



## Family Lives and Relational Living: Taking Account of Otherness

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### Abstract

Contemporary research has shown that families are constituted through everyday practices of intimacy with affinities being fashioned around the structuring principles of openness and reciprocity alongside or superseding traditional ties of obligation and responsibility. Paradoxically in many instances powerful differences and inequalities among intimates remain intransigent, undermining claims on the democratisation of intimacy. In this article I want to examine how people make sense of difference and significant otherness in family lives, focusing attention on embedded practices that span across interpersonal, human-object, natural-cultural boundaries. I focus on three examples; these are relations between humans and animals, parents and children, people and objects. These relations are structured through species, gendered, generational and subject-object differences, but these categorical distinctions do not set apart the self and other. Instead they demonstrate how otherness is part of everyday relational living. Thus, to put personal relationships and families in context, I contend that we need to reframe the analytical lens around an ethics of otherness.

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**Keywords:** *Families, Intimacy, Ethics of Otherness, Human-animal Relationships, Parent-child Relationships, Human-object Relationships*

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### Introduction

1.1 Research has shown that significant intimate relationships often extend beyond the adult–sexual couple and/or 'the family' (Roseneil, 2005). Individually meaningful social groupings – such as couple relationships, families, extended kinship, families of choice, friendships – create a sense of belonging (Jamieson et al., 2006). Mutual respect has been identified as one of the structuring principles around which these wide ranging relationships are created, sustained through practices of disclosing intimacy that aim to foster intimate knowledge of self and other (Jamieson, 1998). Central to these understandings of contemporary living are ideas of reciprocity. In fact, in many ways reciprocity has become emblematic of understandings and experiences of intimacy, driving changes in the patterning of relational life (Williams, 2004). However, while mutuality in relationships may be a personal and culturally-applauded goal, many differences and inequalities among intimates remain steadfast, affectively structuring relations and undermining claims around the democratisation of intimacy (Jamieson, 1999).

1.2 There is, therefore, a tension at the centre of recent thinking and research on personal relationships and intimate life. In this article I want to engage with this knotty issue; to refocus the analytical lens on how differences between self and other are played out in everyday life. I argue that rather than seeing differences as contra-evidence and/or a qualification to the democratic relational paradigm we should pay more attention to the ways that practices create embedded multidimensional emotional–social worlds in ways that embrace otherness in relationships. I therefore want to advance an argument for developing an ethics of otherness in the study of families and personal relationships.

### Methodology

2.1 Emotions have been a sticking point for scholars across the social sciences (Ahmed, 2004) often being either erased from the sociological equation or overly determined in psychoanalytical interpretations of the unconscious. I situate emotions at the heart of family lives, using emotional encounters to advance understanding on intimate life. I reflect on points where knowledge on relationships has become stuck,

developing new vocabularies on what counts as knowledge. In this article I have as such two main aims. The first is to investigate some of the wide ranging intimacies that fasten us together, exploring how differences are negotiated in everyday emotional encounters between self and other. The second aim is methodological. I want to suggest that while sociological accounts of relationships and family living have added significant insight into how we live our personal lives, these have simultaneously tended to wring out the emotions that constitute the fabric of study. Intimacy is sanitised and neatly packaged.

**2.2** While second wave feminist accounts of motherhood were often reflexively framed, drawing on the emotional intensity of maternal experience,<sup>[1]</sup> more recently there has been a move away from such personalised accounts. Perhaps motivated by the desire to legitimize the field of UK family and relationship studies and/or to offset the perception of a soft 'touchy-feely subject' through recourse to 'hard-nosed' social scientific analysis of lives, loves and affinities, it seems to me that we have effectively written out the essence of relationships – namely, the emotional glue that holds us together. I want to write relationally: to produce an account that retains the passion, emotions and 'sense of feeling' that shape relational lives; to embed fondness, love, sensuality and desire in the words on the page. As such, I want to begin from a different starting point, looking at relationships through the spectrum of feelings, honing in on everyday interactions and how these forge and sustain a sense of affinity, one to another.

**2.3** My intention is to steer clear of grand realizations and epiphanies and instead focus on 'moments of undoing' which have the capacity to make us stop short and think again, perhaps from new points of departure. This takes inspiration from Lisa Baraitser (2009), who argues that by bringing together the mundane and the theoretical something productive may emerge out of the gap between them. In my account of family intimacy and relational living I therefore use fragments of lived experience to help me articulate, understand and describe family relationships. Drawing on traditions of feminist scholarship, autobiographical studies and 'anecdotal theorizing' (Gallop, 2002), I cite my own and others' experiences as examples which prompt and provoke my thinking on intimate life and which illustrate the ethics of otherness. These illustrations aim to build theoretical understanding from the bottom up; using the personal as a lens through which new perspectives on relationality can be brought into view.

