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A Review of the Sociological Research

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Introduction

The phrase 'intimate relationship' is a broad and fluid term, in that it can encompass numerous different associations between friends, sexual partners, family and kin. This working paper examines how sociological constructions of family and intimate relations have shifted over the years, exploring how particular bodies of literature have documented and shaped understandings of social connectedness. It will be argued that there are three major sociological perspectives on contemporary personal relations, with theorists emphasising breakdown, democratisation or continuity. Having reviewed the available research and outlined each perspective, this paper moves on to contextualise the three different interpretations, relating them to current debates around the concept of social capital.

As Lynn Jamieson (1998) notes, the word 'intimacy' has come to replace what would previously have been termed 'primary relationships', signifying a new focus on the quality as opposed to the structure of such relationships. Within the field of sociology the term intimacy has taken on a particular significance, describing a theoretical stance that has emerged and colonised topics of interest that were previously viewed from the perspectives of family or community studies. Those who write on the subject of intimacy tend to centre on adult, often sexual, relations, theorising them in terms of individualised, negotiated interactions, in contrast to previous models that emphasised gendered roles, responsibilities and obligations. Such approaches have been criticised by feminists and others for marginalising relationships between parents and children, and neglecting the gendered nature of childrearing. Furthermore, concepts of 'individualisation' and 'democratisation' that underpin theories of intimacy are the source of much debate and argument, with many disputing the claim that personal relationships have become more contingent, negotiated and self directed. Such theories of 'intimate citizenship' also stand in opposition to alternative interpretations of individualisation as threatening the moral fabric of society.

Contemporary theorising about family life revolves around the theme of social change, with discussion centring on the impact of broader structural and societal changes on personal relationships. Statistical analysis of trends in family forms and household composition have been drawn on to emphasise an increased diversity in living arrangements (more divorce, lone parents, step-families), yet they can also be used to demonstrate an enduring continuity of traditional ties, with the majority of families still composed of a heterosexual couple. The notion that dramatic changes have taken place in the way that people relate to one another has not been subject to empirical research, and it is difficult to envisage how it could be given that there are so few previous studies of personal relationships. Nevertheless, change and transformation is a commonly cited premise in contemporary literature on personal and family relationships, driving theories, models and prescriptions.

From a sociological perspective changes in family and personal relationships are a consequence of post-industrialisation, which has led to the de-traditionalisation and individualisation of social life. Social commentators differ in their account of the implications of these changes, with some adopting the pessimistic view that the breakdown of traditional ties leads to the disintegration of moral frameworks, while others focus on the positive potential that such changes offer, suggesting that greater diversity and plurality of lifestyles leads to a democratisation of personal relationships. These contrasting perspectives are each ideologically charged in that they reflect and bolster

particular political stances. The more negative account of social change appeals to a traditionalist argument which calls for a renewed respect for normative structures and values. The more optimistic view accords with a more liberal faith that equality and justice in personal relationships can be disconnected from wider political and economic spheres.

The dominance of these two views within sociology and the ideological force driving them leaves limited room to recognise continuity in the experience of intimacy and family life. Nevertheless, empirical research points to the continued importance that individuals place on family ties and obligations (Gillies et al. 2001; Ribbens McCarthy et al. 2003). Some theorists have argued that the extent of social change has been overstated and suggest that diversity and plurality have always been a feature of family relationships (Crow 2002; Vascovics 1991). Such discussions tend to focus on establishing appropriate definitions of change and continuity with theorists debating the real significance of demographic changes such as the increase in divorce and co-habitation. Although many theorists argue there have been radical shifts in social relations, others see change in terms of a slow, uneven but cumulative influence on the way individuals live their lives. Thus the former highlights transformations and decisive breaks, while the latter allows for existing diversity as well as continuity.

Models of Family, Kinship and Change

As Tamara Hareven (1994) points out, in the absence of systematic historical analysis, myths and grand theories about change and continuity directed early social scientific studies of family and kinship. Conceptions of the family that underpinned preliminary sociological writing (and persist into contemporary understandings) contrast modern family forms with a very different pre-industrial past. Family and kinship relations were perceived as the primary structuring features of small scale, pre-industrial society, producing basic goods and services and ordering roles and obligations. Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball's famous (1968) study of a rural farm community in Ireland was often cited to illustrate how this classic extended family structure was founded on patriarchal, ascribed status, constituting a community with no recognisable distinction between familial, social and economic functions. Industrialisation was identified by many as having sounded the death knell for this way of life, destroying extended families and undermining communities (Ogburn 1955; Thompson 1963; Wirth 1938).

While these early commentaries were characterised by themes of social breakdown and hardship, functionalist theories of the time generated a less pessimistic view of the future of the family. The influential work of Talcott Parsons focused on change and adaptation as opposed to demise and disintegration, suggesting that a more contained, nuclear family had evolved as a response to the needs of the modern industrial society (Parsons 1956). According to Parsons, as the economy became increasingly differentiated from the family, and the need for a specialised, mobile labour force grew, isolated nuclear families were freed from the obligations of wider kin and were therefore better able to adapt to the requirements of industrial society. From Parsons' perspective, the family evolved from fulfilling the purpose of economic production and consumption, to performing the less distinct, but equally important role of socialising children and stabilising adults within its boundaries. This functionalist analysis was founded on clear sex role distinctions, with the female bearing and caring for children within the household and the male providing for the needs of the family, mediating between the outside world and the inner domestic unit. For Parsons, this

nuclear structure was ideally matched to meet the requirements of modern society, and as such was not feasibly replaceable.

Consequently the family was perceived as the lynchpin of social cohesion, civilisation and order, and as a structure embodying the moral health of society. Concerns about the impact of industrialisation on community and family life were focused not just on the privations of those forced to adapt to harsh new working conditions, but also on a feared moral decline associated with rampant individualism. As Janet Finch (1994) notes, anxiety over the demise of working class filial affection is evident from at least the nineteenth century, reflecting the reluctance of the wealthier classes to accept financial responsibility for the destitute. The notion that industrialisation weakened a working class sense of responsibility for 'their own' was explored in the work of another prominent functionalist theorist. William Goode applied the principles of bargaining and reciprocity to family relationships, suggesting that individual members would moderate the extent of their family obligations in line with the perceived returns on emotional and practical investments (Goode 1963). Goode argued that in industrial society family members gained most from limiting their commitments to the nuclear family unit. In Goode's view, wider kinship networks were most common in upper class families as a result of the power and influence that can be gained through maintaining family connections. In contrast, working class networks were seen as offering few incentives to sustain their existence.

