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# **Chapter 1. Introduction: Negotiating Families and Personal Lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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## **Abstract**

In this chapter the editors set out the background, rationale and structure for this collection. This presents an opportunity to look at families, diverse lives but also the forces that shape possibilities of living and adult sexed life. They explain the framing of the book and each contribution is summarised. The editors focus on diversity, but also the forces that shape our experiences of intimacy, family, childhood and relationships in the 21st century.

Each of these contributions to the sociological studying of the family disrupt the individualisation thesis through contributors' analytical attention to subjectivity, emotion and structure in family life. Whilst the work is not culturally comparative, we consider the global impact of neo-liberal ideology on our perceptions of family and parenting in the 21st century. The international dimension illustrates causes and consequences of globalisation and consequent effect on the economic and personal lives of individuals and families. The empirical evidence base of this volume covers the time span from early 2000's to the present

day and offers critical analysis, current thinking and research in the field of personal, intimate and family lives.

We are coming through a global pandemic and each of the authors in this book conducted their research prior to it. It is not lost on us that this collection would have been different if the research was conducted under Covid 19 restrictions. The lockdowns of 2020/21 were times when family lives changed, public life changed, and routines and normalities were suspended. The restrictions placed on all of us were profound in their effects. Reports in the media and surge of sociological and policy research highlighted aspects of family life (Holt and Murray, 2021; Savage, 2021; Children's Commissioner for England, 2020). Most research and reports thus far revealed evidence of compounded inequalities, unequal domestic divisions of responsibilities, physical and emotional danger in the home and stresses associated with balancing paid and unpaid work. These were revealed under Covid restrictions in ways that were not presented to the public in the same way before. The spring and summer of 2021 is hopefully the time for moving on from pandemic to a new normality and this is the context in which we publish this volume.

This volume is positioned within the shifting and challenging context of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. We are living through times when family research is crucial to aid the understanding of social change, and how personal life is constructed in relationship to professional life and politics. We curated this volume with the intention of offering a new resource on matters of the personal and private in the 21st century, illustrating theoretical and methodological innovation, and including consideration of work from diverse geographical locations. Inclusion of work from other parts of the world accentuate globalisation and how it shapes possibilities in different ways depending on the geographical location of our participants.

Our collective approach is shaped by the recognition that forces both global and local produce and reproduce inequalities. Geographically diverse research in our chapters reveal the continued problem of inequality suggests much social change has occurred but, also continuities are found. Each of the authors researched the lives and experiences of people whose choices in some way seem to disrupt the normative and traditional ideas of family, parenting and childhood. This is accentuated, for example, in Hugman's chapter about narratives of childhoods in 'care'. Themes and connections between the chapters capture this, but also a sense of change and in some cases pinpoint historical and contemporary moments of change. Whilst much quantitative and empirical work in recent years provides an evidence base of change and diversity, this collection focuses more on the lived experiences of these changes. We see changing patterns of personal life, changes to traditional life courses, changing ideologies, changing legislation and policies. In the midst of this, the authors skillfully elicited very personal stories and accounts of how changing times are experienced at the personal level. Our contention, as editors, is that in spite of changes in the acceptability of different family forms and changing family roles and how there continues to be a stratification in status of what is culturally deemed to be a good family (Smyth, 2016; Featherstone et al 2018). The different global positions, and socio-economic status of participants in this collected research offers and insight into differences and commonalities of experiences.

Our imperative for developing this edited collection came about through our time researching and teaching about families from sociological perspectives. One module entitled Sex, Families and the Construction of Personal Lives at the University of Sunderland was the central example that provided our sustained interest in teaching sociology of families. With our students, we examined the forces of history, ideology and policy and how possibilities

