

Conjuring up Traditions: atmospheres, eras and family
Christmases

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Introduction

‘Christmas is a time when you think very much of how it was for you and how you want it to be’

(Judith, research participant, aged 49)

This article explores some of the relational dynamics of family Christmases, with a particular emphasis on the ways in which ideas about tradition are brought into being or ‘conjured up’ in interpersonal settings and practices, and in people’s accounts and narratives of their families over time. We argue that in recognising and conjuring up practices and happenings as ‘traditions’, people are – amongst other things - creating a vivid and potent sense of personal family eras, atmospheres and family styles, whose moral currency is the subject of debate and negotiation. These are central in how generational dynamics and personal family histories take shape, and how memories are ‘indexed’ in and through time.

Sociologists have paid relatively little attention to the everyday realities of ‘traditions’ as they are experienced and narrated in people’s lives. This is ironic perhaps, given the significance of debates about detraditionalisation (Beck, Giddens & Lash 1994), the ‘post-traditional’ order (Giddens 1991), and the suggestion that tradition itself is an ‘invention of modernity’ (Giddens 1999). Yet most of the unpacking of what ‘family traditions’ in particular might mean in everyday life has been done by others, including psychologists describing family ritual, in a quasi-functionalist way, as an engine of family

harmony (Fiese et al 2002), by cultural historians exploring the changing meaning of particular celebrations (Gillis 1997; Pleck 2000), by social anthropologists and scholars of religion exploring the nature of ritual (Moore and Myerhoff 1977; Kellaheer, Prendergast and Hockey 2005), and by market researchers examining a range of 'consumption rituals' (Curasi et al. 2004; Lowrey and Otnes 2004).

Part of the reason for this is the tendency for sociological work to conceptualise tradition as a component in societal transformations that are painted on a grand canvas. Tradition enters this schema as a macro and 'known' force whose presence or absence, strengthening or decline, is envisioned as part of a set of causal or evolutionary processes. Tradition thus often becomes a synonym for the past or lingering remnants of the past: a past that is either idealised as a time of certainty, security, and communal feeling or decried as oppressive, conservative, and mechanical. In either case a 'false dichotomy' (Handler and Linnekin 1984: 273) is established wherein 'tradition' (or 'traditional roles' and 'traditional society') are fixed and static and stand in contrast to contemporary flux and reflexivity.

We want to suggest, however, that if we focus only on imagining and deploying a notion of tradition as a macro process or 'thing' that operates in global systems as a referent to an idealised past, we risk missing some of its more interesting in-vivo features. In this article, therefore, we do not attempt a full analysis of the macro operations of traditions but instead we explore how people speak of and engage with personal family traditions – family

Christmases in particular – and what else is ‘going on’, sociologically and relationally speaking, when they do so. We are especially interested in ‘the relational’, and specifically in how traditions are enacted and encountered through dynamics of relationality in and through time. Our interest here runs counter to much sociological work on traditions, most of which focuses on the cultural, the collective, or the individual, but rarely on the relational. We shall argue that people conjure up or bring traditions to life both in their personal narratives and in the relational practices and experiences to which they refer, and in this sense we follow those who want to see traditions as living and negotiated things rather than sets of rules that are followed or rejected (MacIntyre 1984; Smart and Shipman 2004; Smart 2007). In exploring what else is ‘going on’ when traditions are conjured up, we shall argue that at least some of the significance of family Christmas traditions lies in the ways that they are implicated in the *atmospheres*, *eras* and *generational* dynamics of family life.

Our focus therefore is not on what traditions are thought to achieve or accomplish in terms of solidarity, hierarchy, and social order (Bell 1997; Bloch 1989; Turner 1969), nor indeed what they contain or why they exist. Neither is it about why people (as individuals or collectives) follow traditions. Instead, we want to explore what is going on in terms of interpersonal and family relationships when people appeal to or invoke the idea of tradition. We want to understand the way that particular events, memories, associations, practices, things and sensory encounters are relationally enacted and

understood in everyday life as ‘traditions’, and what the implications of that are for family and generational relationships.

We base our arguments on data from the Family Backgrounds in Everyday Life Project.¹ Although the focus of the project was not ‘tradition’ per se – see the following discussion – the concept often played an important role in how people talked about their family backgrounds, about how they made sense of the evolution and transmission of their family practices, and of their life as part of a couple. Participants described a range of inherited or created practices, rituals, and seasonal celebrations. Of these, Christmas was the most prominent for the majority of the people in our study, with at least twenty-four of the twenty-seven participating couples observing Christmas and speaking about it in interview (the remaining three couples did not mention it). The prominence of Christmas is not surprising: Daniel Miller (1993) has observed that Christmas is a festival that has grown to the point where it appears to be taking over the world. Indeed, the power of Christmas is noticeable both in the adoption of Christmas iconography well outside ‘traditional’ Christian communities, often as part of syncretic commercial celebrations, and in its role as a normative practice that, according to Werbner (1996), renders non-participants in the (English) national rites of Christmas as ‘stranger citizens’.

¹ The Family Backgrounds and Everyday Life project was a component of the Real Life Methods and Realities programmes (ESRC grant numbers RES-576-25-5017 2005-2008, and RES-576-25-0022 2008-2011), and part of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods.

Moreover, despite the tendency in popular culture and in social analysis to see the 'meaning' of Christmas as primarily residing in the accompanying orgy of consumer capitalism (Belk 1985; Stronach and Hodkinson 2011), it is also important to note that Christmas is one of the major kinship events of the year (Hauri 2011)², one that may involve the physical co-presence of family members who represent differences in background. As such, Christmas is often a time when thoughts of family, and differences in family practices, come into sharp relief. Indeed, despite the abundance of apparently generic elements of the English Christmas, it can also be the occasion for a wealth of practices and rituals that vary from household to household or kin group to kin group (Wolin and Bennett 1984). We found that even small elaborations on Christmas traditions and rituals could be of major significance to our participants because they indexed particular family histories, or symbolised imagined family futures, and were thus cause for negotiation and debate. Indeed, as Moore and Myerhoff (1977) have observed, attention to form is what makes a series of actions a 'ritual' or 'ceremony', it is what makes them *important*. As such, Christmas can be a time of considerable conflict and stress despite (or perhaps because of) it having become the paradigmatic time of family togetherness (see Löfgren 1993; Searle-Chatterjee 1993). Thus, Christmas proved to be a particularly important vehicle for people's talk about tradition, and the rituals that made something seem 'tradition'-like, and our paper draws heavily on these narratives.