This picture of the industrialised working class as fragmented and isolated from their wider family and kin was seriously undermined by a number of well known studies of community conducted in the 1950s and 60s. Michael Young and Peter Willmott's (1957) classic study of family and kinship in a working class area of East London challenged established views of the urban poor by revealing the crucial significance of extended kinship networks in the day-to-day lives of families. They demonstrated the key role that mothers in particular played in mediating and maintaining three-generational family structures, which were characterised by a system of mutual aid and support. Other research lent weight to this re-discovery of working class solidarity, such as Raymond Firth's study of a poor district of South London, Peter Townsend's focus on the family life of older people, and Colin Rosser and Christopher Harris' study of family and social change in Swansea (Firth 1956; Townsend 1957; Rosser and Harris 1965). Arguments that the demise of kinship was more applicable to middle class families because of their greater geographical mobility and increased financial security were also refuted by research. Young and Willmott's (1975) subsequent study of a largely middle class London suburb indicated that while kin were more widely dispersed geographically, regular contacts were maintained. Raymond Firth and colleagues (1969) also focused on middle class families, emphasising the continued significance of selected or chosen kin relationships.

These studies were extremely influential and spurred a new interest in social networks, communities and more specifically kinship systems. Although such topics eventually fell out of favour they have recently been revived by social capital theorists attempting to measure the value of social connectedness. The major focus in the 1960s and '70s was on determining the norms of obligation and reciprocity governing such relationships, in the context of a general consensus that kinship ties are the closest and most committed (Crow and Allan 1994). The bonds of biology and marriage were seen as generating particular relationships characterised by responsibility, moral rights and trust, but there was little explanation of why this might be the case. Exchange theory was drawn on to theorise these frameworks of support and reciprocity, with the suggestion that the

cultural expectations associated with ascribed kinship relations sustained more indirect or diffuse levels of exchange between family members than might be expected from friends or neighbours.

Studies highlighting the continued significance of kinship represented a major challenge to functionalist accounts of the adaptive, isolated nuclear family, but historical research uncovered evidence that was yet more undermining of this theory. Focusing on household composition and drawing on nominal census records, Peter Laslett (1972) found little indication of the 'classic' large extended family that was thought to have existed prior to industrialisation. Instead of a decline in numbers of family members living together his research pointed to a continuity of nuclear family sized households since the sixteenth century. This historical approach was also pursued by Michael Anderson (1971), who found evidence to suggest that rather than precipitating the demise of the extended family, industrialisation appeared to strengthen kinship bonds. In studying data from the 1851 Preston census, Anderson discovered a significant increase in households containing extended family members, predominantly amongst the poor working classes. He interpreted this rise in average household size in terms of the pressures of industrialisation, highlighting the dominance of the cotton industry in Preston and the associated hardships and struggles endured by those who worked in the mills. According to Anderson, kinship ties and networks amongst the nineteenth century working classes were necessarily strengthened to insure against the everyday experience of low wages, periods of unemployment, sickness and death.

As David Morgan (1975) pointed out, these early sociological debates around the structure and function of family and kinship were contained within an implicit ideological framework which at best deflected critical attention away from family as a concept, and at worst sanctioned and promoted particular ways of living. Functionalist accounts presented the family as having successfully adapted to meet the needs of modern society, thereby positioning the nuclear unit as a natural and desirable culmination of social evolution. The alternative focus on kinship associated with community studies promoted a cosy, romanticised view of family as a secure, supportive network centred around 'Mum'. There was little space within these analyses to acknowledge the darker side of family life, and by the 1970s this uncritical version of family as a success story was under attack from various directions.

The most systematic and comprehensive challenge to the ideology of family emerged from the early second wave feminist movement. At the forefront of this critique was a rejection of the notion that family structures are in any way natural, inevitable or necessary, and an alternative emphasis on the central role of the family in reproducing patriarchy and capitalism. Landmark feminist thinkers such as Kate Millett (1970), Juliet Mitchell (1971) and Ann Oakley (1972) argued that the nuclear family existed as a major site of the subordination of women, demonstrating that taken for granted beliefs about roles and responsibilities within the household actively denied women opportunities in wider society. Some feminists, such as Margaret Benston (1972), applied a Marxist analysis of family as crucial to the maintenance of capitalism, demonstrating how women are exploited as a source of unpaid labour in the home. Others such as Shulamith Firestone (1972) went further, arguing that sexual division of labour predates the economic class system and as such points to an enduring class struggle between men and women. While seventies feminists produced a contrasting array of theories concerning the family and what to do about it, the study of intimate relationships was revolutionised by a number of key feminist insights.

Firstly, in drawing attention to the ideological construction of the family, feminist analyses attacked the normative dimensions underpinning notions of roles and functions. By revealing how socially constructed gendered assumptions lay at the heart of the family, assumptions concerning what was natural and inevitable were re-cast as 'knowledge' used to maintain power. Feminist work at this time was characterised by a more general critique of the principles of science as a male-defined framework which ignored or marginalised women's perspectives. This critique also encompassed a questioning of the notions of neutrality and objectivity, arguing that reason cannot be separated from emotion or subjective interest. By highlighting the way claims to objectivism naturalised particular embedded perspectives, issues of gender and power were implicated in the process of understanding families.

Secondly, feminists drew attention to the ideological separation between notions of public and private, showing how this structures understandings of family and social organisation more generally. By demonstrating the significance of this duality in constructing male and female sex roles, feminists highlighted the exclusion of women from the public realm on the basis of their reproductive responsibilities within the private sphere of the family (see Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974). As Carole Pateman (1988) argued, the notion that a woman's proper place was in the home was maintained through a doctrine of 'separate but equal', effectively obscuring the patriarchal power men wield in both spheres. The deconstruction of this public/private dichotomy was embodied in the feminist slogan 'the personal is political', which demanded recognition of power dynamics in all aspects of men and women's lives. Debates about the meanings and interpretations of public and private raged through the 1980s and '90s, with feminist perspectives ranging from a commitment to abolish the private sphere altogether (Eisenstein 1981), to a call for greater recognition and respect of the private as a crucial aspect of women's lived experience (Edwards 1993; Ribbens 1994). Such debates shaped a more critical approach to the study of family, adding new theoretical dimensions.