**2.4** The empirical research data that I draw on comes from a small scale qualitative mixed methods study on family relationships, *Behind Closed Doors*.<sup>[2]</sup> Rather than rely on extracts of data to evidence claims on the patterning of experience, I have however deployed what could be described as a quasi-methodology. In advancing this approach my purpose is to produce a quieter, slow and uncertain method (Law, 2004); to literarily reflect the multiplicities, fractures and connections that comprise relational living.

**2.5** To illustrate my argument I will examine three examples. The first example focuses on human–animal relationships. I explore the role and value of pets in family living and how animals are a component of household intimacies that are constituted through the *significant otherness* of relating intimates. The second example focuses on intimacy in parent–child relationships, examining experience that spans across gendered and generational boundaries. I focus on activities (such as shared bathing) which unsettle normative containments of intimacy, looking at how we make sense of relational practice. In my third example I explore human connections to other things, focusing attention on human–object relations and understandings of the natural–cultural world. Through my analysis of these examples I examine the importance of 'significant others' and how people make culturally meaningful differences stick to distinctive kinds of intimacy and relationships. I demonstrate the artificiality of boundary setting around self and other and how an ethics of otherness enables us to appreciate the embedded practices of relational living that comprise ordinary family life.

## Conceptualising other relationships

**3.1** While some literature continues to situate risk and anxiety at the centre of contemporary experiences of intimate relationships (Giddens, 1992, Bauman, 2003, Beck, 2000), other work has posed a compelling challenge to this fragile and individualised agenda. There is a notable return to ideas of relationality and embeddedness as the structuring feature in people's lives (Mason, 2008, Smart, 2007). Ideas clustered around the 'ethics of care', have argued that our bodies, ourselves and our environment are interwoven in a complex, life-sustaining web (Tronto, 1993: 103). Relational ontologies are not about individualisation and self-oriented fulfilment (Doucet, 2001): 'humans are engaged in each other's lives in a myriad of ways' (Sevenhuijsen et al., 2003: 315). Looking beyond the rubric of families and interpersonal relationships, it has been argued that innumerable lines connect one point/person to another. The threads of our emotional–social environments and the traces that we leave are interwoven and tie us/things/loose ends together (Ingold, 2007). Networks of social relations and interactions between actors require a shift in analytical perspective, advancing a 'relational sociology' that is premised on entanglements (Crossley, 2011).

**3.2** Notwithstanding this focus on embeddedness and relationality, power-laden, differences between self and other remain intransigent. Literature on the ethics of care has addressed this to some extent, by focusing attention on how we make sense of equality in practices of care without recourse to discourses on gender 'sameness' (Sevenhuijsen, 2000: 28). These arguments suggest that if a more *particularistic* stance is adopted, oriented around attentiveness to the specificity of contexts, then differences in relationship dynamics become de-essentialized and moral deliberations in the public–private arena are not delimited by understandings of the autonomous rational subject (Sevenhuijsen, 1998).

**3.3** Extending this argument one step further, the philosopher Iris Marion Young claims that interactions between differently positioned subjects are structured through the asymmetry that characterises social and personal interactions. Mutual exchanges are not premised on sameness but on an appreciation of different standpoints. Moral respect for the other requires 'a moment of wonder, of an openness to the newness and mystery of the other person... being able to see one's own position, assumptions, perspectives as strange'

(Young, 1997: 357-358). Differences between subjects involved in these wonderful exchanges enhance the encounter rather than reinforce any social inequalities that may underpin them. It is this line of thinking that I primarily draw on and extend in this article.

**3.4** Young's theoretical framework is heavily influenced by the writing of the philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas, who invokes an ethics of otherness. For Lévinas, the ethical is beyond ontology. We are drawn into an ethical relationship with the other because we *are* a responsible subject before we come into *being*: there is no me/self before the Other. Subjectivity and responsibility are therefore inseparable (Levinas, 1985: 95-97). Mutual recognition is not dependent on similarity or identification because this precludes the stranger or outsider who is beyond cognition. The other cannot be assimilated into our being and so we must retain a sense of openness to the otherness of the other, respecting this 'strangeness' and 'irreducibility to the I' (Levinas, 1969: 43). It is this alterity of the other/I which fosters compassion, what Lévinas terms *non-(in)difference*. This requires that we simultaneously keep open the distance between self and other while making the other proximate and in doing so we make sense of and render meaningful their suffering (Bell, 2001: 163). In this way Lévinas acknowledges the asymmetry of self–other interrelations but these differences do not determine encounters rather they fashion *ethical appreciation*.

