Negotiating families and Personal Lives in the 21st Century, Exploring Diversity, Social Change and Inequalities.

Wilcock, A and Hugman, C Quaid, S (2022)

The idea to curate this book came from our colleague Cat Hugman, who suggested the idea after a busy teaching day. Our discussions began to focus on the idea for a book that would place non-normative experiences at the centre and began to imagine a publication that would encapsulate this aim. We realised that during class and in conversation with students we found ourselves saying the same thing many times. That is to say, that there is no such thing as ‘normative family’. Our next thought was to put the non-normative at the centre of our sketchy proposal. We then considered how we could contribute to the existing range of sociology books for students learning about families and social change. The collection came from these discussions and from years of teaching sociology of families in the classroom and being challenged by students to explain such change and diversity. We developed this collection against the backdrop of historical change and current redefinitions of family and personal lives. We started to discuss the possibility of a sociology book that would reflect and explain just how much things have changed against such an historical period of change. A book that would explain both the forces that shape personal choices and to illustrate shifts in the way people understand and create their personal lives. Furthermore, we wanted to contribute to learning and provide students with current thinking, innovative methodological and theoretically challenging approaches.

One particular 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 students, over the years our approach was to start with history, ideology and policy and explore how possibilities and limitations on personal lives can be understood. The thinking behind the collection came from our teaching practice, so we very much hope this book contributes to learning; 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 and to imagine the future.

The inclusion of work from other parts of the world accentuates globalisation and how it shapes possibilities in different ways influenced by the geographical location of our participants. The volume presents innovative technologies and their use of family space that now shapes family lives, relationships, and intimacies globally. It explores a diverse range of family and intimate experiences such as, personal choices about reproduction, life choices, family forms and conflict mediated through race, ethnicity, sexuality and gender. Specific chapters cover: how lesbian couples negotiate family and identities; the construction of families in poverty as “troubled’; domestic violence with privacy of families; the lives of women post-divorce and over 50; socially just methods in researching families ; the use of photo-elicitation in researching family life in South Africa ; the use of technology and how technology use is mediated and manged in daily family life; Negotiating Living Apart Together families in China; Life stories of adults who were care experienced in childhood; We accentuate the enduring importance of situating sociological research on families and personal lives within specific historic and cultural contexts.

Globally, we are living through times when family research is crucial to aid the understanding of social change and how personal life is constructed. Our international standpoint illustrates the causes and consequences of globalisation and the consequent effect on the economic and personal lives of individuals and families. The empirical evidence in this volume covers the time span from the early 2000’s to the present day and gives critical analysis, current thinking and research in the field. The diverse global positions, socio-economic status of participants in this collected research offers an insight into differences and commonalities of experiences. Innovative methods are showcased and all researchers theorise how we explain inequality and marginalisation but also how we create and make sense of our relational identities. As we move into a new stage of globalised organisation of the world, people’s lives are shaped by forces most often beyond their control. We are at an historical moment of change where experiences outside of normative definitions of the family are the increasingly becoming normalised.

We published this book as we emerged from a global pandemic. The measures and lockdowns were profound in their effects and brought about changes to family lives and public life as routines and normalities were suspended. It has also brought greater attention to aspects of family life including, domestic divisions of responsibilities, home schooling, violence and abuse in the home and stresses associated with balancing paid and unpaid work. These aspects of privacy were revealed in ways that were not presented to the public in the same way before. Hopefully now, we can settle into a new normality and the context in which we publish this volume. Within this volume questions emerge within each evidence-based chapter, by leading sociologists, about how we will ‘do’ intimacies, families and relationships in the future.

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. Questions for the future emerge from each chapter about how we will ‘do’ intimacies, families and relationships. Imaginative and innovative methods are revealed in the research discussed in each chapter from socially-just methods, use of visual data, to the use of multi model techniques. Also, we recognise the emotionality in research in this field. We were so delighted with the response to our call for chapters and going forward - we are continually seeking further dialogue with disability scholars in family studies, fatherhood and masculinities scholars, black and global south family studies and furthering the decolonising study of personal lives.

Dr Angela Wilcock.

Dr Sheila Quaid

Dr Catriona Hugman