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## Editors' Introduction: Beyond the Conventional Family

In the West, at the start of the 21st century, 'the family' is a sociological concept under severe strain. Processes of individualization are rendering the romantic dyad and the modern family formation it has supported increasingly unstable, and the normative grip of the gender and sexual order which has underpinned the modern family is ever weakening. As a result more and more people are spending longer periods of their lives outside the conventional family unit.

Recognizing these tendencies, Ulrich Beck (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 203) has recently, rather provocatively, described the family as a 'zombie category' – 'dead and still alive'. The weight of opinion within the discipline of sociology might well disagree with Beck on this, given the effort which has been expended researching the ways in which the category lives on in changed and diversified forms – lone-parent families, stepfamilies, lesbian and gay 'families of choice' (Weston, 1991), 'brave new families' (Stacey, 1998). The move by family sociologists to pluralize the concept, to speak of 'families' rather than 'the family', emphasizes the 'still alive-ness' of the category, and seeks to maintain attention on family practices (Morgan, 1996). While we would not wish to deny the ways in which the family remains a central social institution and a key trope in the cultural imaginary, our intention in this issue of *Current Sociology* is not to inject a further shot of adrenalin into the category in the hope of restoring it to full and vibrant health. Rather we aim here to address the ways in which the category of the family is increasingly failing to contain the multiplicity of practices of intimacy and care which have traditionally been its prerogative and its *raison d'être*.

The impetus for this collection of articles came from the Friendship and Non-Conventional Partnership Project,<sup>1</sup> which is part of the British-based ESRC Research Group for the Study of Care, Values and the Future of Welfare (CAVA).<sup>2</sup> CAVA is a research programme investigating changing practices of partnering and parenting, and the implications of these for future

welfare policies. Its empirical projects have been concerned with exploring the effects of processes of individualization and gender transformation – as well as other social transformations such as migration and increased geographical mobility – on practices of care in intimate relationships and within communities. The particular focus of the Friendship and Non-Conventional Partnership Project has been on those who might be considered the most individualized – adults who do not live with a partner. We were interested to explore how this group of people, living outside the conventional family, lead their intimate and social lives, and how they receive and give care. As part of CAVA's research activities, we organized an international seminar around the theme of our research project, inviting a number of sociologists who were working on cognate issues to come to Leeds in the UK to discuss their work.<sup>3</sup>

Read together, the articles in this issue suggest that the hegemony of the conventional family, founded on a co-residential heterosexual relationship, rooted in a romantic love attachment, is experiencing significant challenge. They address some of the most significant social changes of our age: women's growing economic, social and cultural independence, the continuing rise in divorce rates, in the proportion of people living alone, in numbers of women choosing not to have children, of people partnering across households, of visible, 'out' same-sex relationships, and the related reordering of the sphere of the sexual.

Collectively, the articles perform two major interventions. First, they engage with recent debates in European sociology about the transformation of social relationships within late modernity, in particular, discussions of individualization (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002; Bauman, 2001, 2003) and the transformation of intimacy (Giddens, 1992). The articles support the thesis that there are fundamental shifts underway in the social organization of intimacy and sociability, and they are suggestive of an increasing diversity of relationship practices, which are both constitutive and productive of these conditions of social change. The articles propose that a range of personal relationships – non-co-residential intimate partnerships, friendships, household communities – are important in providing intimacy, care and companionship in an individualizing world, and that these relationships are central to people's core values. Thus the articles offer a counterpoise to the pessimistic tone which characterizes the work of sociologists such as Bauman (2001, 2003) and Putnam (2000), whose ideas have been taken up in a widespread public discourse about a supposed crisis in personal relationships and community.<sup>4</sup>

Second, the articles contribute to the project enjoined by a number of sociologists who have been seeking to develop a 'queer sociology',<sup>5</sup> in that they provide substantive empirical discussion of a range of counter-heteronormative relationship practices.

Just as the challenge posed by feminism to sociology began with 'adding in' the study of women but has moved on to demand a fundamental rethinking of every category of analysis within the discipline,<sup>6</sup> the challenge of queer theory is more than 'adding in' the study of lesbians and gay men. Doing this is just the starting point. Making sociology queerer means allowing lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and all those whose lives transgress heteronormative assumptions a place in our analyses, and then theorizing from their lives. This needs to be linked to casting a gaze on relationship normativities, which allows us to register not just assumptions about the gender of intimate sexual partners, but also expectations within the heterosexual relationship order – or what might be called, heterorelationality – of co-residence, romantic love, monogamy and the primacy of the conjugal couple. Several of the articles indicate that increasingly heterosexuals as well as homosexuals are resisting and reworking these dominant conventions of heterorelationality.