² Not that, as Werbner (1996) has observed, kinship and consumption are mutually exclusive.

The Study - Family Backgrounds in Everyday Lives

The project from which this paper arises explored the role of ‘family background’ in people’s accounts of their interpersonal relationships and life trajectories. We particularly focused on couples who self-identified as having ‘different’ family backgrounds; in part, because such self-perceived ‘difference’ often cast their family backgrounds into relief. Our use of the term ‘family background’ – a phrase in everyday parlance that people often use when describing their geographic, social, and cultural origins – was deliberately exploratory. Rather than using the term as a fully realised theoretical category, we employed it as a framing device, a conceptually open way to approach empirical enquiry into the inheritance, creation, and maintenance of kin and interpersonal relationships.

At the core of the study was a set of ethnographic interviews with forty-eight people (twenty-one couple and six individual interviews, from twenty-seven couples overall) living in a city in the north of England, who self-defined as part of a couple with different backgrounds. What a ‘different background’ meant in practice could include socio-economic status, region or country of origin, ethnicity, religion, parenting and family ‘styles’, taste and values. All those who responded to the call for participants were heterosexual and the majority were in their 30s, 40s and 50s (three couples and one widowed individual were older). The participants spanned (as individuals and as households) several self-identified ethnicities, nationalities, and religions, although the majority (thirty-three) were nominally White British. Other

national/ethnic identifications comprised one Russo-Ukrainian, one Bulgarian, one Iranian, one Egyptian, three British Afro-Caribbean, one British Greek, one British-Italian, four Irish, one white American, and one white Australian. Further, in addition to a range of Christian backgrounds (practising and nominal), including Anglican, Catholic, Baptist, and Orthodox, there were also two Jewish and two Muslim participants. However, it was perhaps unsurprising, given our interest in family background, that national, ethnic and religious identities were often complicated, with some 'white British' participants citing important influences from, or affinities with, their Italian, Austrian, German, Irish, Jewish, Catholic, and Christian Scientist parents or grandparents.

Where possible we interviewed partners together as a couple, because we were interested in how they negotiated and enacted differences and similarities in their backgrounds. Couple interviews created a dynamic where participants could challenge, discuss, and co-create their accounts of family background and their current relationships.

Conjuring up a sense of family tradition

Here we are going to explore how people conjured up a sense of family tradition in the interviews. A first question to deal with is this: given our study did not focus directly on tradition, how did we know when people were speaking of it? Most obvious was when our participants explicitly used the word 'tradition' to describe particular actions, practices, or events. But even

here, what they meant by 'tradition' was often implicit and therefore unspecified; most uses of the term seemed to revolve around the idea of inheritance and repetition and these are indeed often key to emic understandings of both 'tradition' and 'ritual'. However, even the most 'traditional' ritual had to be performed for the first time and sometimes the newness of a ritual or family tradition proved to be central to its significance (see Kellaheer, Prendergast and Hockey 2005). Subsequently, it seemed that imagining that an event or action drew on something from the past (in a socio-cultural, collective or personal sense), or might be repeated in the future, could be as significant as strict repetition over time in constituting it as a tradition. This point echoes recent sociological interest in the notion of the 'imaginary' as a *force* in social relations that knits together the personal experiences of feeling, memory, imagination and practice with the socio-cultural (Smart 2007; Gillis 1997). As Latimer and Skeggs argue, 'an imaginary is not just a metaphor, it is metonymic: a concept that stands for a way of thinking the world into being' (2011: 397).

We also noticed more implicit forms of 'tradition-speak' in people's accounts when they did not necessarily use the word itself, but we nonetheless thought they were invoking the idea of tradition. In these cases people's forms and styles of talk started to shift, signalling that a sense of tradition (which we think we were meant to recognise as such) was being conjured up in the interview dialogue. This accords with Catherine Bell's (1992, 1997) useful description of ritual and 'ritual-like' activities as arising through a process of differentiation from other acts or times, of separation from the normal run of life. Bell

proposes several key elements of ritualisation that are consistent with those commonly perceived as constitutive of ritual in general: formalism, disciplined invariability, rule-governance, sacred symbols, and performance. However, Bell argues that no single element is necessarily present in any particular ritualisation; rather one or several of these elements may be invoked, often discursively and/or by analogy, to make something 'seem' like a ritual (and thus, we would argue, a 'tradition').

Let us consider some examples. Our first is Katherine (49, White, British with Irish Ancestry, Baptist, Social care worker), here talking about her childhood family Christmases:

Katherine: When our children were little, my Mum'd do the dinner. And we'd all go and my sisters'd go

Katherine's way of articulating past events ('we would go' 'they would go' 'Mum'd do') had the effect of bundling up a period from the past – when her children were little – into a chunk, or an homogenous entity. Although not all Christmases will have been exactly the same, the sense of the passage of time or of differences between Christmases year by year during this period became smoothed in the process of Katherine's words. This way of talking created a more generalised picture of an era within which time 'stands still' or of a 'time out of time' (Falassi 1987; see also Turner 1969). The era in this case was delineated by the age, size or life stage of Katherine's children, the centrality of Katherine's Mum in the proceedings, and the physical location of

her Mum's home. There were multiple actors and subjects, named and implied in the full narrative (children, Mum, sisters, self, husband) indicating that Katherine was invoking a collective engagement and a gathering ('we'd all go')

Here is another example, which introduces further elements in the conjuring up of tradition. John (47, White Irish, Protestant, Banker) and his wife Bernadette (47, White British, Catholic, Nutritionist) were talking about John's childhood Christmases.