**3.5** The masculinist framing that characterises Levinas' work has been justifiably criticised,<sup>[3]</sup> nevertheless I find his ideas on otherness, responsibility and beyondness to be most useful in advancing understandings of the ways that relationships are experienced and enacted. These illuminating dimensions of Levinasian thinking can also be traced in lines, or perhaps in-between the lines of another strand of theorizing that I want to engage with – actor network theory. I acknowledge that in drawing on ideas within ANT I perhaps take my argument to the very edges of relational thinking. Advocates of actor-network-theory (ANT) situate the nonhuman at the metaphorical and analytical heart of sociology.<sup>[4]</sup> In ANT there is no other because all entities are mutually constitutive; things are being constantly and mutually shaped through their involvement with each other (Bijker and Law, 1992). Nested systems of molecular particularities cut through boundaries that separate self/other, nature/culture, rendering ideas of categorical difference to be immaterial. Otherness only becomes meaningful through culturally mediated processes of translation.

**3.6** One of the key exponents of ANT, Bruno Latour, suggests that there are 'many metaphysical shades between full causality and inexistence'. Many entities lack 'figuration' nevertheless they are caught up in an 'entanglement of interactions' which make them part of our social worlds (Latour, 2007: 71-72). Animals, like objects, lack 'figuration'. They are not perceived as subjects in the social world of humans in part because we cannot transpose human registers onto non-human matter. As such animals remain 'actants' rather than actors. It is through an appreciation of the *other* qualities which these 'actants' (and objects) bring to our lives, that an ethical relationship is created between species strangers.

**3.7** In this article I will build on these diverse yet intersecting strands of theorizing on mutuality and the ethics of otherness because I contend that they nudge forward understandings on relationality and the boundaries of intimacy. I move towards a dramatically different framework for thinking about personal relationships. This poses an implicit critique of dominant conceptual models in family studies that tend to be framed around human worlds, pitching arguments for or against the democratisation of intimacy. I do not, however, want to set up a straw man simply so that I can knock it down. Instead I will show how this proposed new framework draws together threads across wide ranging interdisciplinary perspectives to produce creative conceptual combinations that add another dimension to existing understandings of family living and relational lives.

## **Cross-species connections: humans and pets**

**4.1** I want to now focus attention onto discussion of my three examples, where human–animal–object worlds come together. In this first example, cross-species connections, I will show how the otherness of animals decentres human thinking on mutuality. Human–animal interactions are structured through differences that create relational opportunities, generating an 'unbounded space' through respectful appreciation of the other (Haraway, 2003: 50). I have selected this example and the optic of human–animal relations because it can tell us something different about the experience and understanding of household intimacies, something significant for sociologists of intimacy and relational sociology.

*There's only one Taz*  
(extract from a poem by Liam, aged 7 years)

[...] We got him from the pound  
where he was sad and all alone.  
He jumped up and said hello  
he chose me and I chose him.  
His old owner was mean to him  
and he had no friends at all  
so we made his birthday be on Valentine's Day  
to show him that we loved him [...]  
We never argue or fall out  
he is my best friend and always will be.  
He sneaks up on my bed  
and goes to sleep next to me.  
But the best thing of all about Taz  
is that he gives great cuddles.  
Taz is my dog.

**4.2** For many people, adults and children alike, pet animals are really important. An estimated 52.7% of British households own at least one pet (P.F.M.A., 2003) suggesting that animals are certainly not marginal in terms of their presence in everyday lives. Social sciences research on human–animal relations has primarily focused on the affective value of pets in enhancing human experience (Podberscek et al., 2000), figuring centrally in people’s extended and extending networks of kin (Charles and Davies, 2008, Mason and Tipper, 2008). But I want to say more than animals affectively count – as dependents who need routine care alongside kin (Brown, 2005) and/or as restorative substitutes who compensate for the alienation caused by community breakdown and crumbling social fabric (Franklin, 1999). I want to move beyond these ‘like kin’ and/or intimacy deficit models. My intention is to situate human–animal ties within the fabric of connected lives, bringing to the foreground an appreciation of different *ways of being*; materialising ‘queer families of companion species’ (Haraway, 2003: 11).

**4.3** Dog–human relationships have been identified as a particularly close cross species union that draws on a long history of association (Haraway, 2008). There are indications in these arguments that point towards the presence of particular forms of mammalian intimacy premised on adult–young care, but in other instances zoological definitions and genotypes do not appear to determine practices of relating. In the *Behind Closed Doors* project (see Gabb, 2008) innumerable animals were counted by children as friends and/or family including dogs, cats, a hedgehog, tortoise, fish, guinea pig, squirrel and a snail. To these children, species was not a factor in their formation of attachments. Pets were repeatedly described as ‘part of the family’ and parents and children alike talked of loving them. This may not be the same kind of love one feels for a partner, parent or child, but it is nevertheless experienced as love.