and limitations on personal lives can be understood. We often observed that our own experiences of family and personal lives were either not represented in the core sources or as transgressions from a norm. This book was proposed and developed in order to contribute to sociological learning and practice. As a part of this we were motivated to provide accessible work for students that included current research that is methodologically innovative and theoretically stimulating. The book offers a range of relevant and timely issues for our readers and we hope that it encourages students to become critical thinkers; to be informed; to couch their studies in theoretical and challenging frameworks; to ask questions and to continue to ask questions. The collection provides evidence of social and legal change, but also new marginalities and leads to questions of an imagined future where freedom of choice is the norm. We have a narrative of liberalisation in late modern society, but we also have a narrative of marginalisation and each author in their own specialism reflects the contradictory nature of social change. The chapters offer learning and teaching material for those in Higher Education who are teaching sociology and social policy in relation to family life. This collection builds on the discursive and empirical work of sociologists both in the UK (Smyth, 2016; Bottero, 2015) and internationally (Ehrenberg, 2012; Chambers, 2012) that demonstrate changes and continuities in how people make sense, interpret and do family.

Contributors consider the emergence and impact of neo-liberal ideology on our perceptions of families, coupledom and parenting. We critique family as a homogenous concept and look instead at diverse 'family practices' (Morgan, 1996). Current understandings of personal choice in relation to reproduction, 'choice', identity and the construction of 'family' are critically analysed through a range of empirical and theoretical contributions. Questions are raised about how we continue to open up cultural and social policy spaces for diversity and fluidity; expanding the possibilities for people to choose personal and family lives of their

own; how personal choices are negotiated with partners, husbands, wives, children and kinship networks. New technologies in reproduction enable different possibilities for human reproduction and creation of new family forms, the use of technology within family spaces shape the nature of human relationships and interactions in particular 21<sup>st</sup> century ways. People navigate and negotiate the use of technology in different ways. These negotiations are contextualised within the political and ideological frameworks of societies at any given moment in time. Personal choice about reproduction, life choices and new family forms are mediated by geographical position, 'race', ethnicity, sexuality, gender, income, policy and the national regulation of any nation state. Despite the proliferation of 'choice' brought about through legislative reform and shifts in cultural values there remains undercurrents of political and cultural ideas about what makes a 'good' family continue, and this continues to shape possibilities for family lives. Moreover, evidence in recent years suggests that there are an increasing number of families living in poverty, this is mirrored in an increase of cases of abuse by neglect, yet the focus remains on poor parenting, particularly mother blaming (Jensen, 2013; Featherstone et al, 2018). These detract from examining the wider social systems that intersect to shape parents' ability to manage on low incomes (Featherstone et al, 2018). Precarity in employment and the uncertain base of the economy shapes the possibilities for family life for many.

Contributors in this volume consider the emergence and impact of neo-liberal ideology on our perceptions. We delve into lived experiences of families, coupledness and parenting in these neoliberal times as ideologies of family are shifting and changing at a particularly fast pace. In the midst of this people are making decisions. Material inequality and marginality is considered by Crossley for example, through the lens of the 'social harm' perspective. Neo liberal rationality and new social conservatism shape and family and personal lives with new

polarising discourses about good and bad parents/mothers and policy makers use terms of ‘parent citizenship ‘parental responsibility’ and ‘parental governance’ (Jensen and Tyler, 2013). We are seeing these terms along with others such as ‘responsibilisation’ and ‘cultures of dependency’ being used to dialogically reframe parenting identities in these times of individualisation, difference and struggle.

The nuances of considering inequalities and diversity lead us to reiterate the continual need for “conceptualising of the interrelationships of gender, class race, ethnicity and other social divisions” (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 195) across the range of chapters and to consider racialisation in the experiences of our participants. This is present in Quaid’s chapter where she indicated that lesbian couples created joint parented family projects based on egalitarian ideals; however, other definers of identity such as, culture, disability, ethnicity, class, gender and religious background, caused contradictions and tensions. Crossley, in his introduction identified the racialised stigmatising of troubled families. Moore, in the South African context, highlighted the ongoing silencing and marginalisation of people of colour from theoretical and production of knowledge in this area of investigation. Diversity is reflected in research on families that transgress normative expectation, including lesbian families, LAT (Living Apart Together) couples, adults brought up in care and middle-aged women. We recognise that there have been significant changes, a liberalisation of norms in UK family types. In part, through substantive changes to legislative and policy changes over the last 20 years inter alia: civil partnership, reproductive choice and assisted technology; equality legislation; paternity policy. However, these changes are not reflected equitably in the UK and more globally. As we go into a new stage of globalised organisation of the world, people’s lives are shaped by forces most often beyond their control. Each author makes clear the geographical location of their research and collectively we are able to offer a snapshot of