John: Christmas was a big thing in our house, we didn't have any of the religious aspect of it really. We didn't go to church or anything... There were very clear traditions, especially around the opening of presents, and that could only be done in a certain order or a certain time and (overlapping)

Bernadette: It had to be in the hall as well, had to open them in the hall (overlapping).

John: It had to be in the hall of the house for some reason, I don't know why. I think that's where the Christmas tree was. So the presents had to be opened in the sight of the Christmas tree. And they couldn't be opened before everyone was there.

John's grammar is interesting in that he switched from the first person plural ('we didn't go to church') to the impersonal third person ('there were very clear traditions') at the precise point where he wanted us to know about the

traditions his family had created. We think that, as with Katherine, it is partly the way he spoke about these things that helped to conjure them up as a narrative of tradition, notwithstanding his use of the actual word, 'tradition'. He emphasised that the status of the practices he described should be read as traditional by adding a tone of compulsion: 'had to be'.

The effect of these things, and of John's wider recounting of his childhood Christmas, was to establish that traditions were created by and belonged to his family, and that they took on a kind of independent or external (to any single individual) existence. Christmas presents and the tree had a kind of authoritative agency, requiring certain practices to take place in their presence. The practices he identified were physical and material (unwrapping presents), spatial (in the hall, in the sight of the tree), temporal ('a certain order or a certain time'), and relational ('couldn't be opened before everyone was there').

As with Katherine, we think John was bundling this chunk of the past up, and offering it to the interviewer as an era or a 'time out of time'; in which disjunctions and variations were smoothed and glossed so that what emerged was an era – his childhood family Christmas – characterised by certain traditions and a particular atmosphere that was seared in a multi-sensory way into his memory. The telling and repetition of stories about his childhood Christmas reinforced the sense of time standing still within the era. John's childhood Christmas traditions had obviously been narrated before, probably

many times over the years, as his wife Bernadette's familiarity with the detail suggested. Indeed the narrative had become something of a co-production.

We found many of these forms of talk to be common ways for people to conjure up family traditions in their interviews, namely – the impersonal, third person³, a sense of compulsion (and not always of benign compulsion), a narrated and repeated character, and a bundling of time into an era involving a generalising of practices into traditions through the smoothing of variation and disjuncture, and the implication of time standing still within the era as in a 'time out of time'. These constituted signals that tradition was being both invoked and evoked at certain moments in the interviews.

Many of these were present in our third example, but this one also raised other important points. Fionnuala (53, White Northern Irish, Catholic, Teacher) was talking about what Christmas was currently like in her family:

Fionnuala: The camera is there (she gestures to its position), the tree is at the window, this is the kind of cadeaux circle, the girls claim their corner, 'I'm having that chair', 'you had that chair last year', 'why can't you have the end of the sofa this year?' Gerald's (partner) here usually 'cause it's closest to the camcorder. I'm there with my glass of champagne. The floor is littered with Christmas paper and every single present is recorded and a thank you message given into the camera.

³ There are various studies that show how a passive third person voice is used to imply or claim generalisation in scientific discourse (Runblad 2007)

This excerpt clearly contains a number of the elements from the previous examples. There are differences, however, not least in that Fionnuala was talking about current traditions, rather than an era from the past, yet arguably she used similar devices to create a bundling or generalisation, of an *era of the present*. She was describing the creation of a 'time out of time', and her description itself became part of that creation. What is particularly distinctive is her use of the present tense and quoted speech together with sensory and spatial references to a jolly scene that she mapped for us in 'real time'. In her account, she animated a kind of collective and chaotic choreography of things, people and practices, and in the process she created a vibrant atmosphere of her family traditions around Christmas.

The use of the present tense to convey that something 'always' takes place is a particularly striking form of generalisation⁴ of the kind we saw in both Katherine and John's extracts, because it helps to transform described practices into accounts of family tradition through the implication of repetition and the smoothing or glossing of variation and disjuncture within the time frame being invoked. We shall go on to show that tradition as lived and experienced does not simply or even usually involve straightforward repetition and replaying of historical practices, and certainly what people actually do or experience is not exactly the same year after year.

The full complexity and negotiated character of the lived experience of Christmas traditions cannot, in reality, be captured in one consensual

⁴ There are some connections here with recent work on the concept of the generalised other by Holdsworth and Morgan (2007)

narrative where time appears to stand still. Nor can accounts of 'what we always did' reveal how participants in these practices felt at the time or how closely they matched the ideal practice that might appertain in any specific socio-cultural and historical context. As Anthony Cohen (1994:164-167) has argued with respect to rituals of socialising – a category of ritual behaviours in which the English Christmas might conceivably be placed – just because participants seem to be going along with the form of the ritual does not mean that they think or feel the same way about it. Even Bloch (1989) and Bell (1992), whilst suggesting that consent to ritual forms may 'school' the social body (Bell 1992:215), acknowledge that ceremonies and rituals can be sites of ambivalence and conflict rather than strict compliance. But we think this impulse to generalise and smooth over variations is about something else as well, when seen in the context of people's personal family histories – people were using a conjured up sense of tradition to create and delineate atmospheric eras, of the past and present, such as 'my childhood Christmases', or 'what we do at Christmas'.