**4.4** In their accounts of how pets featured in family life, participants described how the needs of animals were incorporated into everyday activities. Practical arrangements such as holidays and the logistics of staying over at a partner’s house required the needs, and often the individual preferences of the family pet to be integrated into household routines. Animals joined in and shaped exchanges of affection such as father–son rough and tumble play. At other times they transformed the embrace of a couple into a ‘family’ event.

Harriet: A nice leisurely Saturday. We [husband and wife] normally put *Saturday Kitchen* on (TV) and the race is on to get in the shower before it starts at 10. Today tea in bed... Scott of course joins in, he leaps onto me, and almost as if he knows there is no work today, he shares in the tea drinking interlude.

**4.5** For Harriet, Scott (the pet dog) is not only part of the family, he plays a crucial role in the intimate network that she has created to fulfil her emotional needs. His (species) difference is not irrelevant here, in fact to the contrary; his animal otherness means that he brings something else to the relational equation. This animal is identified as a *particular* source of comfort and reassurance. For Harriet and many other people, animals are literally and emotionally one of their *closest* intimates; a confidante, a companion, a being with whom they share their most personal space and private thoughts.

**4.6** Disclosing intimacy may be key in sustaining positive and personally enriching democratic human relationships (Jamieson, 1998), but it is an animal’s capacity to just listen which is often most highly prized. An animal will never interject, judge or disagree. They provide a sounding board for our feelings; an ever-accepting receptacle for human emotions, and for some love. A companion species and an ideal companion: the companionate relationship re-inscribed.

**4.7** While partners and children cannot always be relied upon to be there at the right time in the right way, pets remain a source of unstinting reciprocal attention, giving ‘great cuddles’ and unmediated affection, on demand and on mutual terms. Rain or shine, day or night, animals can be depended upon to meet human emotional need. In return, humans appear to be accepted into the social world of animals, *they adopt us*, as part of their pack, clutter, horde and so forth. This may be in some ways projecting human values onto animal behaviour, but to entirely dismiss human–animal relations because of anxieties around the charge of anthropomorphism unnecessarily diminishes the mutual qualities which characterise this association.

**4.8** I began this section with an extract from a poem. This was written in 1998, by my son Liam when he was 7 years old. It recently came to light when we were de-cluttering the house. It brought back fond memories and the emotional sentiments expressed still ring true. Time however moves on and Taz died several years ago, having lived for 15 years as part of our family. The grief that was experienced around this death was palpable. Described in the poem as ‘my best friend’ and elsewhere as ‘my brother’, Liam had no memory of life without Taz; his sense of loss was akin to that any other. When a pet dies the grief experienced by adults and children alike is often heart-felt and long lasting (Enders-Slegers, 2000). Notwithstanding the intensity of these feelings, there is little social recognition of emotional attachments in cross-species relationships and in fact pet bereavement is often received with incredulity – ‘it was *only* a dog!’.

**4.9** The saying ‘a dog is for life’ may be common parlance in Western culture, but animal–human relationships are nevertheless seen as qualitatively different. Animals are seen as emotionally disposable; getting another dog replaces the former one. I am not trying to suggest here that all forms of feeling are equal; instead I cite this example to demonstrate how connections to another living being span species boundaries. The otherness of the ‘intimate’ does not *contain* emotions. It is cultural meanings which prescribe how we make sense of these feelings, setting up boundaries that artificially separate different species.

**4.10** In counter fact to this emotional segmentation, the presence of animals in human worlds often initiates and extends relational living. Cross species interactions connect us, blurring boundaries between self and other. As various pets snuggle up next to humans, personal space is opened up to another. Pets

are invited into our most closely guarded space. Cats and dogs routinely take up occupancy in the bedroom. The boundaries of touch are most telling. Dogs rest their heads in our laps, in the most private (sexual) area of the body, inhaling scents that are otherwise shared with only our closest human intimates. Animals lick our skin, their fur sticks to our clothes and bodies. We literally and symbolically leave our mark upon one another through these exchanges of saliva, sweat, skin and fur. Emotional sensations and the bodily fluids that we share signify the kind of relationship we have with another. The edges of these interactions separate which beings are important to us. Our relationship with cats, dogs and any number of pet rodents requires *touching acts of care* which signify the attachment between humans and animals.

