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## The Consequences of Love

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**Abstract:**

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of sociological work exploring the importance and meaning of kinship. Much of this work has criticised the ‘individualisation’ thesis according to which changes in family structures over time have been interpreted as reflecting a fundamental decline in family values. Highlighting continuities as well as change in family life, this work has also suggested ways to move beyond the individualisation debate and to develop alternative frameworks for the study of contemporary families and personal life, notably through the analysis of family practices. For various reasons, this recent work has focused primarily on the experience and practices of adults in ‘ordinary’ rather than more difficult family circumstances. This article aims to complement this work by focusing on the difficult family experiences of young people affected by parental substance use. It is argued that it is important not to lose sight of such experiences in order that sociological thinking reflect the diversity of family relationships practices and the resources available to support them, including at younger ages. Further, the importance of developing concepts or a language facilitating the exploration and communication of the emotional and symbolic significance of these practices is emphasised.

**Keywords:**

*Family and kinship practices, love, childhood, young people, parental substance misuse, difficult family circumstances*

**The paper:**

Recent work in the sociology of families and relationships has moved away from polarised debates around family structure prompted by the ‘individualisation thesis’ (Bauman, 2003; Beck-Gernsheim, 1998). Drawing on empirical studies in various disciplines, this work has challenged the ‘individualisation’ thesis by focusing on meanings rather than structures (Carsten, 2005), and has identified significant continuities in contemporary family values and practices (Strathern, 1992; Gross, 2005). Influenced by Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’, some moves to provide an alternative conceptual framework to the ‘individualisation thesis’ have focused on family practices (Morgan, 1996) or ‘doing’ family in different social and economic circumstances (Charles et al., 2008). In addition, the importance of opening up the emotional significance of relationship practices, and love itself, to sociological explanation has been advocated (Smart, 2007). Such work includes explorations of the symbolic importance of family narratives to contemporary individuals’ sense of self (Finch, 2007; Mason, 2008).

This work has tended to examine adults’ relationships rather than those of young people. In addition, perhaps partly in response to the pessimistic approach of some individualisation theorists, much of this work has focused on ‘ordinary’ families, rather than those affected by serious difficulties. In recent years, such difficult family experiences have been considered in more specialised social work and social policy ‘silos’, such as safeguarding children, rather than sociological work (Smart, 2007:133).

This paper starts with reflections on developments towards alternative conceptual frameworks for the study of family and personal life. These developments are then

considered in the light of accounts of family, and particularly relationships with parents, drawn from young people in Scotland interviewed as part of an empirical study of the effects of parental substance use problems on themselves and their lives. It is argued that the importance the respondents attached to constructing and managing family and family-like kin relationships illustrates the sociological significance of developing concepts and language to explore family practices, the resources underpinning them, as well as their emotional significance.

### **Theoretical background**

There have been fierce debates in several European and North American countries on the significance of changes in family structures over the last few decades, focused on the statistical decline in rates of marriage and rise in rates of divorce, cohabitation, and of 'reconstituted' families. Many writers, including Bauman (2003), argue that these patterns reflect a decline in commitment to life partners and to family. Such pessimistic interpretations of these developments in terms of 'individualisation' and 'detraditionalisation' have influenced much policy discourse. At the same time, Giddens emphasises the possibilities for self-exploration and moral identity construction unleashed by greater choice and equality within less traditional relationships (1991, 1992). These ideas have influenced, for example, the development of notions such as 'families of choice' (Weston, 1991), formed around same-sex relationships, outside of, and in opposition to, families of origin (Weeks et al., 1999).

The power of discourses of 'individualisation' and 'detraditionalisation' to frame academic work on the family has, however, been challenged (Smart, 2004: 1037;

Segalen, 1986; Déchaux, 1995; Gillis, 1996). These writers have suggested that, whatever the changes in family structure, there are many continuities in family experience and, on this basis, have contested simplistic notions of 'detraditionalisation' (Strathern, 1992; Rose, 1996). Examples include studies indicating the continued significance to ordinary people of 'moral absolutes' in the family sphere, such as putting children first (Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2000); and work on 'meaning-constitutive' traditions such as notions of long-lasting coupledness based on romantic love (Gross, 2005: 286-8; Gillis, 1996).