the global and local forces both economic and cultural that shape the very individual decisions and lives people can make for themselves and their children. Social reproduction and biological reproduction create the life force of any society, and families in whatever form they take, remain the central organising institution for reproduction of the next generation. Family patterns and experiences of living apart together, ‘troubled families’, children in ‘care’, culture, coupledom, same sex families, violence and abuse and influences of digital technology are examined innovatively through theoretical engagement.

In *Personal Life* (2007) Smart outlined the conceptual journey of sociological approaches to families from Young and Wilmott (1987), Giddens (1992) to the conceptual shifts created by the development of ‘family practices’ (Morgan, 1996) and of ‘display’ by Finch (2007). These scholars, along with the definitive work by Finch and Mason (1998) laid the ground for the study of families to delve into the lived day to day experiences. The impact of feminist scholars (Oakley, 1974; Delphy and Leonard, 1992; Smart, 1992) was significant with inherent critiques of normative ideologies of family as oppressive for women and privileging for men, and therefore, feminists developed a sociology of the family that is heavily shaped by a gendered theoretical frame. In so doing, feminisms led to the realisation that forces outside of the family shape the relations both within and beyond. Qureshi and Milton’s chapter uses insights from intersectional feminism to reveal both gendered and racialised constructions of identities of women. Quaid and Wilcock are both informed by feminist standpoint epistemology and Shaung Qui explains her own feminist positionality in her approach to LAT couples lived experiences. Feminisms allowed us to explore the particularity of women’s experiences to consider ‘family’ in a broader social and political context with forces shaping personal lives. The ‘concept of personal life’ (Smart, 2007: 27) along with a recognition that diversity and difference and new ways of living such as



Families of Choice (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2000) were recognised as inherent to study of personal lives. The enormous influence of the late David Morgan is evident throughout the collection. ‘Family Practices’ methodologies and Families of Choice research on sexual minorities led to a broadening of definitions (Morgan 1996; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2000; Nordqvist, 2007) in sociological approaches to privacy and family life (May and Nordqvist, 2019). Finch (2007) argued ‘the importance of ‘displaying’ as well as ‘doing’ family’ and this addition to sociological approaches and methodologies shapes some of the work in this collection, most notably the chapter by Berriman and Jaynes on the use mediating role of technology in 21<sup>st</sup> century families. In conceptualising terms such as ‘parenting cultures’ (Lee, Bristow, Faircloth and Macvarish, 2014) the political re positioning of parenting made clear the connection between private roles and public responsibilities.

Morgan’s (1996) ‘family practices’ was a significant departure from approaches focusing on family structures. We want to retain this approach and our contributors’ share this as a methodological starting point of the lived experienced of doing family. However, it is also necessary to recognise that in the years since Morgan’s (1996) initial work there have been significant social and cultural shifts, particularly the intensification of neo-liberal political economic and intensified global interdependency that shape the contexts of individuals doing and experiencing family. Along with these developments we have on the other hand, increasing politicisation of family and the ideological derogation of families on the lowest incomes. We connect the economic circumstances of life to these ideologies and consider the psychosocial impacts of, for example, austerity policies and advances in reproductive technologies. Further to the impacts we explore possibilities and limitations on peoples conduct and choices in these neo liberal times.