**4.11** Species differences may be undeniable, but it is the *other* qualities which both parties bring to the association which creates the relational opportunity (Haraway, 2008) and which, as a consequence, enables the relationship to flourish. The significance of the human–animal relationship is in its *significant otherness*: in our mutual investment in another creature that we can *never fully know*. As such we must always remain open to the other's difference and in so doing we become aware of our strangeness in this other's world. In this way animals open us up to relational possibilities that reside *beyond* the personal, the social and the family: they call into question what constitutes a relationship. Emotional and tactile connections create ethical appreciation of our *shared species otherness*. In the next example of this article I will build on these ideas of an appreciation of otherness, showing how adults and children coalesce.

### **The boundaries of intimacy: parent–child relationships**

**5.1** In social settings the separation of intergenerational worlds remains entrenched (Furedi and Bristow, 2008). In families, however, such generational boundary setting is recast; here adult–child intimacy remains sanctioned, even demanded as part of 'healthy' childrearing. Moral anxieties about body space and the proximity of others' bodies are assuaged as relating practices bring adults and children together. Touching acts of intergenerational care are often enhanced through the intimacy of an encounter. For example, in the *Behind Closed Doors* study parents variously described the pleasures afforded through shared bathing. In their accounts of this intimate practice there were many similarities between descriptions of 'family baths', bathing with children, and bathing with partners. These similarities sometimes invoked the erotic, at other times the playful, nearly always the activity was described as reinforcing a special closeness.

Henry: we used to have our kids in the bath and they just love it; they're not bothered about seeing mum and dad naked or anything. I think again there's nothing wrong with that at all, as long as it is the father and the child.

**5.2** In Ann's research diary, completed over a one week period, she mentions bath-time activities with her son on eight separate occasions. In subsequent email communication she frames the activity of shared bathing in quite candid terms; the scene is steeped in sensuality and eroticism.

Ann: when I bath with [son, aged 2] I enjoy skin to skin contact especially if he gives me a hug in the bath and lays with his back to me for a moment of relaxation.

**5.3** The moment described here is one of great tenderness and closeness; Ann is enveloped in the tactile pleasures of bodily contact. For her, the separation between self and other is literally and metaphorically washed away in the bath. There are no boundaries between mother and child. The naked pleasures are unfettered. Differences between self and other do not structure the encounter, instead they enhance the moment, fostering what Levinas terms 'ethical appreciation'. Mother and child share in creating and sustaining the moment through their mutual appreciation of each other and the emotional and embodied pleasures that are afforded as skin touches skin. This cuts across generational lines ordinarily imposed to structure parent–child power relations. The asymmetry of these different bodies can be mapped onto social status and physical proportions, but as both take time to enjoy 'the moment of relaxation' intergenerational differences are rendered meaningless. Both are invested in and responsible for this precious *extraordinary* interaction and the asymmetrical rewards that it creates.

**5.4** Without wanting to douse this scene with cold water, the special moment described here is however subject to constant interruption. I am not simply referring to the hustle and bustle of family life and how this may disrupt such momentary tranquillity; I am primarily pointing to the adverse impact of cultural discourses which call into question the appropriateness of such practices of parent–child intimacy. In the UK, the *containment* of intergenerational contact is currently determining child-centred social policies (Furedi, 2008). Differences between adults/parents and children are being afforded particular meanings, a process of cultural 'othering' which cleaves open the space between self and other through the regulation of intimacy.

**5.5** Sensuality and physical contact are understood to reinforce the mother–child bond (Gabb 2004) allowing Ann and her son to in many ways rest easy. In contrast, while many fathers also talked freely about their enjoyment in parent–child bathing, there nearly always remained a hint of defensiveness in their tone or phrasing. As Henry's earlier assertion demonstrates: 'there's nothing wrong with that at all, as long as it is the father and the child'. Henry feels compelled to both reinforce the innocence of such activities and also make clear that the person depicted in the picture shown to him is not a man: he is a father. Henry's comment is in response to cultural anxieties which reach almost hysterical proportions around the intersections of generation and gender – children and men.

**5.6** For men, Western anxieties around risk and male predation reinforce categorical distinctions that are designed to manage intimacy. Notwithstanding very real concerns around child welfare, adults' deference to culturally legitimised codes of conduct often rests uneasily on top of practices of everyday family intimacies. The carefree actions of children can transgress the cultural boundaries that have been set up to

separate men and children, self and other.

Jocelyn: [Daughter, aged 6] and [husband] still shower together but sometimes her behaviour is inappropriate and he's had to tell her to keep her hands to herself... she's a great lover of bottoms, anybody's bottom within the family and she likes to pat them so she's been told she's not allowed to.