Atmosphere was central in how people spoke about Christmas traditions (see also Hauri 2011). Atmosphere comes across as a situational, multi-sensory, spatial, temporal and relational phenomenon (see also Anderson 2009; Edensor forthcoming). We can see, for example, in Fionnuala's case that the conjuring up of traditions, and the practices which are referenced in the process, is not a purely cerebral or discursive process. Nor is it solely about recalling the past. Rather, in reflecting on family traditions Fionnuala evoked sensory, embodied, temporal, material things and spatial practices: visiting

family, cooking dinner, eating, posing for and taking photographs, tearing wrapping paper off presents, the timing of events, the layout of rooms things and people, and so on. In and amongst that process, she invoked something of the relational atmosphere, the 'feel' or 'affect' of her family Christmases. Indeed, as Paul Connerton (1989) argues, images of tradition and memory are conveyed and sustained by embodied ritual as much as by discursive strategy; it is often physical performance that is the medium of transmission. Hence, Christmas for John and Bernadette was not simply about designating certain practices as traditional but about the embodied and relational performance of traditions through, for example, the temporal specificity of unwrapping presents and the particular spatial placement of the tree (which in turn shaped where presents were unwrapped). Similarly, the Christmas wrapping paper spread over the floor at Fionnuala's house is, for her, a symbol of Christmas but it also physically indexes the series of relational actions and interactions that go into gift giving: purchase, wrapping, unwrapping. These elements are generative of atmospheres.

Overall, our participants re-created atmospheres in their narratives of family tradition that were lived and experienced as full of sensory, embodied and material practices, happenings and stimuli. Family traditions, we therefore suggest, are both lived in and recounted through sensory, embodied, atmospheric as well as discursive registers (see also Classen 1994; Sliwa and Riach 2011). Further it is these sensory experiences that both make something seem 'like' a tradition and help produce the 'sentiment', the feelings, the 'affect', that Fisher (2003) argues can be a crucial product of

ritual and a driver of the delineation of social relationships that ritual can accomplish.

Which traditions to conjure up? Family lines, eras and generations

Of course, some of our participants were more enthusiastic advocates of family tradition, and Christmas traditions in particular, than others. The psychological literature on family ritual and tradition suggests that women are most often the 'keepers' of family traditions (Rosenthal & Marshall 1988; Friedman & Weissbrod 2004), and this was indeed the case in eight of the couples in our study. Yet although there were no male partners taking primary or sole responsibility for family tradition, in the rest of the couples male partners were actively involved in the negotiation and performance of family tradition and ritual.

This perhaps reflects the fact that even those who saw themselves as followers or advocates of tradition rarely spoke of it as a product to be passed on without alteration or as the responsibility of a single family member. Rather, people more often spoke of the need for ongoing decision-making and negotiation about which aspects of which traditions to maintain, adapt, invent, or drop, in the process of which all kinds of other elements of family life and relationships came into play, as we shall see. Such explicit discussions very often took place around times of transition when routines were unsettled: when new couples first moved in together, when children were born, and when children grew up and left home. This need for decision-making, and the

shape of the discussions around tradition, suggests that it was not enough simply to have family traditions (as the quasi-functionalist psychological literature on family ritual and tradition suggests); their form mattered to people. Nor could one invent traditions willy-nilly (also see Kellaher, Prendergast and Hockey 2005). None of our participants suggested that they had free rein to do only what they wanted or what they thought was best. In particular, the desires of partners, children, parents, grandparents and siblings, as well as a sense of responsibility for the way Christmas was experienced by others, were key elements in what traditions were acceptable and would be seen as successful, who would be included, and where gatherings would take place. People's engagement with tradition was thus complex, multifaceted and fundamentally relational.

Smart has argued in a study of parenting amongst people with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, that there are two stereotypical versions about what is to be done about tradition when different backgrounds are brought to bear, neither of which will 'do' sociologically speaking: one is the 'pick and mix buffet' version, where people are assumed to be free to choose, and the other is the 'essential roots' version, where tradition is reified or commodified and located in the past. Yet she argues neither of these do justice to the real complexities of family life in which people are involved, and both of them miss the sociological point that people are relationally engaged in parenting, rather than in simply picking up or dropping traditions (Smart 2007: 106).

Certainly in our study no-one adopted a straightforward 'pick and mix buffet' approach, or an 'essential roots only' approach, but people could talk about the constraints and complexities in negotiating traditions. These were most evident in those cases where the need to make decisions about tradition was most imperative; that is, when it came to the competing traditions and practices of different 'sides' of the family. For example, because many people entered relationships with a personal family history of past Christmases, and because this history did not necessarily match that of their partner, couples (and sometimes wider kin groups) had to consciously or unconsciously work out what to do now and in the future. This picture of plural and often competing ways of doing family traditions belies the easy assumption that there is a clear and coherent socio-culturally existent prescription for a traditional family Christmas. Not surprisingly, there was a range of responses amongst our interviewees to this imperative for decision-making. Some couples happily abandoned most or all traditions while others chose to adopt elements of the traditions of only one side (and sometimes only one part of one side – since a partner's 'side of the family' would not always exhibit a consensual approach to Christmas traditions). Others negotiated (and sometimes renegotiated over time) what family practice or set of practices to adopt, which traditions were better or nicer. In some cases, these processes of decision-making were relatively straightforward and organic: for example, changing family or financial circumstances might dictate the abandonment of large formal gatherings at Christmas.

However, sometimes the negotiations over tradition were less straightforward, and reflected a kind of moral positioning in which the negotiations, and the outcomes, mattered quite strongly. In particular, the assessment of a practice as good or bad often reflected a kind of family allegiance, a positioning of oneself *vis a vis* one's partner and their family. For those who had children such assessments might have been a bid to position descendent generations as well, to make them part of one family line and tradition rather than another. Such assessments fed upon and into judgements about the moral worth of different family styles. Our participants often implied, and sometimes stated explicitly, that such choices were important because they said something about what kind of people, what kind of family, they were. In these circumstances, decisions about which elements of whose traditions to conjure up involved participants actively evoking, creating and debating the relative merits of different family atmospheres and memories.