Thirdly, feminists challenged the implicit assumption in functionalist theories that family is the site of harmonious, well adapted social interactions. Basing their analysis on a politics of experience feminists showed how family ideals of domestic privacy and autonomy could conceal and facilitate acts of cruelty, oppression and injustice. In particular, studies revealing the widespread incidence of domestic violence, rape and child abuse within the home domain undermined the previously dominant image of family as a safe, comfortable haven. As Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh (1982) pointed out, the recognition of violence and abuse as common features of family life demonstrated the vulnerability of those within the home and the very different ways in which men and women might experience family. Critiques of family as a success story also resonated with a group of radical, phenomenological psychiatrists, headed by R.D. Laing, Aaron Esterson and David Cooper. In a number of classic studies, the experience of 'schizophrenia' was explored and theorised within the context of everyday family interactions (Laing and Esterson 1970; Cooper 1972; Laing 1971). Viewed as a devastating indictment of family as an institution, these accounts emphasise the stifling distortion of personal freedom and individuality associated with ordinary family relationships. From this radical phenomenological perspective, the close knit intimacy of the nuclear family is comprised of tension, fear and conflict, such that the symptoms of schizophrenia represent intelligible, adaptive behaviour.

These critical evaluations of family emerged in the context of rising rates of divorce, cohabitation and birth outside of marriage, which led many to predict the eventual collapse of the nuclear family

as an institution. For a variety of feminists and other radical thinkers, any decline in such a stultifying and essentially oppressive institution was to be welcomed as enabling more egalitarian alternatives to the family to develop. For more traditionalist, conservative thinkers, however, changes in the structure and status of family relationships were an indication of a wider moral malaise needing urgent reform. As with earlier commentaries hailing the demise of family and kinship, the consequences of family breakdown were seen as disastrous for society, threatening civilisation and social order. But by the 1970s and '80s it was the so called 'permissive 60s', rather than industrialisation, that was identified as the root problem. These concerns were the focus of right wing political think tanks both in Britain and America, and became central to the development of the political and economic philosophy associated with New Right thinking.

In defining themselves as 'pro-family', New Right thinkers positioned themselves against liberal views on sexuality, marriage, childrearing and welfare reform, arguing that such moral laxity had led to a host of social problems including crime, truancy, unemployment and even the spread of AIDS. At the heart of the New Right critique was the feminist challenge to patriarchal family values, which was seen as undermining the foundations of society. Women were portrayed as increasingly placing their own needs above those of their children and husbands, facilitated by the availability of welfare support enabling them to live independently. Feminism and welfare benefits were also seen as undermining men's incentive to work and provide for their families, encouraging them to abandon their domestic responsibilities. From the perspective of the New Right, this lack of moral responsibility is inextricably linked to an economic decline associated with greater dependency on the welfare state and an unstable social order. For example, the prominent New Right thinker Charles Murray's theory of the 'underclass' argues that a rise in 'illegitimacy' and single parenthood is producing a new breed of crime prone, promiscuous young people rooted in a 'culture of dependency' (Murray 1994). Murray and many other proponents claimed that halting the growth of this emerging underclass was essential to prevent economic decline, and suggested this could only be achieved through government policy that supports and enforces traditional family responsibility (Mead 1986; Murray 1990, 1994; Dennis and Erdos 1992; Davies 1993).

While right wing thinkers argued for a reverse in the tide of social change, and feminists campaigned for greater transformation, others maintained a more optimistic view of marriage and domesticity. As Janet Finch and Penny Mansfield (1991) point out, the notion of 'companionate marriage' emerged as an ideal amid a post-war concern to consolidate and stabilise family life. Emphasis was placed on the principles of 'partnership', sharing and greater equality between the sexes, and the advent of a new, more home-centred family life. Sociological writings, particularly the community studies of the 1950s and 60s, commonly drew on and reproduced this companionate ideology when theorising about family. For example, Young and Willmott's study of *The Symmetrical Family* (1975) claimed that married couples were increasingly moving towards a egalitarian partnership characterised by a relationship of sharing and negotiation. Based on their studies of family life in London, Young and Willmott identified the prototype of this symmetrical partnership in affluent, middle class Woodford, and argued that this more 'progressive' family structure was in the process of filtering down to working class sections of society. Young and Willmott's conclusions were devised in the context of various other studies highlighting the emergence of strongly held values of intimate, shared domestic life (Bott 1957; Rosser and Harris 1965; Gorer 1971), projecting a theme of social progress that sharply contrasted with more critical accounts of family.

From this more optimistic viewpoint, rising rates of separation and divorce were not seen as indicative of a weakening of the ideal of marriage and the family, but a feature of the changing nature of marriage. Conjugal relationships, it was argued, are now associated with higher expectations reflecting a striving for a satisfying, companionate partnership. As David Morgan (1985) notes, this shift towards viewing marriage as a personal relationship rather than part of the social institution of family coincided with the emergence of a new medical model of family, characterised by the notion that marital problems can be assessed, diagnosed and treated. Morgan points to the expansion and professionalisation of structures aimed at supporting and sustaining marriage and the family, focusing in particular on the relatively recent growth of specialised counselling and therapy. Consequently, with the rise of the ideal of companionate marriage came the notion that intimacy is achieved and sustained rather than simply ascribed through marital status. In an attempt to explore the attitudes, expectations and experiences of married couples, a number of studies highlighted the significance that individuals accorded to their partnerships and how they associated the concept of successful marriage with effort. In her study of the way married couples manage their lives, Janet Askham (1984) concluded that couples were highly committed to maintaining their relationships, and worked hard at negotiating and compromising. Similarly, Penny Mansfield and Jean Collard (1988) found high levels of aspiration and determination amongst newly married couples.