**5.7** As the examples in this article illustrate, family interactions ordinarily cut across intergenerational (and species) boundaries. The rules which determine intimate conduct between adult and child, or as demonstrated in the previous section animals and humans, have leaky edges and can only be sustained through constant boundary maintenance work. This work is designed to contain intimacy. Gender and generation are invoked to keep 'other' worlds apart, a separation that is primarily oriented around distinctions between innocence (children) and sexuality (men/adulthood). Children and sexuality are not however antithetical (Jackson, 1982). Cultural narratives of childhood which epitomise children as the embodiment of innocence become meaningful only when they are set against the perceived *threat to innocence* posed by adult others/men.

**5.8** In everyday practices of family living this narrative of segregated generational and gendered worlds begins to unravel. As the shower scene described by Jocelyn goes to show, children are inclined to push against boundaries, in part because they do not know the rules. For Ann, the sensuality of mother-child bathing is a legitimate and much treasured dimension in this activity. In these and other instances like them, the quality of the parent-child relationship is enhanced as adults open themselves up to the innocence of the child. The playfulness of an encounter is enjoyed for what it is: fun. As naked bodies come in to contact, skin-to-skin sensations literally and metaphorically break down the cultural boundaries that are set up to separate generations. Adults and children are enveloped in the intimacy of encounters; encounters which afford a physical and emotional space for mutual appreciation, of the other's presence and the different qualities which they bring to this relational moment. To fully account for these qualities, requires an opening up of the *conceptual imagination*. Looking at parent-child relations through the lens of an ethics of otherness decentres moral imperatives which delimit what we see in families and how we tell these stories. It enables us to appreciate how mutuality in relationships is not dependent of sameness but is instead positively enhanced through the otherness of intimates.

### **Sticky objects: natural-cultural worlds**

**6.1** Everyday practices of embodied and emotional relating, like those described thus far, connect one to another, materialising mutual sets of feeling. They are moments full of wonder (Young, 1997) in family lives. The openness of the child offsets the jaded scepticism that may come with adulthood. Sharing a bath with a child reorients adult perceptions of sensuality. As we step outside ourselves, we can appreciate sensations that connect self and other, across generations, in ways that defy arbitrary boundary setting. In paying attention to children's heightened sensitivity to the minutiae of their environment, new dimensions are opened up which require us (adults) to relearn and/or remember to appreciate our sensory worlds (Baraitser, 2009). The final example in this article is again autobiographical. I use it as a means to focus attention onto children's investment in objects, a way of being that off centres the adult human oriented way of seeing; re-placing adult humans in the natural-cultural ordering of things.

A walk on a sunny Sunday afternoon. The hues of autumn tint the colours of the sky. The three of us are warmly wrapped up in scarves, coats and wellington boots, tromping through mud and mulch. Liam (then aged 10 years old) is in his element; picking over various leaves and tree trunks he happens upon a stick. 'Sticky' is adopted. Physically attached to our son by a piece of string that could not be cut or discarded, this particular twig accompanies us up and down hills, through woodlands and across fields for the duration of our walk. Conversations include Sticky: 'Did you see that Sticky?' 'Sticky is tired and wants to sit down!'

The entanglement of twig and string in legs, undergrowth and the struts of various stiles shape our walking activity and our entangled natural-cultural inter-actions. Sticky remained with us for some time after the walk and occupied pride of place in Liam's bedroom. Today, if I looked hard enough I am certain that I would probably find him stored in the recesses of a cupboard somewhere, covered in the dust of 10 years' 'neglect': out of sight and out of mind.

**6.2** In analysing this fragment of ordinary family life it would be easy to dismiss Liam's attachment to Sticky as a childhood whim. Alternatively I could fall back on psychological meanings and interpret Sticky through the lens of 'transitional objects': the 'me/not me' phenomenon in children's act of substitution. However I find both of these interpretations limited and limiting. I instead want to consider Sticky in the context of our everyday *interrelations with things*.

**6.3** Studies of kinship and relating practices show that objects sustain our connections to others across time, place and generations and so on, consolidating interpersonal ties and comprising an important part of how we make sense of who we are. Objects are not simply inanimate. We can understand the nature and qualities of relationships by exploring how individuals deal with things, especially possessions (Smart, 2007). Objects can mediate people's spiritual affinities and immaterial relationships with dead loved ones (Kellaher et al., 2006, Finch and Mason, 2000). Gifts, inheritance and 'keepsakes' knot together the self and someone/something other, reinforcing a sense relatedness and connected identity (Carsten, 2004). Objects are meaningful. They are 'sticky' and 'saturated with affect', often serving as sites of personal and social tension (Ahmed, 2004: 11).