These negotiations and conjurings of tradition were inextricably tied up with a sense of time and memory (see also Smart 2007) yet, we do not wish to argue, as for example does the historian John Gillis, that they established a coherent continuity with the past. Gillis draws on the anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff's (1984:306) assertion that ritual carries a message of order and continuity to argue that family rituals, such as holidays and family dinners, act to obscure breaks in linear time by asserting an unbroken line of family tradition and precedent, with the family past, present and future brought together in the ritual space (1997:93-94). The family is thus made over as a refuge of stability and continuity in a world where change seems otherwise

inevitable and 'family time' characterised as both a continuation of, and a return⁵ to, the values of the past. For Gillis, this mythical tradition not only invests the notion of 'family' with moral significance but also (briefly) reconciles the messiness of family life as lived with its eternally absent ideal.

However, in our study, family tradition was not nearly as idealised or instrumental as Gillis suggests, nor did it create an unbroken line of continuity. The evocation and performance of family traditions and rituals was often a mix of conscious and semi-conscious *bricolage*, involving the assembly, creation and sometimes jostling of different traditions and atmospheres – past, present, and aspirational for the future. Certainly, our participants' narratives were saturated with time and memories of the past (see Mistztal 2003) but the past was not always or only idealised and there was, of course, the question of which elements of whose family past, and which eras and family styles, were to take precedence. Rather than establishing an unbroken line, the conjuring, evocation, invocation, and invention of family traditions seemed to help our participants debate their orientations to eras in the past, present and future (which could include negative judgement about either past or present) and to the sometimes complex dynamics of generational change in their families.

We will now consider three case studies to show how this worked and to illustrate some of the themes. Each of these cases involves couples

⁵ Eric Hobsbawm (1983) similarly argues that 'traditions' entail a conscious attempt to create a sense of continuity with the past; a continuity that, for Hobsbawm, is very often false and driven by cultural elites seeking to inculcate their own norms and values in the general populace by appealing to an idealised past.

negotiating decisions about different legacies and ideas about traditions and approaches to Christmas.

Helen and Frank

Helen and Frank were both in their 50s, with grown up children who had left home. Although both now in solidly middle class occupations, they each came from working class backgrounds. The main source of difference in their backgrounds was religion – Helen’s background was Jewish and Frank’s was non-practicing Church of England. This meant that as well as both living within a culture where Christmas is a major festival to be reckoned with, whatever one’s cultural or religious background, Helen also brought a legacy of engagement with Jewish rather than Christian cultural traditions. Once Helen and Frank had got together and had children, they had to tackle the question of how to reconcile these. This is how they narrated the story:

Frank: I was brought up in a strong tradition of big family Christmases, three generations and when we got married I, I kind of more or less, well we didn’t talk about it or argue, it was just accepted that we would celebrate Christmas.

Helen: ‘Cause we didn’t do Christmas in my house. We had Christmas presents or Hanukah presents, whatever you call them, but they were on Christmas day the same, we never had a tree, never had decorations. My family still have a turkey dinner but that is Christmas

so Frank has always said “Well, it’s not a real Christmas,” so we’ve never ever seen my family at Christmas.

Frank: We don’t see Helen’s family at Christmas, they’re not particularly interested, are they, in travelling or celebrating Christmas?

Helen: Well they have, they have a family turkey dinner together ...

Frank: But, in Jewish tradition Hanukah is a, same time of year anyway. So, erm, what do we do? We have, we’ve always had, us and the kids (laughter) together at Christmas and sometimes various other members of my family will come but not that often these days ‘cause they’ve all got their own. So it’s usually, it’s come down to me and Helen and our two kids and my daughter’s husband comes as well. And I’d like to think that in, you know, years to come when the family, as the family grows, they’ll all come. I’d like to continue that tradition of having family Christmases.

On the face of it, Helen and Frank’s story appears to be one where the Jewish traditions of Helen’s background have been suppressed – more through neglect than conscious decision – in favour of the legacy of Frank’s family’s multigenerational family Christmas. There is also perhaps some slight tension around the fact that they have ‘never ever’ seen Helen’s family at Christmas, notwithstanding that her parents do have a muted form of celebration at Christmas: a family turkey dinner. There are hints that the resolution of this

issue might not have been entirely comfortable over the years, for Helen at least.

However, although both agreed that Frank brought a legacy of multigenerational family Christmases, nevertheless his memories of childhood were of a household that was, in his words, 'cold in terms of love and affection', and with frequent arguments. It is by contrast with this rather negative experience, and Helen's parents' more ambiguous approach, that both of them felt it was important to *create* a strong warm family atmosphere for their children to appreciate into their adulthood, and Christmas became a clear part of that strategy. Helen explained that last year her daughter's husband's parents came too:

Helen: Yeah, they came and stayed. Because we felt we wanted to have the relationship with our daughter's in-laws that our families never had. There were elements of us bringing the kids up that we wanted to make sure it wasn't like the way we had so we've...our kids have grown up with the tradition of the family being together, and our thirty year old son may come on Christmas Day, Christmas morning hung over...Invariably, having seen his friends, but Christmas Day and Boxing Day he gives to us. So you know, I'm pleased with that.

Helen and Frank painted a picture of a relaxed, anything-goes, open-house kind of Christmas atmosphere, centred on the relationship between themselves and their adult children, and warmly extended to those people

who their adult children in turn are becoming involved with and related to. Their account made clear that they saw this as their *creation*, not a hand-me-down from their parents, and it was clearly one that they were proud of and pleased about. Frank's hope that 'as the family grows, they'll all come', was more than just a cursory nod in the direction of the possibility of future grandchildren. We think that Helen and Frank are consciously trying to build an *intergenerational era*, located in their home and centred on these crucial relationships and a happy warm, easy-going atmosphere that will be treasured and remembered by descendent generations into the future.⁶ Their negotiations about the relative merits of different traditions and atmospheres of Christmas suggest a particular kind of generational consciousness and a sense of their positioning in the changing generational order of their families.