Our theoretical frames share a collective critique of the individualisation thesis. Roseneil and Budgeon (2004) suggested that the 21st century is an era of powerful individualisation. We see narratives of liberalisation on the one hand and the opening of possibilities, and the effects of de-traditionalisation. Cultural and social change opened up possibilities for some minorities it has opened up the possibilities for change for example the rise in divorce and also for example the increasing cohabiting, but we also see that the economies of the neoliberal global system shape and alter and restraining people's choices in a number of different ways. In 'Family Troubles?' (2013) explored current debates on how 'family' is understood, constructed and positioned in neo liberal times. We continue the critique of the individualisation thesis through the book by challenging the false dichotomy of structure or agency: analysing agency, where the latter also needs attention to subjectivity and social identity-and the way that societal norms shape this. We reflect on this and suggest that the family is in a state of flux in the 21st century. We are all in a state of change now as we consider historical forces that have brought changes and detraditionalisation particularly since the 1970s and as we saw the development of Neoliberalism as a dominant global ideological force. Within this ideological shift there are many changes that are libertarian in the UK, for example, Same Sex Marriage (2015). When we reflect that 30 years ago, we could not have imagined that by the 2000s we would see the equal legal right of people in same sex relationships to have a state registered marriage and to have their parenthood of their children recognised by the state as a couple. We have also seen the increase in LGTB families in adoption and fostering processes since The Adoption and Children's Act (2002). This heralded the opening of possibilities for sexual minorities to opt into parenting. Research methods and techniques in the chapters are innovative and researchers used thoughtful mechanisms and techniques to produce knowledge from the perspectives of those taking part in our projects. Earlier work on researching of family dynamics explored the

methodological challenges of research in the emergent sociology of family life and childhoods (Gabb, 2008).

The inclusion of work from China and South Africa as-well as the UK alludes to differential impacts contingent on time and place. Whilst not claiming to be a comparative analysis collection, we reveal how global forces shape and impact our reproductive choices, personal choices, marriage or not to marry choices and how many children to have. Much quantitative and empirical work in recent years provides us with an evidence base of change and diversity, and this collection focuses more on the lived experiences of these changes. We illustrate the need for recognising the racialised constructions of identity and family; accentuate the need for intersectional approaches and develop the use of social harm as a progressive conceptual lens through which to analyse marginalities and reveals the role of technology on ‘family practices’ (Morgan, 1996). Imaginative and innovative methods are discussed in chapters on researching the family. Particularly the work on socially-just methods in the chapter by Hardacre, Stuart, Shay and Kinkead-Clark for example and the use of visual data in Moore’s chapter. Also, the use of multi model techniques by Berriman and Jaynes, and the recognition of emotionality accentuated by Wilcock in her research and how to manage emotionality as a professional researcher. These will be of interest and learning value to sociologists at all levels of practice. By bringing together current thinking, innovative methodological and theoretical approaches aim to raise and articulate relevant, timely and future thinking for our readers.

### **Structure of the Book**

The chapters in Part 1 particularly showcases theoretical innovation in research into families and personal lives. The chapters in Part 2 of the book bring to the fore a range of innovative

research methods, ranging from visual additions to biographical research to documenting and attending to researchers' feelings.

### *Part 1*

In **Chapter 2** Quaid considers how identities such as ethnicity, disability, class and nationality intersect in contradictory and sometimes unresolved way, but these intersections appeared to be part of routes to parenthood. She considers the 'absent presence' of the 'father' and how that story is told to children and suggests that reproductive choice is a moment in life when other aspects of identity become to the fore. These lesbian couple's narratives critique the individualisation thesis and suggest that creation of family is deeply connected to these other definers of self. Contradictions were part of the reinvention of self and negotiation of new relational identities as the couples created families with each other, and then navigated their relationships with kinship, with sperm donors/ fathers and the children themselves. Her research reveals intersections of identities in their negotiated family presented potential sources of tension for the respondents. In **Chapter 3** Crossley's compelling critique of individualisation emerges with consideration of negative effects of dominant policy and neo liberal rationalising ideologies. The translation of these ideas into a policy intervention 'Troubled Families' provides the basis for his chapter. Crossley argues that it divides families into two types; one, families that are seen to be deserving and hardworking and second, those in need of support and that are seen to be harmful to themselves and to their communities, or that members of these families are harmful or that lifestyles are harmful. The theoretical lens of 'social harm' is utilised here in order to theoretically explore the marginalisation process. His use of 'social harm' as a lens through which we can explore inequality underpins the chapter. In **Chapter 4** Carter and Duncan tell the sociological story of Christina, drawn from a larger qualitative study with narratives