The sociological research on intimate relationships during the 1980s focused heavily on the interpersonal relations between married couples, marking a move away from a previous preoccupation with the functions and structures of family and kinship (Finch and Morgan 1991). Nevertheless, feminist and Marxist theory also generated new analyses of household labour highlighting the economic significance of women's unpaid work, and problematising traditional formulations of home versus work. The gendered aspects of household management were also explored in terms of financial organisation (Pahl 1989), food consumption (Charles and Kerr 1988) and the division of labour within the household (Yeandle 1984). Such analyses reflected a sociological desire to take a closer, more critical look at family and household dynamics as they are lived.

By the end of the 1980s, however, there was an increasing awareness of the huge gaps and omissions in the available research literature on intimate relations. The almost exclusive fixation on heterosexual couples and wider family relationships as the primary source of intimacy was challenged and effectively critiqued as narrow and normative. In addition, simplistic understandings of family as an objectively knowable entity were increasingly undermined by analyses which emphasised the complex, contingent lived reality of family to its members (Morgan 1996; Gubrium and Holstein 1990; Bernardes 1997). Jean Duncombe and Dennis Marsden (1993, 1995) showed how the discourses of love and intimacy are played out in households, emphasising the gendered, asymmetric nature of emotional behaviour in the context of close personal relationships. Writers such as Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein (1990) emphasised the discursive nature of family, demonstrating how relationships are constructed and maintained through routine communication and dialogue. Furthermore, David Morgan (1996, 1999) introduced the concept of 'family practices', focusing on family as an interactional process as opposed to a particular structure or set of social ties. Morgan drew attention to the way everyday activities constitute family experience, reframing family as something you do rather than something you are. Janet Finch and Jennifer Mason's (1993) study of kin obligations underlined this understanding of family as interactive

processes, revealing how responsibility to family members was contingent and negotiated rather than normatively defined.

In this context, an alternative definition of intimacy emerged with a realisation of the under-researched significance of same-sex relationships, close friendships and children's agency within and outside their family relationships. With previous understandings of meaningful personal relationships centring on the role of necessity, obligation and social contract, a new interpretation of intimacy was founded on the ideals underpinning companionate marriage. As Lynn Jamieson (1998) notes, the term intimacy has come to mean a specific kind of association characterised by openness, the sharing of thoughts and the expression of feelings. This conceptualisation of what she terms 'disclosing intimacy' enabled a consideration of the quality rather than the structure or status of relationships, and as such provided a new direction for sociological research.

From Social Obligations to Negotiated Intimacies?

The rise to cultural ascendancy of the notion of disclosing intimacy was both recorded and fuelled by a particular theoretical approach within the social sciences which emphasised a changed consciousness in Western societies. Prominent sociological theorists such as Anthony Giddens, and Ulrick Beck and Elizabeth Beck Gernsheim have attempted to document the emergence of a new social order of 'reflexive modernity', which they claim has led to a transformation in the experience of the personal. They point to the way that structural frameworks underpinning heterosexual partnerships have loosened and blurred over the years, with women gaining greater financial independence through participation in the labour market and increasing numbers of couples divorcing or separating.

Giddens describes a post traditional society in which men and women, progressively freed from the roles and constraints associated with traditional social ties, are compelled reflexively to create their selves through day-to-day decisions (Giddens 1991, 1992). This conscious process of biographical construction extends to personal relationships, which are evaluated and conducted from a position of self awareness. According to Giddens, people are increasingly seeking intimate connections with others that are sustained on the basis of mutual knowledge and understanding. Such 'pure relationships' are entered into for their own sake and are sustained only on the grounds that each party continues to derive sufficient personal satisfaction. Giddens also notes how the fragmenting of established social structures combined with the uncoupling of sex and reproduction have prompted the emergence of a new kind of 'plastic sexuality' expressed outside of conventional boundaries or orthodoxies. Such 'transformations of intimacy' are viewed both as a response to and a feature of social change.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's 'individualisation thesis' articulates a similar picture, suggesting that a new age of modernity has replaced the old predictabilities and certainties of industrial society, bringing with it new risks and opportunities (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 2002). They argue that these changes have fundamentally altered the experience of love, sexuality and family life, placing intimacy at the heart of detraditionalised life. Liberated from precepts and conventions individuals become authors of their own lifescripts, but while this process of 'individualisation' weakens and challenges traditional social ties of kinship and marriage, love and intimacy are ever more sought after to ease the isolation of this autonomy: 'For individuals who have to invent or find

their own social setting, love becomes the central pivot giving meaning to their lives' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995: 170).

Such theories offer a broadly optimistic account of the changing nature of personal relationships. Many theorists argue that increased self reflexivity leads to a 'democratisation of personhood' (Skolnick 1992) that has an impact on wider political and ethical frameworks. For example, Ken Plummer (1995) uses the concept of 'intimate citizenship' to describe how political claims have been made through the articulation of personal and sexual narratives. He suggests that the various discourses of intimacy that circulate in the late modern world offer the potential for new forms of emancipation, shaping new public repertoires around which communities may mobilise. Jeffrey Weeks (1995) also adopts a broader view, exploring the potential for 'radical humanism', a position built on a respect and validation of difference that he argues has become more possible in the light of shifts in the sexual landscape.

For Giddens (1991, 1992) the emergence of 'pure relationships' and 'plastic sexuality' brings greater equality between individuals, undermining traditional gender divisions and challenging notions of appropriateness and convention. He suggests that as relationships are no longer grounded in obligation and necessity there is greater opportunity to negotiate and create more egalitarian, fulfilling associations. Beck and Beck Gernsheim (1995, 2002) largely accord with this view, claiming that 'individualisation' has weakened prescribed gender roles and widened the scope for men and women to shape their own lives and relationships. They do, however, qualify this view by suggesting that until men are more willing to embrace these changes, inequality will continue to breed discontent among women. Other writers have also focused on a perceived democratisation of intimate relationships, highlighting potential benefits of developing a heightened sense of self in relation to others. Ray Pahl suggests that people are currently in the process of refashioning relationships characterised by dependence and obligation into new 'confluent' associations in which 'men and women are gradually learning to talk to one another as equals' (2000: 102).