Natalie and Elliot

Elliot, a 42 year old teacher, initially claimed that he and his wife Natalie (40, also a teacher) do what everybody does at Christmas: have dinner, eat turkey, drink wine, and watch television. However, Natalie took issue with this characterisation of their Christmas. As it turned out, the differences between Natalie's Catholic childhood in the northeast and Elliot's partially Christian

⁶ As almost all our case studies demonstrate, the location of Christmas celebrations was important, with different 'parts' of the family sometimes staking competing claims to be the proper hosts. In her ethnography of Elmdon village in Essex, Marilyn Strathern (1981: 137-138) has observed that the passing or ageing of focal parental figures (usually mothers or grandmothers) sometimes gave rise to such competition amongst adult siblings as they not only attempted to shift the focus of Christmas to their own household but also shifted (or signalled) their conception of the 'close family' who should attend (Strathern does not, however, note the potential for competition between different 'sides' of a couple's kin networks). Frank and Helen did not take over Christmas from their parents in this way but in recreating Christmas anew in their home they did consciously position themselves as a new focal point of 'the family'.

Science, middle class, upbringing in the southeast of England, as well as their recent experience of spending alternate Christmases with each set of parents, had given rise to discussions about what kind of Christmas they wanted to create now for their young children. Although they joked about these negotiations, they felt it was their 'responsibility' to get Christmas right, and this made the negotiations more highly charged than they might otherwise have been. One area of negotiation and occasional contention – in common with six other couples in the study – was gift giving and gift opening (another five couples remarked upon historical family differences in gift buying in terms of how expensive gifts could be and whether this denoted 'fun' or vulgarity). There is, of course, an important literature on Christmas gift exchange (for example Carrier 1995, Werbner 1996) that draws on long-standing scholarly work around the interface between gifts and commodities. Indeed, to some extent, some of James Carrier's (1995) arguments about the tension inherent in the conversion of commodities into vehicles of private sentiment, and the importance of this ritual to the Christmas experience, are echoed in our data. However, this is ground well covered by other works and we want to focus here on the situational, relational and atmospheric dynamics and rituals of gift *opening* rather than ritual elements of gift exchange per se. Elliot seemed determined to introduce his childhood practice of gifts in stockings. Natalie was happy to accede to this request but other aspects of Elliot's family gift giving practices proved more contentious (indeed, the timing of gift-giving and gift opening was one of the major areas of disagreement on the form of a proper Christmas).

Elliot: And you (meaning 'one', in reference to his own childhood) wouldn't actually get your presents till about three or four in the afternoon. And when I told you (Natalie) this, you thought that was appalling. (overlapping)

Natalie: Well I was amazed because at Elliot's family's everybody, er, they take turns to open their presents and everybody's looking while you're opening the present.
(overlapping)

Elliot: You can't have another present until so and so's opened theirs.

Natalie: I mean, at our house it was a kind of crazy, frantic unwrapping and then it was all done, boof. And then you'd play with your presents for the whole day.

Elliot: But you'd do that in the morning.

Natalie: But, oh, it would be done, done and dusted, yeah.

Elliot: Done, well, when you were kids, before five in the morning.

Natalie: Aha. It was, it was really exciting though and it was just so exciting, it's 'cause that (overlapping)

Elliot: It's some', it's something that was there all day (referring to gift opening in his childhood Christmas). You know, you were looking forward it. You didn't have it now, you had other stuff to do in the morning.

Natalie: No, you'd blooming forgotten about it by four or something. You might as well open them tomorrow (laughs)

Elliot: But no, they were always there looking at you.

Behind the banter between them, Natalie seemed particularly conscious of a responsibility for creating a Christmas that their children will remember. She spoke of creating or carrying on fun or warm traditions such as her family's practice of requesting gifts from Father Christmas by shouting up the chimney. She contrasted such traditions with Elliott's family's more formal and restrained ones and, in particular, what she perceived as his family's negative tradition of not having a Santa Claus.

Natalie: It's quite a surprise to think that we are the age that our parents were when...they'd had all of us and by then the tradition of Christmas had been fairly well established. And we did x, y and z, and that's how, and now of course I mean I suppose we have a kind of routine but it's actually up to us to set the tradition. And so we've had the discussion about whether we're gonna shout up the chimney...and

I mean there's... no question (but) that I'm going to introduce Santa Claus. (laughs) ...There's absolutely no question and I'll, you know, I'll fight (for) it.

Interestingly the lack of a Santa Claus in Elliot's family did not simply denote the absence of a common Christmas tradition but was in part rationalised as a family inheritance in itself, arising from the terrible disappointment felt by Elliot's grandfather when he discovered that Father Christmas was not real. The story of his desire to spare his children from this disappointment had cascaded down the generations, helping to conjure a multi-generational sense of tradition.

Natalie resisted this denial of magic and enchantment, although her resistance was at least partly inspired by a similar impulse: to make Christmas 'right' for one's children. She felt a strong sense of responsibility to create traditions that would produce a warm Christmas atmosphere and make a special, magical time that her children would remember – as the era of their childhood family Christmases. Natalie sensed that there was only a relatively brief window of time in which to achieve this 'laying down of memories' (Smart 2007: 105), because children grow up, and their belief in magic cannot be sustained: time passes, children become adult, and the era can only then exist in family memory, tradition and narrative. Natalie herself had experienced this kind of disenchantment as she grew up:

Natalie: We'd do exactly the same thing every Christmas and I think it's the tradition that you remember up until you were about fifteen, and then you either realise the tradition is quite dull or its just not exciting any more.

