Families, Intimacy and Social Change: Editorial Introduction

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Introduction

1.1 The papers in this special issue of *Sociological Research Online* were all presented at the British Sociological Association Annual Conference, held at the University of York in March 2004. The conference theme was 'Sociological Challenges: Conflict, Anxiety and Discontent'. As members of the organising committee we wanted to ensure that a selection of the best papers was published in an accessible outlet. We are delighted to guest edit this special issue which show cases some of the most innovative and insightful work in the field. We will be following this up with a further special issue next March focusing on the theme of 'Politics, Responsibility and Risk'.

1.2 Tragically while this special issue was being assembled, one of the contributors, Sue Innes, died after many months of being diagnosed with a brain tumour. Sue was Research Fellow at the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, Glasgow Caledonian University in 2001 and again in 2004 and 2005. She was a founder of *Engender*, the Scottish women's research and information organisation and perhaps best known for her publication, *Making It Work*, which looked at the challenges facing women and work in the 1990s. It is highly fitting that this special issue is dedicated to her memory.

1.3 In this brief editorial we explain the intellectual rationale for this special issue and the significance of the chosen papers for current sociological debates. The 2004 conference was designed to focus upon how the task of sociology is defined by the social conflicts that take place in modern societies. We wanted delegates to consider how the sociological imagination is animated by issues of social division, economic hardship, cultural disadvantage and political oppression and how under these circumstances, our discipline is in constant debate, defining its social role and value. We sought to encourage debate in relation to the impending ecological crisis, the negative consequences of neo-liberal capitalism, the extreme inequalities between the developed and developing world and the aggravated uncertainties associated with an intensifying experience of rapid social and technological change. In organising the conference we hoped to provide opportunities for delegates to debate the sociological challenges that continue to define our discipline, as well as those that are emerging as the core concerns for social life in the twenty-first century. We asked the question: how might sociology venture to identify its purpose and identity in the world it seeks to explain?

1.4 We invited papers addressing the following themes:

- Embodied expressions and oppression
- Intimacy, work and family life
- Politics, responsibility and neglect
- Culture, conflict and everyday life
- The challenge to sociological theory
- Teaching and learning

Special plenary sessions were organised to provide the intellectual context for the shifting sociological agenda. Professor Sue Scott, from the University of Durham, presented a talk on 'Sexuality, Anxiety and the Challenge to Sociology' which highlighted key sexual antinomies that characterise everyday life in the 21st century. The final plenary was given by Professor Joan Busfield from the University of Essex, who talked about 'Pills, Power, People' and how sociological analysis can further understandings of the growing impact of the pharmaceutical industry on our lives. We also held two social theory roundtables 'Sociologists and their audiences' and 'The future of the social', as well as a lively roundtable on risk, entitled 'The social reality of risk'.

1.5 Within this special conference issue, these 'best papers' are organised around the theme of 'Intimacy, work and family life' since this stream produced some of the most lively and significant contributions. Given the diverse range of papers the selection process for inclusion in this special issue was not an easy task.

We were keen to consider papers by both established scholars and more junior academics. All of the papers that were submitted in written form were read by two of us, and we had an initial discussion about those that were considered to be potentially publishable in a leading refereed journal. Of those selected, most clustered around either the theme of 'Families, intimacy and social change' or the theme of 'Politics, responsibility and risk.' Unfortunately we had to reject some papers that were judged to be of very high quality because they did not easily fit into these cohesive groupings. Of course, all papers were peer reviewed and we are grateful to the reviewers for helping us in our task.

1.6 The uncertainties and anxieties pervading contemporary family life have been highlighted in a number of sociological books such as Ulrich Beck's (1992) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, Deborah Lupton's (1999) *Theorising Risk and Culture*, Carol Smart's (2001) *The Changing Experience of Childhood*, Iain Wilkinson's (2001) *Anxiety in a Risk Society* and, more recently, Fiona Williams's (2004) *Rethinking Families*. Such work highlights the emotional and physical tensions and struggles involved in trying to successfully juggle a family and a career, the declining fertility rate as more women (particularly middle-class) choose to be childless or delay having children until they have reached beyond their optimum child-bearing years, the decline in the number of children that couples are having, the increase in partnership failure, the often hidden problem of domestic violence, the social impact of increases in life expectancy and the rise in single-person households (especially among women). The dilemmas faced by Kate Reddy, the high-powered career woman and mother of two in Allison Pearson's (2002) novel *I Don't Know How She Does It*, illustrative many of those faced by contemporary women. They can identify with the feelings of guilt, isolation, tiredness and resentment even if they do more mundane, less time intensive, jobs. Alongside issues of work-life balance, consumer culture places additional pressures on today's families. As Steve Miles (2001) highlights in *Youth Lifestyles in a Changing World*, young people's transitions into adulthood are increasingly difficult. Consumer lifestyles play a key role in constructing young people's identities in a rapidly changing world.