The literature on intimacy and self reflexivity focuses, in the main, on adult relationships, incorporating an analysis of contemporary family relationships within a thesis of increasing 'individualisation' and 'democratisation'. Theorists focus on the couple as the 'core' of the family (Giddens 1999), claiming that intimacy and love have become a new lynch pin as the economic role of the family has declined. With kinship roles and responsibilities no longer associated with normatively defined obligations, it is claimed that principles of choice and agency move to the centre of family relationships. It is suggested that, relieved of their traditional roles, many family members are forging experimental and creative associations out of the new challenges and opportunities with which they are presented. According to Judith Stacey (1990) these 'brave new families' are pioneers of the postmodern family condition, struggling to embrace diversity and flux, and to generate more egalitarian relationships. From this perspective, the moral framework of the family is in the process of radical alteration, evolving to encompass new democratised values of negotiation, autonomy and mutual respect (Giddens 1992, 1999).

Many theorists have placed lesbian and gay relationships at the forefront of this cultural shift towards democratisation. Stacey (1996) argues that gay and lesbian families represent an ideal model of postmodern kinship because their conscious efforts to devise intimate relationships are freed from the constraints and the benefits of traditional patterns of family life. Without cultural

guidelines and institutional supports same-sex couples are compelled to creatively fashion new forms of association. Research carried out by Jeffrey Weeks, Brian Heaphy and Catherine Donovan (2001) confirms this sense among same sex-couples themselves. They note the prevalence of an 'egalitarian ideal' (Peplau et al. 1996; Dunne 1997) in accounts given by non-heterosexual couples, with notions of equality and democratic negotiation being emphasised as characteristic of their own and other same-sex relationships.

For Giddens these ethics are also applicable to children, as part of the move away from traditional times when children were expected to be seen and not heard. He argues that within the framework of an intimate democracy children's voices should count, even though parents need to retain overall authority over them. According to Giddens, this is legitimated through 'in principle equality' based on the notion that the child would agree if she or he could access adult knowledge (Giddens 1999: 5). Thus, children as well as adults derive an entitlement to participate in this more egalitarian version of family.

Despite this positive focus on democracy and equality, intimacy theorists also recognise and discuss the difficulties and disadvantages of detraditionalised life, describing how the effort of achieving and maintaining intimate relationships in a context of 'individualisation' generates complexities and hazards that can drive people apart. According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, being yourself while being close to others requires a intricate balancing act that often breaks down under the weight of these competing demands. Trends towards cohabitation, separation and re-partnership are interpreted as a consequence of a shift in family relations from a 'community of need' defined by ascribed ties and obligations, to 'elective affinities' (Beck-Gernsheim 1998). In this context contemporary family relationships are conditional, characterised by risk and fragility as opposed to rules and rituals. Individuals are thus caught in something of a paradox, with love and intimacy becoming simultaneously ever more central as an ideal, and yet ever more difficult to secure and maintain (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995).

Many theorists have expressed concern about the impact of individualisation on personal morality and society as a whole (Bellah et al. 1985; Tester 1997; Fevre 2000; Stivers 2002). Anxieties centre on the rise in an ethic of self interest and an absence of concrete values to guide actions and relationships. From this perspective the forces of detraditionalisation have led to the 'demoralisation' of Western culture (Fevre 2000), leaving us confused, unhappy and lacking in purpose. In terms of intimate relationships such writers have emphasised the emotional costs of contemporary sexual relationships in an individualised, detraditionalised world. Men and women are depicted as casualties in the quest for love and intimacy on their own terms, suffering frustration, disillusionment and insecurity. According to Ralph Fevre, raised expectations of relationships have resulted in 'petty warfare and mental cruelty' with 'unhappy marriages increasingly replaced with divorces as people go off to try their luck a second, third or fourth time in the hope of finding someone who thinks in the right way' (2000: 101). From the perspective of Fevre and other authors (Lasch 1977; Sennett 1998) the economic rationality of late capitalism has pervaded the domestic sphere and corrupted the way in which intimate social relations are experienced. Trust and social cohesion are identified as the casualties of this cultural shift. This negative interpretation portrays the increased significance of intimacy as a symptom of the self-obsessed, atomised nature of consumer culture. Positive values of love, care and responsibility are presented as unsustainable in a culture promoting choice and personal freedom at the expense of long term commitments to family and parenting. Social breakdown is the predicted outcome.

As Lynn Jamieson (1998) notes, such pessimistic accounts of detraditionalisation mirror the fears of those who have been predicting the collapse of the family and moral standards for over a century. She also highlights the links between this form of theorising and New Right critiques of the welfare state as an instrument facilitating the demise of family responsibility. During the early 1990s New Right ideology was crystallised in the Conservative government's 'back to basics' campaign to promote the virtues of the traditional family. The ensuing vilification of alternative family structures (lone mothers in particular) was softened by the incoming Labour government, but the central role accorded to the family as the protector of morality remained. There was a shift from a neo-liberal stance of blaming over-involvement by the state for the decline in traditional values, to a social democratic critique of the corroding influence of a market-based philosophy, competition and a 'me first' mentality, which were was seen as undermining the co-operation and reciprocity necessary to sustain families and communities. Drawing on the work of Anthony Giddens and communitarian philosophers such as Amitai Etzioni (1994), the successive New Labour governments sought to address the perceived threat that individualisation poses to family ties and social cohesion. Their so called 'third way' approach aims to balance individual rights with social responsibility through an emphasis on both moral tolerance and personal obligation. In terms of family policy this has been expressed through an endorsement of heterosexual marriage as an ideal, within an overall rhetoric of progressive liberalism and acceptance of other family forms (Barlow et al. 2002).

From the perspective of Giddens (1998), 'third way' politics represents a method of facilitating the transformation of intimacy that is characteristic of post-traditional society. People must learn to embrace their individualised citizenship and become 'responsible risk takers'. Giddens firmly refutes the notion that the family is in decline, but is equally adamant that there can be no return to the bygone age of traditional family life. He argues, 'there is only one story to tell about the family today, and that is democracy', achieved through values of 'equality, autonomy, decision making through communication and freedom from violence' (p.93). The pressures and disappointments that individualisation generates are recognised as provoking longings for old, traditional certainties, evident in campaigns to preserve 'family values'. Although such desires to return to the security of general moral laws and external control are recognised they are generally dismissed as a vain attempt to turn the clock back (Giddens 1992; Stacey 1996; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995).