Natalie's sense that she and Elliot needed to 'get in quick' to create an era of childhood Christmases was heightened by what she saw as the evidence that no one else was going to do this, and a keen awareness of her and others' position in the changing generational order. She explained that she felt let down by her mother's apparent unwillingness to orchestrate and create a vibrant Christmas atmosphere anymore, as she had done in the past. This made it clear to Natalie that she and Elliot now had to assume the generational baton of responsibility for Christmas tradition:

Natalie: We always used to get up really early...that's not the case now. My mum didn't even buy a turkey this year. We had blooming cod in breadcrumbs. She just can't be bothered now

For Natalie and Elliot, the negotiating stakes were heightened and made more tense by this context, and the scene was set for some relatively heated discussions between them. In the interview, these were more like jocular teasing and banter than serious disputes but Natalie and Elliot were clearly debating things that mattered to them and that had a moral value. The contention or discussion mostly centred on their different experiences of, and feelings about, family styles and the kinds of atmospheres they exude:

specifically, the differences between Natalie's large, Catholic, working class family and Elliot's quieter, middle class childhood. Natalie's endorsement of her family's way of unwrapping presents as 'exciting' demonstrates a strong preference for her family's style of 'frantic' but warm (she implies) chaos, whilst Elliot defended his family's calmer, quieter celebrations. Such talk not only mirrored their more general discussions about their different backgrounds but also formed part of their negotiations over what kind of family they should be and what kind of atmosphere might characterise this.

Simon and Juliette

However, not all such assessments of other family traditions and styles were negative or contested between partners. Simon and Juliette were both civil servants, in their mid 30s, without children. His background was working class and hers was lower middle class. Both Simon and Juliette agreed that her family Christmas – and by extension, her family itself – was manifestly better, warmer, and less formal than his was. Simon indicated that he would much rather be with Juliette's family on Christmas day but his sense of obligation to his father meant that he and Juliette spend much of the day apart:

Simon: It's, it's cosier round there, you can tell when you walk through the door, it's, it's not as, it's more relaxed, I like going round there on Christmas night, and I like going round on Boxing Day. It can be a bit manic at times, especially if your sister's shouting at the kids, but it, you know it, just it's warmer, you know

what I mean, it's not as formal?... And there's a routine round at me dad's and Vanessa's (Simon's stepmother) on Christmas day. Christmas lunch is half past twelve and then they don't open their presents until after, but straight away you wash up, or they wash up, then it's the present opening and then sit there and have a cup o' tea, erm, yeah so by six o'clock I'm climbing the walls and I'm ready to go, erm, but you walk into like Justine's [Juliette's sister] house and is, everyone's just like relaxed and, as Christmas used to be years ago, everybody eats too much and then you just sit there too full to move and that's what it's a bit like round there, you know it's

Juliette: (overlapping) Probably party hats still on at eleven o'clock at night.

Simon: Yeah, you know, nice...'Cause me dad and Vanessa [Simon's stepmother] are both teetotal so there's no booze.

Juliette: That's perhaps another reason why I don't go (laughter)

Once again, this is a more ambiguous vision of tradition than either the entirely self-conscious creation of family togetherness through ritual or the rote passing down of stable practices. Rather, traditions pressed on people, jostled with each other, and had to be dealt with, and there was a pervading

sense of atmosphere – ‘warm’ versus one that made Simon ‘climb the walls’. Simon could not simply opt out of his father’s Christmas but rather he and Juliette felt compelled to juggle their competing family traditions, to please both families – and to position themselves as active parts of those families – by treating them separately. They also coped by inserting a private celebration of themselves as a couple, by ensuring that they always went out for a drink together on Christmas Eve before having to meet the demands of wider family tradition. Simon and Juliette clearly did not feel the imperative that Natalie felt to create their own atmosphere and era of Christmas – but instead they endured or imbibed those created by others - a fact that may have been influenced by their not having children.

Nonetheless, there is clear evidence of era-based thinking about Christmas traditions. Simon’s statement about “Christmas [as it] used to be years ago” indicates that he assessed the present against the past; specifically, the time before his mother died and his father remarried. Although Simon described his father’s formal Christmas as, in part, a product of his father’s social awkwardness, he also put the change down to the influence of his stepmother, Vanessa. It is not simply that Simon found his stepmother somewhat formal but that she brought a new way of doing Christmas into the house: his description of what they do now was how ‘Vanessa has always done Christmas’, and this serves to mark out the pre-Vanessa Christmases as an era – one that Simon warmly remembered and mourned. Simon thus had a different position in the generational order, which meant that, for the time being at least, his strategy was essentially to endure his father and Vanessa’s

'new' traditions for Christmas day and the formal and sterile atmosphere that accompanied them, and then to escape as soon as he decently could to the informal, warm and chaotic atmosphere of Juliette's sister's house.

This kind of contrast of family styles and atmospheres, between warmth and informality (sometimes judged negatively as excessively indulgent) on the one hand, and coldness and formality (sometimes judged positively as mannered and organised) on the other, was a major albeit complex theme in our data set as whole, with sixteen couples in total suggesting that this was an important source of difference⁷. Further, as we have seen with Natalie and Elliot, such distinctions often crystallised around Christmas traditions; indeed, ten of the sixteen mentioned such family style differences and conflicting atmospheres specifically in relation to Christmas. These judgements and distinctions formed part of moral claims about the superiority of certain family styles, and as in Simon's case, of particular family eras within his own family history. In particular, as in the case above, a 'relaxed' Christmas (and family) was commonly deemed morally superior, even if there was some disagreement as to what made something 'relaxed'. That is, although some participants favourably contrasted their noisy and informal celebrations with more uptight and restrained family styles, family Christmas could also be characterised as 'relaxed' because the day was calm and little was expected of participants.

⁷ These judgements were sometimes complex and ambiguous. For example, one of our participants reported busy Christmases centred on food and family, which she found appropriate and yet also oppressive and patriarchal. Another couple explained how the woman's family shied away from physical affection where the man's were physically affectionate and hospitable. However, her family were more 'up for a laugh' and more noisy and chaotic. Her family had virtually no Christmas celebration, whereas he received lots of presents and had a big lunch.