1.7 The papers that have been selected for this special issue all deal with particular aspects of the issues identified above and make a significant contribution to current debates. They offer a mix of historical, cultural and contemporary insights through presenting rich case study data. This special issue begins with a paper on 'Social Change and the Family' by Chris Harris, Nicky Charles and Charlotte Davies. The study provides an insight into social change affecting family life over the past forty years and therefore sets the scene for the papers that follow. Harris et al. replicate, as far as possible, the classic study of family and kinship, conducted by Rosser and Harris in 1960. In doing so, they present fascinating empirical evidence about the nature of social change and continuity over the past four decades, based upon the case study of Swansea, the second city of Wales. Some of the changes observed by Rosser and Harris have persisted to the present day; notably, increased life expectancy and the decline in the fertility rate. They also find an extended kin network very much still alive today. However, Harris et al. note that there are also some interesting instances where trends have been reversed. What we now find is a significantly higher mean age at marriage, a rise in those remaining childless or single throughout life, and the increased incidence of divorce, co-habitation and births outside marriage. Rather than participation in the traditional family being seen as the 'norm' it is now regarded as a matter of individual choice. This, they argue, illustrates the shift from collectivism to individualism and the demise of clearly defined duties, obligations and normative rules. Harris et al. note how, in contrast to 1960s, relationships between couples, and between parents and children, have to be negotiated to a much greater extent. Broader structural changes such as the decline in manufacturing industry and the expansion of the service sector, the increase in female participation in paid employment, and the decline in male labour market participation, have had major impacts on family life and intimacy. There is, they argue, a constant dialectic going on between the demands of the local labour market and the reproductive couple and it is precisely this that presents the central problematic for sociologists of the family in the 21st Century.

1.8 The second paper, 'Researching Intimacy, Work and Family Life in Glasgow 1945-60', by Sue Innes and Linda McKie, also presents an empirical case study in order to reflect upon changes in family roles in historical perspective. This study, based upon a qualitative analysis of 34 case records taken from the archive of the Royal Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (RSSPCC), provides some fascinating insights into family life and gender roles in the mid 20th Century. Like the previous paper, it charts some of the major structural and demographic shifts in the post-war years and goes on to consider the diversity of family forms in existence during this period. The authors draw upon Foucault to illuminate the way in which the RSSPCC played a surveillance role through seeking to restore discipline and order to 'problem families.' The emphasis on cleanliness, Innes and McKie argue, performed a symbolic role serving to reinforce distinctions between the respectable working-classes and those considered to be on the margins of society. The inspector's judgements reveal an array of class and gendered assumptions, highlighting the sharp delineation of gender roles within the family.

1.9 The theme of violence within the family is also the subject of the third paper 'Sociological Work on

Violence: Gender, Theory and Research' by Linda McKie. This explores the challenges for sociology in seeking to adequately theorise violence in everyday life. McKie notes how mainstream or malestream work has tended to focus upon terrorism and war, whilst women's studies has tended to focus upon conflict in families and relationships. Moreover, some scholars examining family violence have tended to underplay power relations within a patriarchal society. In McKie's view what is needed is a bridging of these traditional divides so that a broader conceptualisation of violence can be developed.

1.10 The paper by Sharon Boden, 'Another Day, Another Demand: How Parents and Children Negotiate Consumption Matters' examines conflicts between children and their parents arising from a consumer culture that increasingly targets young people to purchase mass fashion. The study presents some of the findings of an ESRC/AHRB funded study on 'New Consumers? Children's Consumption and Fashion' and is based upon 7 focus groups with families containing children between the ages of 6 and 11. Boden argues that children are increasingly sophisticated consumers who use this status to influence the consumer activity of their parents, seek to exert their own independence and employ a range of techniques to attempt to get their way. The paper highlights how the child-parent relationship is affected by the growing permeation of consumer culture within everyday life. These tensions are particularly evident for the 'tweenager', who typically resides in a small dual earner household, as they search for identity and conformity in a world where transitions into adulthood are increasingly difficult.

1.11 The final contribution by Jo Armstrong, 'Beyond 'Juggling' and' Flexibility': Classed and Gendered Experiences of Combining Employment and Motherhood', draws the special issue to a close by calling for the need to move beyond popular notions of 'work-life balance' and 'juggling'. Armstrong argues that instead more attention needs to focus upon how women's experiences of motherhood and paid employment are intimately connected with issues of class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity. Her study highlights the complexities of such processes and the need to consider how these shift over the life course. Drawing upon Bourdieu, Armstrong suggests that the different trajectories that individual's experience are linked to access to different forms of capital.

1.12 Taken together these contributions offer a variety of small-scale empirically based case studies and a more theoretically informed piece that address the dynamics and complexities of social change, with important implications for our understanding of intimacy and families in the 21st Century. They suggest that an analysis of past and current trends is necessary in order to develop informed reflection about likely future patterns. We hope these papers will open up renewed debate about the challenges and opportunities presently facing the discipline and thank the contributors for making this such a stimulating collection.

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