achieved through semi structured qualitative interviews. Individualisation theory, with its emphasis on individual projects and its romanticised view of autonomous agency is not seen a good place to start to understand Christina's story. Rather the notion of bricolage is developed as a theory of social action. People respond to new and changing situations by consciously, and unconsciously, adapting from what is easily available to them and has most social fit. Tradition, what has gone before, becomes both a resource and legitimation device for what happens in the future. The approach is exemplified through two further case studies of same sex weddings and marital naming practices. The story of Christina challenges the notion of self-actualisation as her choices are inevitably shaped by tradition partially, by autonomy partially by social economic status and by gendered partner expectations. Christina is a working-class woman and whilst she is making her choices that are different to others in her world, and she sees different possibilities for herself compared to previous generations, these are mediated by forces seemingly beyond her control. Within narratives of marginalisation Hugman in **Chapter 5** explores the negative public stories of children in 'care' as passive helpless victims or deviant young people. She critiques this ideology through utilising Bourdieu's framework and looks at how notions of a good family and a good childhood, or of social and political interest to the state. Her research is drawn from a wider study looking at the voices of adults with care experience suggesting that care is something that we want for children and young people. She is, however, careful to notice that the term 'care' denotes a particular ascribed status and experience of children growing up living with a family unit and/ or living in residential or foster care. Her research disrupts dominant ideas about poor outcomes for care experienced young people. At the heart of this chapter is a concern that these representations of children and young people are inherently focused on deficit perspectives towards some ways of parenting, organising the family, child behaviour and adversity. In **Chapter 6** Qui explores how people's intimate relationships are

becoming more fluid, uncertain, and contingent, under the process of globalisation and individualisation. In a rapidly changing society, such as China, some people choose (or are forced) to live apart from their partner, due to educational demands, dual-career pursuits, military deployment, and other such factors, but still keep a committed couple relationship. The emergence of diversity forms of relationships and living arrangements, such as couples living apart together (LAT) relationships, challenge the societal assumption of what ‘family’ is, and intimacy which is closely associated with physical proximity (Jamieson, 2013; Smart, 2007). LAT relationships have not been systematically researched in China, where people were influenced by a patriarchal and collectivist culture, and simultaneously embraced new ways of living.

Crossley, Carter and Duncan, Quaid, Milton and Qureshi critique Giddens’ individualisation thesis. The theoretical innovations of Hugman, Quaid and Crossley provide examples of sociological research exploring problematised family experiences. Through the use of empirical evidence and theory these contributors disrupt and critique discourses of ‘problem’ family experiences. Quaid examines the interplay of negotiated relationships, agency and individuated risk in her chapter on lesbian mothers. This chapter contributes empirical evidence of how lesbian couples created joint parented family projects based on egalitarian ideals and other definers of identity, such as culture, disability, ethnicity, class, gender and religious background, caused contradictions and tensions. With parallels to Milton’s and Qureshi’s work below, Quaid argues that the problems they faced in negotiating family identity were both deep in the cultural definers of self-lie in constructions of race and ethnicity and unequal access to economic resources

## *Part 2*

In **Chapter 7**, Milton and Qureshi draw from two separate ethnographic studies of middle-aged women's lives after the breakdown of marriages and intimate relationships, one focusing on middle class, White British women and the other on working class, British Asian Muslim women. Sociologies of intimate life have debated whether contemporary intimacies are moving beyond the family, as people eschew the conventional cohabiting couple and pursue friendships or non-conventional partnerships. By framing inequalities across age, race/ethnicity and class the authors detail the baby steps onto the dating scene taken by middle-aged women post-divorce or separation and describe their engagement with public socio-sexual spaces. The meanings of singledom in middle age were complex. For women in both studies the gains of independence sat awkwardly with what was imagined necessary for future intimacies, and the couple was described with both ambivalence and longing.