According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), nostalgia for relationships characterised by permanence and stability are reflected in the significance accorded to children in a post-traditional age. Having experienced the frail, insecure nature of intimate relationships with adults, people are portrayed as seeking to establish a more reliable bond with a child. Love for a child is perceived as offering 'a tie which is more elemental, profound and durable than any other in this society, (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995: 73). Carol Smart and Bren Neale (1999) also note how divorce and separation encourages parents to re-evaluate their lives with a sense that relationships with children are enduring and intrinsically satisfying in contrast to the tenuous, provisional nature of adult partnerships. Drawing on the work of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, they discuss how post-divorce parenting has become a new site of gender conflict, exposing taken for granted inequalities within heterosexual relationships and forcing fathers to re-assess and re-value their relationships with their children.

Carol Smart and colleagues (2001) focus more specifically on the way that children, as reflexive agents, experience and manage everyday life in a post-divorce family. They argue that rather than viewing children as victims of their parents' divorce or separation, family breakdown may be seen as offering greater opportunities for the democratisation of relationships between children and parents. According to them, divorce and separation result from a problematization of family relationships, which encourages a re-evaluation of roles and practices within households. They suggest that this cultural space for reflection enables children to become more actively involved in family negotiations and decision making, and conclude that post-divorce structural arrangements for children matter less than the extent to which children themselves are able to participate in matters that affect them. From this point of view, contemporary experiences of family as fluid and unstable are compensated by the greater respect and autonomy accorded to individual members.

Despite the widespread take up of intimacy theories within the realm of sociology, this approach to studying personal relationships has not gone unchallenged. Feminists in particular have critiqued the assumptions underlying the twin concepts of individualisation and democratisation, emphasising the very particular understanding of personhood such theories espouse. Feminist writers such as Carol Gilligan (1982) and Seyla Benhabib (1986) have long critiqued the concept of the 'autonomous ego' that has underpinned Western approaches to social theory, questioning the premise of the individuated, disembodied subject. Instead they have formulated conceptions of autonomy that emphasise mutuality, relatedness and recognition of the needs of the other. As Selma Sevenhuijsen (2002) suggests, this relational ontology is encapsulated in a feminist 'ethic of care' which offers an alternative to the particular interpretations of subjectivity, morality and justice that grounds the work of Giddens and other intimacy theorists. Viewed from this alternative standpoint individuals exist because of, and through their relationships with others, and thus can not be regarded as separate, individualised subjects. Liberal, contractual interpretations of democracy and justice based on the notion of the self governing individual are thus rejected for a focus on selves as embedded in a network of care and responsibility. Rather than exploring how separate individuals negotiate and maintain connections with others, feminists taking an ethic of care approach assume inter-dependency and examine how personal freedom is articulated within a framework of obligation and relational morality.

Feminists have also argued that the contemporary interest in intimacy and personal relationships has eclipsed the gendered dimensions of parent-child relationships. Jane Ribbens McCarthy and Rosalind Edwards (2002) point to the way in which debates about public and private spheres have shifted, marginalising a previous feminist concern with the private sphere of family and domestic household. They draw attention to a re-framing of the private in terms of intimate adult relationships and show how intergenerational relationships between children and adults are inappropriately theorised within this context. As they state of Giddens' analysis of the democratic family, 'the effect of this may be to disguise and obscure the actual (institutionalised) positions in which children and parents are placed, in the process taking adult-adult relationships as the model for adult-child interactions in an abstract line of reasoning that seems to have little bearing on the lived experiences of parents and children in contemporary western societies' (Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards 2002: 206). It has also been argued that the principles of discussion and negotiation associated with the 'democratic family' resonate with White middle class parents, while pathologising alternative understandings and practices of working class and ethnic minority parents (Edwards et al. 2002).

As well as neglecting the significant and highly gendered and classed activity of childrearing, intimacy theorists have also been accused of ethnocentrism in their portrayal of individualism as a newly emerging characteristic of personal relationships. Harry Goulbourne and Mary Chamberlain (1998) claim that choice and negotiation are long established features of African-Caribbean family and community relations. But while some might argue that White western society is following a more individualised African-Caribbean tradition, others question the extent to which intimacy theories reflect the current state of personal relationships. In a comprehensive review of the literature, Lynn Jamieson (1998) found little evidence to support the thesis that individualisation or democratisation is an emerging feature of contemporary relationships. Instead she highlights how experiences of intimacy are wider and more variable than the ideal of the pure relationship. Although Jamieson notes the significance and potential resonance of public discourses of disclosing intimacy, she views such accounts as partial and selective, obscuring the contradictory complexity of lived private lives. This view is supported by a number of empirical studies demonstrating an enduring attachment to ideals of family and commitment (Jorden et al. 1994; Edwards et al. 2002; Weeks et al. 2001).

The premise of detraditionalisation has also been widely critiqued, with writers questioning the extent to which expectations and certainties characterised the past, while simultaneously contesting the extent to which traditions and long standing beliefs have been shed (Heelas et al. 1996). They point to the extensive evidence refuting the periodisation of Western history in terms of a clean break with '*the* traditional' (Heelas et al. 1996). For example, Graham Crow (2002) claims there was considerably more fluidity and diversity in past intimate relationships than is recognised, and highlights the continued significance of structural inequality in constraining individual freedom and the exercise of democracy. For Barbara Adam (1996) the concept of detraditionalisation is unhelpfully grounded in the oppositional thought tradition of the enlightenment, with an ephemeral present defined and differentiated from a fixed 'othered' past. She argues that tradition remains a central feature of contemporary society and that reflexivity is, and has always been, fundamental to human nature. From Adam's perspective, 'social theory needs to encompass theoretically the mutual interpenetration of continuously changing multiple new and old developments' (1996: 143). This would require the replacement of a 'before and after' approach with a contextualised, embedded focus on the multilayered complexity of every day life. In terms of theorising intimate relationships, a focus on specificities, continuities and the interpenetration of past, present and future would replace a preoccupation with identifying and defining social change.