At times, participants attributed differences in family and Christmas style to their class and/or ethnic backgrounds; although again this was complex. There was not a straightforward match and the apparent effects of such backgrounds were not predictable. Natalie, for example argued that her chaotic and relaxed working class background (and Christmas) was better than Elliot's restrained middle class version. Yet such distinctions were also made within ostensibly same 'class' couples too. Simon and Juliette, for example, had a relatively similar socio-economic background and if anything, Juliette's family had always been better off. Similarly, Fionnuala favourably compared her lively middle class Northern Irish family Christmas – and the current era of Christmas that she had instituted – with the staid middle class English Christmas (and family) of her husband. Such valuations could work in the opposite direction too: middle class white Australian Russell fondly remembered his family's warm and relaxed summer Christmases and admitted to struggling with the cold and somewhat dull Christmas spent with his partner Amy's British Afro-Caribbean, working class family. Whilst we cannot, therefore, delineate an objective set of 'good qualities' relating to family style and atmosphere, nor can we match them closely with class or ethnic background, we can say that these things were important to the majority of our couples, and were sometimes disputed. Instead we think that what mattered in each case was the way in which claims of the moral superiority of a particular family style, atmosphere and set of traditions, allowed participants to orient themselves toward (or away from) their kin, non-family, and the wider world.

Conclusion

We have argued that Christmas traditions were central in the *constitution of eras* because they enabled the bundling up of time – past, present and anticipated for descendent generations – into packages of generalised ‘time out of time’ – characterised by distinctive atmospheres - and around which memories could coalesce and about which stories could be told. The way the participants in our study engaged with, and spoke of, tradition both produced and marked family generations and eras. In a sense, much of the participant talk about tradition amounted to a kind of family history. Family traditions were invoked as an index of individual and kinship trajectories: children born, children growing up and leaving home, of partnerships, separations, repartnerings, aging, and death. Remembering the adoption, adaption, or discarding of particular practices, who was the generational ‘anchor’ at any one time, who else was involved, and where gatherings took place, helped mark different eras and thus created living documents of family history. Times of transition were often subject to the kinds of negotiations over the adoption and form of traditions described in the previous section. The unsettling of routines by births, deaths, and partnerships often prompted the decisions about the traditions that would later become emblematic of such times, constituting them as eras. Hence, in Natalie and Elliot’s negotiations about which elements of whose Christmas traditions to enact there is not only a manifest desire to deploy these practices in the creation of a special atmosphere and time out of time, but to make this time one that the children

will look back on as evidence of a happy childhood and, if Natalie's aspirations are fulfilled, a magical era.

We must also remember that our participants' ways of invoking and talking about traditions were not simply reflective, symbolic, or cerebral. Although we have focussed on people talking about 'traditions', we have also argued that family traditions and practices are not simply about discourse. Rather, what makes them potentially so powerful, the reason why they evoke and are invoked, is that they are enacted in sensory, palpable and embodied registers and in specific places. Our interviewees found themselves to be participating in and exercised by *atmospheres*: lived experience drawing in tangible and intangible practices and interrelationships. The eras we are referring to have a particular ambience and are particularly powerful for people precisely because they are engaged with, imbibed, and remembered, through full sensory and embodied registers.

This means that family Christmases can be warm and affirming, powerfully magical and positive, but also negative, difficult, fraught, painful, exclusionary and oppressive. Indeed they can be these things all at the same time, and in their construction through memory and narrative. Because the events and practices that constituted them were at once embodied and intersubjective – because the collective jostling interactions, enactments, places and ways of speaking are what constituted both the traditions and atmospheres of Christmas – our participants did not always or even usually imagine or experience them as an idealised family cohesion or solidarity. Family

Christmases, particular practices, days, or events designated as 'family traditions' could be and often were venues for stress and conflict, or as something to be endured (see Löfgren 1993). For example, some people complained about how much work particular traditions entailed and the gendered nature of that work, and about how not all participants appreciated them. Perceived expectations about appropriate gifts, gift opening rituals and games, who should visit and who should host, and what to eat and when, could be experienced (and were certainly spoken of) as a burden or as fraught with tension. The practices of other parts of the family were sometimes judged as boring or tiring or simply not much good. Rather than some fuzzy vague idealised family practice, traditions and atmospheres sometimes had a power that meant taking part even when one did not want to.

All this suggests that rather than withering in an individualistic liberal society, family traditions remain an important part of the relationalities of family life. They were conjured up in the speech and physical engagements of our participants. Certainly, there was no hint that family traditions are either atavistic relics or entailed only blind routine and conservatism or the following of a clear and consensual socio-cultural script. Just as in MacIntyre's (1984) notion of 'living tradition', the family traditions of participants were not fixed entities, practices, or rules passed down, intact or otherwise, from generation to generation (Handler and Linnekin 1984; Smart and Shipman 2004). Neither were most family traditions always or only 'modern inventions' in the sense used by Hobsbawm (1983) nor were they entirely nostalgic re-enactments of

an imagined past as suggested by Gillis (1997). Rather, even the newly coined traditions and rituals were acts of bricolage, cobbled together pieces of the inherited, the disputed, the situational and the freshly made. Even if some of our participants were aware that they possessed the potential to create new traditions, or to rework old ones, they did not feel free to make them up indiscriminately. Generational, family and situational dynamics were influential in who could make decisions to act in relation to tradition as well as on what could be done, with whom and where.

We want to conclude by arguing that family traditions themselves – if that means the detailed content of the practices and rituals – are only a small part of the sociological story that needs to be told here. Yet they can steal the show in academic discussions of tradition and formal analyses of ritual. They are important, because they matter to people, sometimes enough to argue about, and people can feel oppressed and excluded by them. But if we look at what else is going on, sociologically and relationally speaking, when people conjure up, negotiate and argue about their family Christmas traditions, then something else emerges that is usually less prominent in sociological analyses. This is a very significant subtext about the moral worth of different atmospheres and styles of family life – in their full sensory registers - as well as the eras through which people come to delineate and confront the passage of time and generation in their family and personal lives.

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