The issue begins with an article by the editors, drawing on the Friendship and Non-Conventional Partnership Project, and further explicating some of the ideas that underlie the logic of the collection. We argue that if sociologists are to understand the current state, and likely future, of intimacy and care, we should decentre the 'family' and the heterosexual couple in our intellectual imaginaries. In the context of processes of individualization, much that matters to people in terms of intimacy and care increasingly takes place beyond the 'family', between partners who are not living together 'as family', and within networks of friends. The article provides a critique of family sociology and the sociology of gender for the heteronormative frameworks within which they operate, and goes on to propose an extension of the framework within which contemporary transformations in the realm of intimacy may be analysed. We therefore suggest that there is a need for research focusing on the cultures of intimacy and care inhabited by those living at the cutting edge of social change. In the second part of the article we draw upon our empirical research on the most individualized sector of the population – adults who are not living with a partner. We explore contemporary cultures of intimacy and care among this group through a number of case studies, and argue that two interrelated processes are in evidence which challenge heteronormative assumptions about personal relationships – the centring of personal life around friendships, and the decentring of the sexual couple relationship. Our research found that friends give and receive care and support in a wide range of situations of emotional, physical and practical need, and that traditional demarcations of domestic and private space are reconfigured in the process. In a related process, sexual partnerships are deprioritized in a way which runs counter to dominant discourses about the overwhelming importance of romantic love.

Sue Heath continues with the theme of the consequences of individualization, which has affected young people's transition to adulthood and has

resulted in the emergence of 'young adulthood' as a new distinct life phase in which adolescence and adulthood are blurred. She considers the links between this life phase and the increasing significance of elective relations such as friendship. As 'twenty somethings' are more likely to marry later and as couple relationships become more precarious, a greater amount of time is spent living with peers in shared housing – a key site for the formation and fostering of communality, intimacy and support. Deciding to enter into a shared household is often based on a balance of constraint and choice – increasing housing costs, concern with housing quality, and interests in cultivating sociability. Heath examines how the everyday rituals and intricate personal relationships constitutive of shared living among friends lead to forms of sociality that challenge the conventional heterosexual couple as the idealized form of household formation. In many cases the nature of these households goes beyond the merely convenient, as young adults share not just space, but also intimacy and rituals, creating in the process 'neo-tribes'. She argues that the forms of communality which emerge from these living arrangements reveal the potential for long-lasting significant ties of intimacy among friends. Central to the emergence of these ties is the institutionalization (quasi-communes) of friendship through a shared domesticity. Because domesticity is usually that which is shared by couples and families, this shared space blurs the boundary between private and public. Much more than a transitional lifestyle, this way of living is one where friendships are afforded a significance once reserved for family or sexual partnerships and where care, support and intimacy are shared among friends who choose to live together.

Judith Stacey's article focuses on the enduring friendships and couplings which often ensue from the profoundly counter-heteronormative sexual cultures of gay men. Placing centre stage the relatively underresearched intimate formations of gay men, she points to their complex and contradictory relationship to 'family'. She draws on extensive ethnographic research conducted among gay men in Los Angeles to argue that gay male recreational sex disrupts conventional family norms and practices, and simultaneously also serves as a cultural resource for constructing creative 'families of choice'. Her research points to the diversity of living and sexual arrangements which exist among gay men – couples and singles with and without children, committed long-term monogamous and non-monogamous partnerships, threesomes, significant co-residential relationships which have ceased to be sexual, paid carers who are 'family', and so on – and to the ways in which such attachments often cross racial, generational and class boundaries. The hypergamous relationships which can result from cruising are not without the potential for exploitative and abusive power relations, but, Stacey argues, the possibility exists between gay men for greater reciprocity of care over the course of the life-cycle than is often the case in asymmetrical heterosexual relationships.

The complex relationship between family relations and friendship is the subject of Ray Pahl and Liz Spencer's article. Their focus on 'personal communities' seeks to introduce some conceptual clarity into the debate about the relative salience of 'given' and 'chosen' ties. They develop a typology of personal communities based upon the concepts of choice and level of commitment. Rather than frame the question in terms of whether the boundaries between the category 'friend' and the category 'family' are undergoing suffusion, this typology allows for a greater degree of analytical complexity in mapping who matters to people and why. Employing this typology reveals a variety of patterns and permutations in levels of suffusion, suggesting that personal communities vary widely in the extent to which family and friends play distinct or overlapping roles. It is not simply a case of relationships being 'given' or 'chosen'.

The organization of intimate lives and changes in household formation are examined by Irene Levin, who argues that there is an increasing trend for committed, monogamous couples to decide to maintain their relationship outside the context of co-residence. In the wake of the institutionalization of non-marital cohabitation, 'living apart together' (LAT) has emerged as a new relationship form in recent years, bringing with it increasing acceptance that living together is not the sole basis for defining a couple relationship. The normative expectation that when two people embark upon a relationship they will inevitably follow the sequence of marriage, cohabitation, sexual intercourse and childbirth has lost the power to sanction particular intimate and household arrangements over others. Levin suggests that lower mortality rates, increasing divorce and separation, changing employment patterns, shifting gender relations, new communication technologies, increased ease of travel and a growth in mobile living also contribute to the emergence of new intimate living arrangements.