Nikolas Rose also challenges the linear narrative of detraditionalisation, describing it as a 'sociological "just so story" of how the human being got its individuality' (1996: 301). He traces this narrative of individualisation back to the work of Jacob Burckhardt in 1860, and suggests that contemporary sociologists and social historians are writing a 'postmodern sequel' in which their own age is demarcated through reference to an erosion of stabilities and certainties. Rose takes an alternative, Foucauldian approach, arguing that a critical understanding of self and others must focus on the practices through which human beings are made subjects (1989, 1996). Rather than drawing on broad structural events such as industrialisation to explain how individuals experience themselves and others, he focuses on the means by which selves become known. Rose asks, 'to what extent, and in what ways, are persons understood and managed, by themselves and others, in relation to values that are accorded to an internal self?' (1996: 305). Thus, he concludes we have not seen a detraditionalisation of the self, merely the ever evolving modification of methods of regulation and subjectification. Political systems and power relations have penetrated the self,

constituting, sustaining and governing individuals and social relationships at the level of the personal. From this perspective, theories of intimate relations represent part of this folding of authority into the subject, presupposing and reinforcing particular ways of being and relating to others.

Breakdown, Democratisation or Continuity?

Broadly speaking, current literature on intimacy corresponds to three major perspectives on the state of contemporary personal relationships. Although theorists may sometimes draw on more than one perspective, accounts of family life and social relationships emphasise the key themes of breakdown and demoralisation, democratisation and egalitarianism, or continuity and enduring power relations. From the first standpoint, de-traditionalisation and the concomitant process of individualisation have undermined the values and identities associated with family life, thereby weakening social ties and damaging societal cohesion more generally. Theorists who adhere to this perspective highlight increases in divorce, separation and people living alone as evidence that isolation and individual self interest have intensified at the expense of principles of responsibility and obligation. While traditional identities were forged from the pre-determined roles of wife/mother or husband/father, the late twentieth century is viewed as marking a shift towards a new ethic of self determination. Such theorists argue that values of fidelity, commitment and duty are being usurped by an ideology of authenticity, autonomy and personal freedom. Their writings paint a gloomy picture of the future of human relations and society as a whole, suggesting that we are moving towards a dangerous, atomised, amoral existence. Principles deemed essential to the social fabric such as reciprocity and trust are viewed as casualties of individualisation, threatening not just the family but the underpinnings of social life. Although such writers may differ over their analysis of the exact causes of this demoralisation they converge in their depiction of contemporary personal relations as problematic and in need of urgent reform.

In contrast, theorists who describe an emerging democratisation of personal relationships perceive social change in a positive light, emphasising a progressive move towards more egalitarian associations. From this viewpoint the detraditionalisation of social life has freed people from the fixed, constrained social roles of the past, allowing them to create new, more fulfilling relationships based on mutual satisfaction rather than contractual obligation. With intimate relationships placed at the centre of human life, traditional, contractual notions of family are regarded as having lost their relevance. Thus increases in divorce and separation reflect the rise of the 'pure relationship', with people striving for new associations based on democratic values of respect and negotiation. Rather than viewing contemporary personal relations as in decline, this approach emphasises transformation and adaptation, with increasing individualisation seen in terms of greater opportunity and potential to create deeper, mutually satisfying connections. With roles and identities no longer fixed, individuals generate their own relationship rules, leading to a wide diversity in the way intimate associations are expressed and lived. Theorists writing from this perspective employ an alternative understanding of trust and reciprocity, showing how individualisation has altered rather than destroyed their practice. 'Pure' or 'confluent' relationships are seen as having transcended the instrumental, interdependent characteristic of previous, traditional social ties. Instead of defining reciprocity in terms of measured and regulated obligation through which trust is maintained, theorists emphasise the mutual benefits people gain from entering into relationships that are freely

sustained on the basis of shared satisfaction. Consequently, trust is not seen as an outcome of social relationships, but as an essential component underpinning the transformation of intimacy.

Although these first two contrasting positions dominate current depiction of families, there is another, albeit marginalised, perspective. For theorists who reject claims of breakdown and democratisation, the concept of social change in personal relationships is profoundly overstated. Many social theorists question the empirical basis for such narratives of decline or transformation, highlighting the danger of interpreting the past and predicting the future through rigid, theoretically tinted lenses. They would argue that such positions reflect and reinforce politically grounded versions of the truth that distort or obscure the real workings of power. The ideological underpinnings of narratives of social change are clearly identifiable. Those who adopt a demoralisation standpoint tend to endorse a conservative, reformist agenda promoting values of responsibility and duty at the expense of social and economic inequities. Single mothers, same-sex parents and other non-conventional family forms are vilified as the embodiment of moral decline and depicted as threats to the very structure of society. Conversely, those who welcome individualisation as promising greater egalitarianism in intimate relations generate a view of equality and justice that operates independently from wider structural constraints. The democratisation of the family is hailed as a private, personal transformation, occurring in spite of the inequity and discrimination characterising the public sphere. As feminists and others have demonstrated, this optimistic account obfuscates not only the relationship between structural inequality and interpersonal dynamics, but also the enduring significance of gender in the organisation of domestic chores and childcare. For theorists who emphasise continuity, personal values and practices of trust and caring have remained relatively steady over the years, reflecting ingrained identities and power relationships.

Intimacy as Social Capital?

In terms of social theory, the three differing interpretations of the status of family life and intimate relations converge around the currently popular but loosely defined concept of social capital. The recent high profile given to social capital as a description of the social processes and practices individuals engage in reflects the wider pre-occupation with the notions of social change and individualisation. Concerns over a perceived demise in community relations and an associated decline in trust have generated a new interest in social capital as a framework for theorising and promoting social resources. Yet, while policy makers have embraced a particular model seen as strengthening social cohesion and offering a myriad of positive policy outcomes, conceptualisations of social capital vary considerably depending on the theoretical standpoint taken. The application of theories of social capital to family and other intimate relationships focuses on the resources and support that such associations generate and on the links between family members and broader sections of society.

