1987; see also Roth and Dashper, 2016 for a further selection of these papers). Family sociology became much more prominent on the pages of *Sociology* in the 1990s when the field shifted from a sociology of 'the family' towards what is now seen as a sociology of families and relationships. We now go on to explore the nature of this shift in more detail.

Late Modern Changes

An important turning point in the nature of the debate on families as it appeared in *Sociology* came with the publication of texts which sought to engage with the thesis, most famously put forward by Giddens (1992), that selves and relationships had been transformed in late modernity. The theoretical and empirical work that has taken place in the wake of the individualisation thesis has broadened the remit of family sociology such that it is no longer simply concerned with family form – though debates around 'family diversity' have remained prevalent, as reflected in the work on lone and step parenting, LGBT families and living apart together (LAT) couples – but also includes an awareness of the experiences of children and young people, as well as the impact of gender and other inequalities on family life. The following three papers reflect these debates.

Hawkes's (1995) article is an excellent example of a paper that sits between two emerging trends of research. Its focus on pregnancy and young women is reflective of demographic work conducted in the 1980s on pregnancy (e.g. Sloan 1983). But, Hawkes also engages with notions of responsibility, discourse, choice and class, which echo contemporary work on individualisation, neoliberalism and female bodies. The focus of Hawkes's paper lies on the views of practitioners in the field of family planning. She found that while outwardly conducting their consultations in a manner that seemed value free, the practitioners made moral judgments about the women who sought their services. They also expressed concerns that young women were not be able to act responsibly once the floodgates of sexuality were opened. Not surprisingly, given the public debates at the time that focused attention

on 'feckless' lone mothers on benefits, such concerns were strongest in relation to working-class women.

The next paper, Jamieson's 1999 'Intimacy transformed? A critical look at the "pure relationship"', has since become a classic. One of the most highly cited papers to have appeared in *Sociology*, it is a seminal critique of Giddens's claims of the transformation of intimacy heralded by 'confluent love', 'the pure relationship' and 'plastic sexuality', which according to him had led to a democratisation of heterosexual couple relationships. Jamieson highlights the more troublesome issues, including continued systematic gender inequality, that are obscured by Giddens's rather optimistic account. An important point made by Jamieson is that a change in the quality of heterosexual couple relationships would not be enough to counter the influence that gender inequalities in other spheres of life, including the workplace, have on the seemingly 'private' sphere of the home. Jamieson also points to empirical work that shows that heterosexual couples spend no small amount of energy in trying to disguise and explain away gendered inequalities, for example in the amount of housework done by each member of the couple. Jamieson observes that such examples highlight 'the tensions between strengthening cultural emphasis on intimacy, equality and mutuality in relationships and the structural supports of gender inequalities, which make these ideals difficult to attain' (1999: 486). Jamieson's paper marked a shift in the field towards a focus on intimacy as something that must be achieved in a relationship.

At the end of her paper, Jamieson points out that Giddens's conceptualisation of the pure relationship runs into further trouble when considered in the context of parent-child relationships. These form the central focus of the following paper in our selection, by Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000). They enter the debate on the changing nature of family life and intimacy from the perspective of step-families, with a particular concern for claims around individualisation and morality in family life. While others had found a lack of moral imperatives in family life in relation to adult relationships and to parenting in the context of divorce (e.g. Finch and Mason, 1993), Ribbens McCarthy et al. argue that when it comes to accounts of parenting told some time after a relationship dissolution, a clear moral imperative exists: 'adults must take responsibility for children in their care and therefore must seek to put the needs of their children first' (2000: 789). However, they also found

that in practice this imperative was gendered, with fathers and step-fathers emphasising financial provision, while for mothers and step-mothers, moral parenting entailed creating a stable family environment for the children. Ribbens McCarthy et al.'s paper also reflects our next theme, namely family sociology's increasing interest in the experiences of people whose families do not fit within the normative two-parent nuclear family model.

An increasingly diverse field of study

In the 2000s, the subject matter covered in *Sociology* in relation to families became more varied, reflecting the diversification of ('acceptable') family life. Non-normative family lives became increasingly possible and visible due to changes in social mores and legislation surrounding gender, sexuality, relationships and 'family'. Following on from Weeks et al.'s (2001) seminal work on same-sex intimacies and 'families of choice', there has been a greater focus on LGBT families in the field of family sociology. The next paper in our selection, Gabb's (2005) study of lesbian motherhood, reflects these developments. Based on an interview study with lesbian mothers and their children, Gabb focuses on the linguistic management of roles between biological and social mothers and charts how new meanings are made by creatively combining old and new. The lesbian mothers and their children in her study struggled to find a suitable terminology to describe their family roles, and often resorted to creative ways of distinguishing between biological and social mothers (or 'other mothers' as Gabb calls them). The study took place before the introduction of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008 which, for lesbian couples, enables both mothers to be named as parents on the birth certificate. Gabb's paper therefore acts a timely reminder of the rapid shifts that family life can undergo due to for example legislative changes and of the continued need to study the everyday lives of families.