**6.4** Writing on the *affective stickiness* of objects did not motivate my inclusion of the Sticky tale; however

the word play is indeed serendipitous. I want to tease apart layers of meaning in the Sticky anecdote to interrogate how attachments become stuck to different interactions. The idiomatic use of sticky examples reflects the messiness and multiple dimensions of everyday relationalities. Lives are interwoven at a material, emotional and metaphorical level and it is the stickiness of these embedded connections which bring us in relation to one to another, humans–animals–things in a *continuum of being*.

**6.5** Looking at these connections through the lens of ANT, there is no distinction between human and non-human worlds. Objects are not 'extra-social' they are actants which are engaged in a mutual exchange of properties (Latour, 1992). The mutually constitutive relationships between humans and non-humans emerge through transactions and interactions. Objects are an integral part of social–ethical networks of relations; another dimension in human relational worlds.

**6.6** The tale of Liam and Sticky illustrates how adults, child and things are placed as actants through their interactions. Objects are incorporated into the emotional and physical lives of parents and children, forging intergenerational, human–object, natural–cultural connections. In the immediate sense having Sticky accompany us on our walk meant that we moved more slowly through the physical environment. We took time to notice and appreciate different grasses; paying attention to the design of different stiles that had hitherto passed by unnoticed. The memories recalled by this object rekindle past feelings and pleasures afforded through the innocence of childhood games. Beyond this, Sticky also serves to forge a deeper connection between us and something other. A piece of wood in the rural landscape becomes embedded in wider networks of relating, as tree *becomes* wood *becomes* stick *becomes* Sticky, a 'friend' who remains fondly remembered as 'one of our pack'. This shift in understanding does more than project human sensibilities onto an inanimate object, it *places* us in relation, one to another, in ways that bring together natural–cultural worlds.

**6.7** The appropriation of Sticky into our emotional and physical environments illustrates inter-generational, human–object, natural–cultural connections: how self and other interrelate through an ethics of otherness. There is transposition of experience. I cannot know what it is to be a stick, but nevertheless I can appreciate the other qualities that Sticky brought to this walk and his lasting place in our family imaginary. Taking a fresh look at intimacy through the lens of 'the other' requires that we rethink taken-for-granted conceptualisations that prioritise interpersonal (human) relations above and beyond all others. It provides an opportunity; to reorient the *placing* of humans/adults in the world around us and in studies of relationality, and in so doing it facilitates a respectful appreciation of human–object relations.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Wonderful interactions

**7.1** My analysis in this article draws attention to the ways that self–other encounters produce and transform relational lives. This does, I acknowledge, paint a somewhat idealised and perhaps overly optimistic portrait of family relations, something that I have previously sought to question (Gabb, 2008, 2010). Abuses of power are seldom absent in households and indeed they characterise many interactions. Families are a place where conflict, animosity and anxiety are acted out in ways that can be terribly destructive. In many human–animal, parent–child and adult couple relationships abuse and neglect are all too often common currency. Cruelty and brutalising actions are used to *get* reciprocity – beating a pet or partner or child to produce the desired response. Children use pets to explore the limits of behaviour – what does/not hurt, what is in/appropriate; 'what can I get away with'. They do hurtful things to animals; they poke sticks at dogs, pull cat's tails and rip the legs off spiders. Many human–animal–object encounters involve practices that would be considered acts of great sadism in any other contexts.

**7.2** Human disregard for the natural environment is proving to be catastrophic. Humans are not always kind and at times we appear to have an infinite capacity to sustain destructive relationships both with one another and with the material world that is around us. Indeed the battle to contain our self(ish) needs may be part of what makes us human. I am therefore loath to leave to one side the ways that cruelty and brutality shape everyday practices of intimacy and the connections between self and other. In this article, however, I do not want to add to the air of pessimism that tends to characterise social theorising on individualisation and the privileging of self-gratification (Bauman, 2003, Beck, 2000, Giddens, 1992) which in so many ways do such an injustice to the complexity and emotional finesse of relational worlds. My thesis begins from a different starting point, focusing on how ordinary examples of family life connect the self to an/other in multiple and complex joinings. I want to focus on the positive ways that (non-abusive) powerful differences are worked through in everyday relational living.

**7.3** For Lévinas it is a sense of moral responsibility, the recognition of value in the otherness of the other, that stops humans acting on violent self-interest (Levinas, 1985, 1974). Reframing humans as part of wider networks of coterminous existence draws together society and nature and calls into question what it means to be human (Ingold, 2000). In this framework, human connections to other things – plants, animals, the world around us – is premised on mutuality. There is no claim to sameness, a semantic move that levels difference; instead there is respect for the *otherness of the other* that embraces the asymmetry of subjects–objects. In learning to pay attention to the other we remove ourselves from the centre of the affective equation and become aware of different registers. A lack of common vocabulary means that we must draw on sensory connections and *intimate knowing* that take us beyond ourselves. These extraordinary 'relatings' connect us to the lives of others as mutual beings. The entanglement of relational practices and emotional investments tie us together 'in a knot of species coshaping one another in layers of reciprocating complexity' (Haraway, 2008: 41–42).