'Race'/ethnicity and class informed what independence from previous entanglements meant, how desire was expressed and how hopes for future good partners were conceptualised. The chapter offers comparative insights into the continuities and changes in contemporary relationships focusing on the intersections between age, gender and heterosexualities in two different settings. Wilcock, in **Chapter 8**, explores understandings of harm and domestic violence and methodologically, she presents an account of intersubjective method. Drawing on feminist standpoint epistemological theory she explores the harms of domestic violence within intimate relationships and raises the issue of emotionality in the research process. Making the case for emotionally engaged research, she argues for reflexive management of emotions and emotionally charged research on sensitive topics. This chapter reflects on how to position and voice and the significance of emotionality in sensitive research, which traditionally has been silenced in academic discourse. This reflection explores the dynamics of situated emotion that can lead both the researcher and the researched into 'unchartered

waters' (Wilcock and Quaid, 2018) and challenging the researcher's positioning during and after the fieldwork. Berriman and Jaynes, in **Chapter 9** explore family practices of display through and around the centrality of technology in day to day family life. Focusing on technologies, the arrival of smart phones and digital cameras and that children become the subject of relentless documentation. The boundaries of public and private are reshaped and blurred in specific and seemingly uncontrolled ways. As children and adults become owners of devices questions arise about the family becoming visible – imagined audiences cause concern. Who can see? What is shown? And who has control over what aspects of privacy are on display? This beautifully weaves between the concerns of the adults and how these anxieties are generational. The method was rich in its design and produced deep insights. Exploring how parents conceptualise and negotiate digital practices of family display' (Finch, 2007). They reveal how digital practices of family display such as, sharing photos and videos and other visual media that have raised new moral quandaries for parents and carers about how much of family displays are public. This use of the visual is taken further in the methodology of Elena Moore, below, in her elicitation of narratives through photography. Innovative methodology in Berriman and Jayne's research included reflective dialogues about perceptions of digital methods group interviews with the family interviews including the review of multimedia documents a focus group. In **Chapter 10** Moore, situates visual stories in her research with women who brought in the visual, and allowed a depth of feeling by using photo elicitation in a method within a socio-biographical approach. She explains the need to be aware of the standpoint of the narrator in the presentation of lives, and the narrative that's told about the lived life. With innovative methodology and analysis, she provides insights to lives by presenting a visual story. Understanding the visual story involves the researcher interpreting the visual in the context of knowledge about the lived life and the told story. Moore demonstrates how the links between the facts about the person's



life, the relationship narration in the interview, and their representation in the photos emphasise different aspects of family relationships for the respondent. Both the visual images and texts in her analysis in terms of the stories that were being told. In **Chapter 11 Hardacre, Stuart, Shay and Kinkead-Clarke** discuss their work about social work and third sector practitioners for whom ‘emancipatory and socially-just notions’ are key to their professional practice. The authors explore possibilities for developing what they term ‘emancipatory research aims’ through cross cultural discussion with colleagues in other countries. They argue that this would result in better policy development (Fraser, 2009; Lyons and Bike, 2013). They are committed to maintain authenticity and reflexive practice in these developments and argue for research methods that avoid normative assumptions of ‘family’ and to avoid the tendency towards deficit model that positions fault with families. Using a methodology that is about figuring of the self they ask questions surrounding neo liberal demands for qualitative impact measurement. This chapter will help readers stand firm, mapping a path from design to delivery, which maintains the socially-just aims that drove the desire to do research in the first place. This involves a reflexive process to disentangle the enmeshed values, beliefs and practices that shape research: this links with Crossley in as much as some families are understood as deficient.

## **Conclusion**

The different global positions, socio-economic status of participants in this collected research offers an insight into differences and commonalities of experiences. Innovative methods are showcased in these chapters and by encountering different families’ experiences this volume centres the particularities of how people negotiate familial identities. At the centre of this field is the ongoing theorising of how we explain inequality and marginalisation but also how we create and make sense of our relational identities such as: partner, mother, father, child,

nurturer and provider. As we go into a new stage of globalised organisation of the world, people's lives are shaped by forces most often beyond their control social reproduction and biological reproduction is the life force of any society. We are at an historical moment of change where experiences outside of normative definitions of the family are the increasingly becoming normalised. To question how a future world would look we engage with the imaginary and consider understandings of social changes and continuities in personal and family life by considering both the past and the future. We seek to connect change and continuity and to move forward to new narratives and sociological stories of family, intimacy and personal lives – and to understand the forces that shape our imagined futures.

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