To explain these continuities and to respond to developments in the sociologies of emotion and the body, some of this work has sought to construct alternative conceptual frameworks of family and personal life. Notably, Charles et al. (2008) situate continuities in 'doing family' in relation to broader themes of social change. In their re-study of kinship relationships in Swansea, 40 years after Rosser and Harris' original study (1965), they identified numerous continuities in patterns of residence and contact between different generations of families. Notably, they found that, across the social classes, children continued to see their parents regularly into adulthood (2008: 66), often becoming closer to their parents after the birth of grandchildren (2008: 68), as well as high rates of mother-adult daughter contact particularly in working class areas (2008: 70). They draw on Bourdieu's concept of habitus to explain the continued strength of embodied and often gendered moral rationalities around care within families (McNay, 1999; Duncan and Edwards, 1999) and the continued discursive power of the 'normal' family. Given this argument that notions of the 'normal family' are embodied in individuals and their identities and

desires through habitus, they view the scope for individual self-reinvention as bounded (2008: 6).

Charles et al. also pay particular attention to the variety of ways in which respondents (most of whom were well embedded within families and none of whom were aged under 19) constructed the meaning of family, as well as implied hierarchies in these notions of family (Becker and Charles, 2006). Across their socially differentiated sites, these respondents' 'families of origin', and particularly parent-child relationships, seemed to be at the top of the hierarchy. This category was followed by 'families of procreation' and then 'wider family'. To a large degree, continued membership of all of these groups, and particularly the latter two, depended on practices of giving support. Becker and Charles also identify social class and other differences in family practices, highlighting, for example, greater levels of conflict in working class families, but also, as discussed, the particular importance of working class mother-daughter networks.

Smart also emphasises relational practices, but focuses less on situating them in relation to theories of social change than on the significance of exploring the contours of the meanings and emotions attached to such practices. She highlights the importance of the symbolic and idealised families 'we live by' (Gillis, 1996) to developing one's sense of self. It is in this sense that she also indicates the importance of exploring the resources, including social and material resources (Jamieson, 1999), necessary for the construction of a respectable story of family (2007: 106-7) consonant with prevalent social narratives of kinship (Finch, 2007: 77).

Smart develops a 'toolbox' of concepts (memory, imaginary, biography, relationality and embeddedness) through which to explore the social aspects of this emotional life, and to avoid 'flattening' the everyday experiences of love and loss. She argues that the ambivalence and messiness of such experience has been avoided by sociologists who have preferred tidier notions such as 'commitment' and 'care' (2007: 54). She therefore points to the importance of incorporating negative, ambivalent, as well as positive, aspects of kinship relationships into this exploration since:

*avoiding difficult issues can involve the risk of sociological accounts of family becoming unable to represent the full diversity of relationships and emotions, presenting only an anodyne, cuddly version (2007: 139).*

Notably, she highlights the 'haunting powers of blood relationships' (2007: 45) and the feelings of shame if family bonds are broken (2007: 84), a shame influenced by powerful notions of the 'ideal' family (2007: 50-1). As such, 'embeddedness' and 'relationality' are not viewed as necessarily good things.

In contrast, however, much recent work has focused on 'ordinary' families and more positive aspects of kinship. Of course, earlier feminist work did explore very difficult family experiences, notably domestic violence, in an attempt to challenge functionalist accounts of the family and of the private sphere (Dobash and Dobash, 1980). Such work often problematised or avoided accounts of 'love' while highlighting women's unpaid labour as 'care'. Subsequently, however, and perhaps in part as a response to the influence of dystopian views of some 'de-traditionalisation' theorists over policy agendas, such work has slipped a little from focus within the sociology of the family.

Similarly, a concern not to reinforce the sustained 'social problem and social policy orient[ation]' of much work on youth (Leonard, 1980: 3; Gillies et al., 2001) may have influenced many sociologists' focus on adults' rather than young people's relationships. It may also be the case that a focus on research ethics in terms of institutional risk (Halse and Honey, 2007) has contributed to a perception that research into more difficult family experiences, particularly those of young people, should preferably take place in the context of work with a strong 'applied' or transition focus.

In recent years, there has been significant work within the sociologies of childhood and youth into children's various inter and intra-generational kinship relationships (Brannen et al., 1994; Gillies and Lucey, 2006; Punch, 2008). Much of this work has also challenged the 'individualisation' thesis, criticising constructions of children as exclusively passive victims of 'detraditionalisation' (Jensen and McKee, 2003).