The prominent theorist Robert Putnam (1993, 1995, 1996) has generated the most commonly referenced definition of social capital, focusing on trust and networks and explicitly linking their measurement to economic growth and the health and well being of populations. Putnam has concentrated his work in the main on localised communities, but along with other theorists (Newton 1997; Fukuyama 1999), he identifies family as a crucial foundation for social capital. As Ian Winter (2000) notes, these authors do not outline the precise way in which family life supports social

capital, suggesting a vague, generalised idealisation of family as providing positive role models. A more detailed consideration of the relationship between families and social capital is offered by James Coleman (1988), who has specifically analysed parent-child relationships as a feature of family social capital. His work focuses on the function of norms and networks, defining social capital in terms of the value individuals derive from it. Coleman and various other writers (Furstenberg and Hughes 1996; Amato 1998; Runyan et al. 1998) have attempted to measure the social capital available to children in their families and relate this to outcomes such as educational success, development or wellbeing. Such studies adopt a narrow and largely normative approach to families, evident in Coleman's negative assessment of households in which both parents work, and his description of the single parent family as 'the most prominent element of structural deficiency in modern families' (1988: 111).

This theoretical approach to understanding families and social capital resonates with the wider concerns about family breakdown and social fragmentation discussed earlier. Both Putnam and Coleman identify diminishing levels of social capital, linking this 'decapitalisation' (Putnam 1995) to perceived changes in family life. In his early work Putnam (1995) identifies loosening of bonds within the family as a major precipitator of the decline of US civic social capital, although he has more recently shifted culpability to television as undermining of trust and group membership (1996). For Coleman it is 'strong families and strong communities' (1988: 118) that generate social capital, features of social life that he argues are becoming increasingly less common. As Virginia Morrow (1999) points out, this mainstream social capital literature both draws on and feeds into a powerful political rhetoric about the damaging impact of family breakdown on children and society in general.

In contrast, theorists hailing the increasing democratisation of personal relationships view social capital in terms of transformation rather than demise. They see new forms of intimacy and mutuality emerging from a context of fluid, diverse social interactions, marking the generation of alternative social capital networks. For example Anthony Giddens (1999) argues that active trust is replacing the passive acceptance of ascribed obligation. This is characterised by the creation of, and investment in contingent social relationships in which trust is actively earned. Other theorists have stressed the significance of new values of friendship and choice in intimate relationships enabling the creation of alternative social networks (Plummer 1995; Weeks 1995; Weeks et al. 2001). Thus a decline in orthodox structures and communities can be seen as generating space for fresh, innovative personal connections founded on ethics of egalitarianism and autonomy. In an analysis of the HIV/AIDS crisis Jeffrey Weeks (1995) notes how, in the face of adversity, high levels of community-based activity became resources for 'collective self activity'. Others have also documented the development of new forms of association and social support emerging from within non-traditional, non-heterosexual social contexts (Plummer 1995). Although few intimacy theorists explicitly address the theoretical concept of social capital, their research points to a regeneration of social connectedness rather than a breakdown.

While those hailing the increasing democratisation of personal relationships challenge Putnam's assessment of the demise of co-operation and trust, another prominent social capital theorist offers an alternative view grounded in a recognition of inequality and power. Pierre Bourdieu's interpretation of social capital is similar in principle to Coleman's focus on the value generated from social connections (Bourdieu 1986). For Bourdieu, however, social capital is inextricably linked to a number of other central resources, or capitals, which determine an individual's standing as well as

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their likely trajectory. Along with social capital, Bourdieu stresses the significance of economic capital, cultural capital in the form of institutional status and personal values, and symbolic capital representing the construction the other capitals take when they are legitimated with symbolic power. Thus, although social capital derives from family and other social relationships, its type and content is inevitably shaped by the material, cultural and symbolic status of the individual and family concerned (Bourdieu 1990). From this perspective contemporary society is witnessing neither the erosion nor the transformation of social capital, but rather its consistent deployment in the reproduction of privilege and inequality.

Like Coleman, Bourdieu also sees families as motors of social capital, but focuses instead on enduring family practices that perpetuate inequity. Family members with access to symbolic and material resources are able to draw on these capitals in order to cement their advantage and transmit the benefits to their children. In contrast, the social capital possessed by the materially disadvantaged enables survival but offers little opportunity for increasing prosperity. Several researchers have drawn on this understanding of family and social capital, including Patricia Allatt (1993), who demonstrates how the minutiae of middle class parenting practice is founded on an active manipulation of social capital to ensure advantage is passed down through the generations. Inge Bates (2002) has also explored the dynamics of social capital transmission within families, highlighting the complex struggles of parents to ensure middle class benefits are reproduced.

Conclusion: Researching Intimate Relationships

Reviewing the available literature on families and other intimate relationships reveals the way accounts are contained and shaped by distinct conceptual frameworks. While intimacy was once understood in relation to an orthodox concern with the obligations and functions of family and kinship, contemporary definitions are characterised by a dominant focus on the ethics of friendship, negotiation and disclosure. Those who continue to perceive traditional family values as crucial to social and economic stability interpret this cultural shift in terms of loss, decline and gradual degeneration. Meanwhile, intimacy theorists are busy documenting positive gains for those engaged in less conventional personal relationships, stressing their potential for greater egalitarianism. Both these approaches seek to describe the consequences of change, constructing theories around the premise that social and economic transformations have profoundly influenced the way people relate to one another. A third, more prosaic position points to a largely enduring status quo, particularly in terms of gender and class dynamics. Although this view is largely marginalised within current sociological research, it represents an important counterbalance to dominant but unsubstantiated claims of atomisation or democratisation.

These three very different interpretations of the state of personal relations at the beginning of the twenty-first century highlight the methodological difficulties of researching the topic of intimacy. Each approach views family and other close relationships through a particular ideological lens, fixing the parameters for comprehension and explanation. Although notions of change may be set against assertions of continuity, these contrasting poles of understanding are contained within distinct theoretical boundaries that delineate the grounds upon which research is conducted. Even when basic premises about change are shared, studies of intimate relationships tend to be conducted from specific, established perspectives. Hence, although assumptions about social

change structure current research paradigms, perception of the direction and content of this change depends upon the political prism through which it is viewed. Furthermore, as many writers have noted, sociology is heavily implicated in the social landscape it portrays, with the language of social science readily filtering into everyday life and shaping the way people understand their experiences and relationships (Billig et al. 1988, Rose 1989). Such complexity points to the importance of grounded, contextualised studies of family and intimacy, while also highlighting the possibility of alternative, yet to be explored dimensions to the way people connect with one another.

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