**7.4** Looking at interactions through the ethics of otherness shifts the analytical lens away from powerful differences, as the *structuring feature* of these encounters and the overriding characterisation of different actants. Instead it focuses on how connections are being forged. The management of fluids and bodily boundaries brings together humans, animals and objects. Sweat, sap, skin and saliva; sexual fluids and

bodily excretions: sticky substances are routinely exchanged. These 'gifts' of liquid, tissue and fibre are part of the messy interactions that glue one to another. Boundaries between human–animal–natural worlds are washed away by the sticky substances that pass between us. The exchange of fluids and fibres between one and another cements and signifies structures of feeling. As we emotionally, physically and symbolically rub off on one another, we connect ourselves to something/someone else. A tactile gesture can never be singular because when we touch something we are automatically touched back. These reciprocal interactions may have very different meanings but through the *touching* fleshy materiality of ourselves we become attuned to the strangeness of the other. The embodied sensation (of touch) folds back upon ourselves and produces a reflexive response as we situate the self and other in relation (Grosz, 1993: 45). These reciprocal interactions demonstrate an ethics of otherness that comprises everyday family living.

## Concluding thoughts

**8.1** In this article I have shown how differences between intimates are simultaneously consequential and arbitrary. I have demonstrated how culturally meaningful differences are made to stick to practices of intimacy through the enforcement of categorical distinctions that disregard similarities among interactions and sets of feelings. I acknowledge that my discussion of self–other/human–animal 'relations' push at the edges of what might constitute reciprocity. There may be limits to the theoretical point.

**8.2** While ANT theorising seeks to place all things as equal, this *theoretical levelling* lies at odds with how people understand their experience and emotions. I am not suggesting that all intimates and relating practices have equal worth; that is counterintuitive. A pet does not ordinarily offer the same rewards as the parent–child relationship. Marvelling at how seedlings grow into plants, rewarding the time and emotional investment that has been made, does not afford the same emotional returns as caring for a pet every day for 20 years. But then why would these connections be the same because this is not comparing like with like.

**8.3** Affinities and emotional investments cannot all equally be described as relationships and I see little purpose in dancing on the proverbial heads of semantic pins in order to affect this transposition. What I do want to suggest is that we need to think more imaginatively if we are to capture the feelings and relational practices of intimacy that are in evidence all around us. This shift in focus affords insight into the ways that we negotiate powerful differences in everyday living: how we make connections and experience ourselves anew, in 'the moment of wonder' (Young, 1997). Encounters are structured through mutuality, respect and *significant otherness*. Combined together, these encounters comprise a dynamic and complex picture of relational living which is constituted through an ethics of otherness. This shift in analytical perspective can surely only enhance the sociological imagination and enrich the study of family and personal relationships.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> One of the most notable examples of feminist writing on motherhood at this time is the landmark text *Of Woman Born* (RICH, A. 1984. *Of Woman Born. Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, London, Virago.)

<sup>2</sup> *Behind Closed Doors* was an ESRC-funded pilot project (RES-000-22-0854); I was the Principal Investigator on this project. Data were generated using a mixed methods approach with parents and children living in the North of England, comprising 10 families in total (9 mothers, 5 fathers and 10 children). Fieldwork was completed over a period of 16 months, 2005-2006. See Gabb 2008 for full details.

<sup>3</sup> There are many feminist critiques of and critical engagements with Lévinas that usefully unpick his ideas in far more detail than I am able to go into here (for example ETTINGER, B. L. 2006. From proto-ethical compassion to responsibility. *Athena: Philosophical Studies*, 2, 100-135.)

<sup>4</sup> ANT does effectively decentre human worlds and in so doing does open up new ways of understanding 'the social' and some people have found it most useful in making sense of objects in the context of highly charged emotional memories and sets of relations (see REAVEY, P. & BROWN, S. D. 2009. The Mediating Role of Objects in Recollections of Adult Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse. *Culture & Psychology*, 15, 463-484.) ANT does not, however, account for either the materiality of differences in shaping lived experience nor does it successfully take account of the biographical and emotional investments that inform family lives, as such it can never wholly account for the investments in and social context of family lives.

<sup>5</sup> A dense and powerful exploration of these relations between the material, subjectivity and family life is found in Silva, 2010.



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