The papers published in *Sociology* since the turn of the millennium have also demonstrated an awareness of the dark side of relationships. A prime example of such work is Cavanagh et al.'s (2001) paper. Based on interviews with men who have used violence against their woman partner, Cavanagh et al. illuminate the paradox of men simultaneously trying to excuse their violence and seeking forgiveness. The authors make wonderful use of Goffman's notion of 'remedial work' – which involves the use of devices such as accounts, apologies and requests – to explore the strategic responses that men have to their violence

against their women partners. Cavanagh et al. argue that the remedial work of these men is to be understood in the context of the interaction between the couple, a form of interaction in which the man aims not only to excuse and divert responsibility, but also to control his partner's understanding of and response to the violence that he has perpetrated.

The ambivalent and often unspoken aspects of relationships are further explored by Smart in her paper 'Families, secrets and memories' (2011) which charts the 'struggle over the place of truth in family relationships' (p. 553) in legislation and family practices. This paper, which was the joint winner of the 2012 *Sociology Sage Prize for Innovation/Excellence*, is illustrative of the more empirically grounded work that has been conducted in the field as a direct or indirect antidote to the grand claims made within the individualisation thesis. The data for this paper derive from the Mass Observation Archive, a resource that has become significant in recent research on personal lives. Smart's study also reflects some of the key concerns of 'new kinship studies' over the meanings attached to kinship at a time when issues of 'truth' over one's genetic heritage have become central in terms of determining family relatedness. In an attempt to understand familial changes in historical context, Smart found that the types of secret held by families tend to reflect what is considered shameful at the time. The secrets of old, often linked to issues of il/legitimacy, have given way to 'new' secrets which largely stem from assisted reproduction and the dilemma of whether or not a child conceived in this manner has the right to know the truth of their genetic origins. Smart also pays attention to how relations of power between genders and generations are implicated in the keeping of family secrets.

Since the turn of the millennium, family sociology has become an increasingly diverse field of study, now encompassing not just traditional concerns over family form and function, but also the complexity of relationships within families and how intimacy is 'done'. The socio-historical context in which these family lives take place has also remained an important concern of this sociology of families and relationships that is attuned to issues of power and inequalities.

Continued theoretical development

The decades since the 1980s have also seen a number of conceptual advances in the study of families and relationships. The next paper, Finch's 'Displaying families' (2007), offered an important theoretical contribution to the field and has in a short space of time become a key work cited by many. In *Sociology*, almost every paper published since on the topic of families at least mentions Finch's paper. Finch's aim was to further develop the conceptualisation of family practices by arguing that 'families need to be "displayed" as well as "done"' (2007: 66). Finch's contention is that in order to be effective as family practices, these 'need to be understood by others as carrying meanings associated with "family"' (2007: 67). The aim of family display is to communicate 'These are my family relationships, and they work' (Finch, 2007: 73).

Drawing from a range of empirical studies of UK families, Finch proposes that family displays are becoming increasingly important in an age when fewer people live in what can be considered normative family situations. Consequently, family connectedness must be actively demonstrated through family practices. Family displays take place in direct interaction between family members, and must be understood as such by them in order to work as a display of 'family'. Finch summarises her argument as follows:

there is a real sense in which relationships do not exist as *family* relationships unless they can be displayed successfully. They cannot exist solely in my own consciousness. They need to be understood and accepted as such by others, and the way in which I relate to relevant others needs to be recognized as 'family like'. (2007: 79)

A further theoretical development has come in the form of the sociology of personal life, which argues for a further widening of the scope of study to include 'connectedness' and relationality more broadly (Smart, 2007). This has been reflected in the papers published in *Sociology*, which have clearly shifted towards exploring not only a broader set of family relationships such as sistering (Mauthner, 2005) but also non-familial relationships, including human-animal relationships (Charles, 2014) and friendships, as the next paper in our selection does.

In 'Gendering friendship: Couple culture, heteronormativity and the production of gender', Cronin (2015) draws on interview material to analyse the ways in which couple practices and friendship practices interface. Cronin argues that the norm of 'the couple' remains strong and acts as an organising principle in people's lives. In practice this meant that the participants in Cronin's study prioritised their (heterosexual) couple relationships over their friendships. In addition, cross-sex friendships could become difficult to maintain because of the potential threat these posed to the heterosexual couple relationship based on exclusive sexual intimacy. Cronin's findings also have implications for sociological theorising on relationality as she proposes that relationships should not be thought of as singular bonds, but 'must be analysed in tandem with, and understood to be co-implicated with, other relationships' (2015: 1179).