Evidence indicates that LAT relationships are increasing in number. Drawing on a qualitative study of those living apart together, Levin reveals the reasons why people choose this form of intimate relationship. In many cases LAT relationships are the result of constraints placed upon one or both of the partners which prevent cohabitation. This may be due to, for instance, the value placed upon meeting pre-existing responsibilities and duty of care for others such as children or elderly parents. Here LAT relationships provide a way of negotiating and balancing the needs of a partner with other obligations. Individuals can choose both a commitment to other intimate ties/obligations and a committed partnership. In other cases the LAT relationship is the result of active choice as a preferred mode of living rather than being bound by the fate of circumstance and in these cases individuals state they have no intention of living together. In these cases living together may be perceived as a risk to the quality of the relationship or may simply be impractical where the partners in question have their own long-established

homes. Levin's research shows that new family forms and new ways of 'doing' family and partnering relations are emerging in ways which continue to challenge the normative assumptions underpinning notions of what constitutes a family.

The nature of postmodern couple relationships is explored by Bernadette Bawin-Legros. Here processes of individualization which produce a greater reflexive engagement in the project of self-identity are analysed in terms of contradictions produced for intimate ties. Survey data are drawn upon to show that intimacy in a 'new sentimental order' is lived as a precarious negotiation of paradoxes inherent in trying to reconcile the desire for a durable sexual/love bond with a simultaneous desire for autonomy. Bawin-Legros argues that the aspiration to find a unique and lasting love based upon transparency and faithfulness is expressed by individuals but that this expression is defined by a context in which it is acknowledged that these ties are likely to be temporary. Thus Bawin-Legros argues that the values that underpin the new sentimental order and practices constitutive of postmodern love can be characterized as those of the 'pure relationship' (Giddens, 1992). This is a form of love which requires the ongoing negotiation of autonomy and unity, freedom and commitment, and fusion and individualization.

In response to Bawin-Legros, Mary Holmes makes a careful evaluation of the privileging of 'choice' over constraint inherent in much theorizing of postmodern love relations. While acknowledging that what it means to be 'together' has transformed in significant ways and that people are living in a range of intimate configurations, including distance relationships, Holmes argues the kinds of choices couples have to make and the ways in which they make them are still informed by tradition to varying degrees. Social and economic position, cultural values and, in particular, gendered beliefs underpinning care, remain relevant to an analysis of intimacy. For example, her own research on distance relationships indicates that choice also involves compromise, compromise requires sacrifice and this process is gendered, such that gender inequality is often reproduced in the complex process of negotiating choice.

Mary Evans also advocates a more cautious approach to claims that intimacy and love relations have undergone a thorough transformation at the turn of the 21st century. Rather than conceptualize the contradictions posed by autonomy and fusion as unique to contemporary relations, she argues that the incompatibility of such ideals has a long history in the West. Social prescriptions and norms have throughout history produced complex incongruities within the realm of love. Rather than interpret the 'denaturalization' of love which Bawin-Legros analyses as unique to the contemporary world, Evans draws our attention to processes of both change and continuity within the social and material realms. In so doing she makes a case for understanding these changes in terms beyond dichotomies such as fusion vs autonomy.

Barry Adam's article turns our attention to the emergence of same-sex relationships as a policy issue in western nations in recent years. He reminds us of the long history of same-sex relationships, and points to anthropological evidence which shows that a variety of same-sex relationship forms had cultural recognition long before lesbian and gay marriage and partnership recognition entered the political arena as issues of contentions in late modern societies. Current claims for access to the benefits which are accorded to heterosexual couples and families reflect one strategy, albeit an often ambivalent one, which is central to relationship recognition. But lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people are also moving towards claiming a new language that escapes the orthodoxy of family ideology, in order to represent values which underpin practices of care and intimacy which are outside traditional notions of 'family values'. This will continue to present challenges to how we think about personal life and relationships, and their connection to citizenship and welfare, as we move further into the 21st century.

It is our hope that the diverse range of relationship practices discussed in this special issue will prompt sociologists to develop research agendas which analyse intimacy, care and community beyond the conventional family.

### Notes

- 1 The project was directed by Sasha Roseneil, and the researchers were Shelley Budgeon and Jacqui Gabb.
- 2 ESRC award M564281001. For further information about CAVA see [www.leeds.ac.uk/cava](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/cava)
- 3 Thanks to all who participated in the seminar, and particularly to Simon Duncan and Steve Mosby for their organizational work. Sue Heath's article was first presented at a seminar organized by the Centre for Family, Kinship and Childhood at Leeds, rather than by CAVA.
- 4 It should be noted that Putnam and Fledstein (2003) is a rather more optimistic exploration of US civic life.
- 5 On what a queer sociology might mean, see Seidman (1996), Stein and Plummer (1996) and Roseneil (2000).
- 6 See Roseneil (1995).

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