As we near the end of our selection of papers, we note that we have come full circle. We began our introduction by observing that in the early decades of *Sociology*, families tended to be researched through the lens of other foci such as class. The advances in the sociology of families and relationships that we have charted above have allowed for scholars to approach the topic from elsewhere. However, while the authors of the 1960s papers were often only tangentially interested in families, contemporary researchers aim to contribute to the theorising of family life and relationships. This is found in the final paper in our selection.

Thomas and Bailey (2009) explore the life of seafarers – whose job requires long absences from home – to highlight how disruption of time impacts their intimate relationships. Drawing on theoretical work that illuminates the importance of temporal markers and temporal synchrony, they explore these in the context of family relationships. The seafarers in Thomas and Bailey's study experienced time as fractured: they felt they led two lives, one at sea and one at home. Their partners similarly experienced discontinuity and temporal disjuncture. The seafarers also recounted experiencing a dissonance upon returning home, resulting from the fact that while from their perspective, family time had been paused, the lives of their family members had continued, leading the seafarers to feel out of place and as though they had 'lost' time, for example by missing out on young children growing up. To alleviate such temporal de-synchronisation, seafarers and their families did make efforts to

'be present in time' (Thomas and Bailey, 2009: 623), for example through regular telephone calls.

In this final section, we have explored some of the theoretical developments that have taken place in the sociology of families and relationships since the turn of the millennium. These have included extending existing theoretical approaches, broadening the scope of study, and bringing new theoretical approaches into play. We now go on to reflect on what the papers included in this e-Special Issue say about the state of the field overall.

Concluding reflections

From the selection of papers in this e-Special Issue on families and relationships, it is possible to see some of the developments that have taken place in the field, but also wider changes in the discipline more broadly, such as a shifts in class analysis, feminist critiques, the theoretical claims of late modernity, advances in qualitative methods, and a return to studying the everyday lives of people. One thing that was notable across all decades though is the way in which the study of families and intimate relationships has often been a space for exploring other societal themes. It is only really in papers where theoretical questions of what constitutes 'family' and intimate relationships are considered that families and relationships become the primary focus.

This e-Special Issue also reflects the increasing diversity of themes and issues as well as theoretical approaches present in research on families and relationships. Two of the ten papers in the selection are theoretical pieces, seven are based on qualitative research, and one on quantitative data. The papers thus also speak of the growing popularity of qualitative research in UK sociology since the 1960s, perhaps further manifest in the fact that the majority of empirical papers published in *Sociology* are based on qualitative studies. The predominance of qualitative papers on families and relationships may also reflect a turn towards the theoretical ideas discussed in this Introduction, which increasingly focused on how individuals negotiate what 'family' means, and do so in divergent and complex ways. Although the heated debate over the individualisation thesis that has been ongoing since the early 1990s is understandably visible, whether as a key focus or through oblique references, there are a range of other theoretical approaches that these papers draw from,

including feminism, Goffman, theories of time, narrative theory, and anthropological work on kinship. In terms of key works within the field of families and relationships, major influences include Morgan (1996) on family practices, Finch and Mason (1993) on negotiating family responsibilities, Weeks et al. (2001) on same-sex intimacies and Smart's (2007) recent work on personal life. Two of the papers in our selection, by Jamieson (1999) and Finch (2007), have also themselves become important points of reference in sociological debates.

Indeed, most of the papers we have included in our selection might seem like rather obvious choices – but the fact that they have become so well-known and widely used does reflect the quality of the papers, as well as the central role that the journal *Sociology* has in recent decades played in this sub-discipline. But we are also aware that we were reading the articles in the journal from the vantage point of today, which undoubtedly influenced our choices. Given the changes in what is now identified as the sociology of families and relationships, we excluded some articles and included others based upon how well they fit with what we now imagine this field to be, or how well they enabled us to tell a coherent story about shifts in the field. We say this not to highlight it as a problem but as an indication of how sub-fields of sociology change over time in terms of topic matter considered interesting, as well as the theoretical and methodological approaches used.

While going through back issue of the journal, we identified some gaps in the work published in *Sociology* on families and relationships. Not even in the 1960s did we find many papers that presented the 'traditional' functionalist view. Bar the exceptions discussed here, theoretical pieces were few and far between. In addition, discussions of 'race' and ethnicity in relation to family lives were largely absent in the pages of *Sociology*, a notable absence, particularly in light of the ways in which ethnic minority families have been problematized in 'othering' public discourses. There were also a variety of themes we were not able to cover in our selection given we are limited to ten papers.

In conclusion, we would like to say a few words about the future of the sociology of families and relationships. The field is clearly in a robust state of health and becoming increasingly diverse, and scholars are using no small amount of theoretical creativity in approaching

their subject matter. This, in our mind, bodes well for the future of the field. Possible future paths, as indicated by papers published in *Sociology*, are a continued inventiveness in terms of finding sources of data, the lasting importance of relational approaches, and interesting intersections with other areas of sociological interest such as time.

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