Further, much work has identified the enormous significance of family support, whether financial, practical or emotional, to facilitating young people's transitions to adulthood (Jones and Wallace, 1992; Jones, 2002; Holdsworth, 2004; Harris, Charles and Davies, 2006; Henderson et al., 2007) and to creating a sense of closeness and belonging (Gillies et al., 2001: 39).

Some of this work has explored children's understandings and constructions of kin relationships. O'Brien et al. observe the importance to young people (aged 8-14) both of the 'potent image' of the nuclear family and of relationship quality, notably emphasising the need for non-resident fathers to maintain commitment to be acknowledged as parents (1996: 92). Mason and Tipper highlight the importance to



children of being part of a family (2008). They found that children accepted adult designations of family members. At the same time, these authors identify ways in which young children (aged 7-12) creatively 'recon' family or family-like relationships for themselves. They found that the children accepted relatives by blood and marriage as 'permanent'. Respondents did not subvert these formal systems of relationality by 'disowning' 'proper' relatives, nor even by employing more distant genealogical categories for those they disliked (2008: 447). At the same time, however, many respondents specifically mentioned special relationships that *seemed like family* with genealogically unrelated persons (2008: 450-1), who had a long-standing relationship with their parents and who they saw regularly. This 'shared biography' seemed to be important in suggesting a level of permanence or stability of meaning and care. The primacy of the children's immediate 'family of origin' was maintained, however, in that all of the people identified in this way were called 'aunts', 'uncles' and 'cousins', rather than 'parents'.

Given 'the ordinary complexity of kinship' (Mason and Tipper 2008: 443), any clear distinction between 'ordinary' and 'difficult' families is difficult to maintain, and 'ordinary' samples will often reveal more difficult circumstances (Gillies et al., 2001). Most of this work on young people's relationships has focused, however, on 'ordinary' families. Further, to some degree, this work has not been emphasised within broader academic debate on family and personal life which has predominantly focused on the construction and effects of adults' relationships. As such, the 'profound disadvantage experienced by [young people] with little family contact' (Gillies et al., 2001: 42; Jones, 2009) remains relatively unexplored. With a view to contributing further to discussion of alternative theoretical concepts beyond the

'individualisation' thesis, this paper therefore explores the construction of family relationships and practices amongst a group of young people with relatively difficult experiences of family life. The next section will introduce the study on which this paper is based. The young people's accounts of their families of origin and their construction of family-like relationships will then be explored.

### **Empirical background**

This paper is based on a qualitative study with 38 young people (20 women, 18 men) affected by parental substance misuse (both drugs and alcohol).<sup>i</sup> As such the respondents were among the estimated two million young people in the UK affected by parental substance misuse (Manning et al., 2009). In addition to examining the impact of their parents' use, the study aimed to explore themes of resilience and transitions from their perspective, thus interrogating the agency of the young people themselves. Interviews were carried out in urban and semi-rural locations across mainland Scotland between 2002 and 2004 (AUTHOR C et al., 2004).

Most respondents were aged 16-23 (mean age 19; full range 15-27). None was from a minority ethnic group, broadly reflecting the then known ethnic make-up of Scottish substance users. To explore the notion of resilience, a diverse sample of respondents was recruited. Many were from deprived urban or post-industrial communities. However, a few (6) were middle class and varying levels of educational attainment and service use were represented. At the time of the interviews, some were in education or skilled employment, and some had casual jobs or were on benefits. Some had experienced substance use problems themselves.<sup>ii</sup>

Recruitment was a long and difficult process. The respondents were approached through diverse agencies including universities, young people's health projects, young carers' organisations, youth cafés, community drugs and young offenders' projects, and a substitute prescription facility. Potential respondents were provided with information about the project through various 'opt-in' means including general presentations (for example to university students and new starters at the prescription facility), posters and leaflets left in agency premises and direct discussions with clients initiated by project workers. An information sheet explained the focus of the study on the respondents' experience of parental substance misuse; the strategies they had employed to get by in their particular family context; supportive relationships within and outside their families; the types of service use (if any) they had found helpful; and their aspirations and plans for the future. Most interviews took place in voluntary agency premises with keyworkers available for post-interview support, if necessary. The methods chosen, including the 'life grid' at the start of the interviews, reflected the potential sensitivity of the issues raised, and the positive reaction of the interviewees to these methods, is discussed elsewhere (AUTHOR A, 2007). Ethical advice and clearance was received from individual agencies, a large statutory social work department and a local NHS Research Ethics Committee.

Supportive relationships have been identified as critical to the development of resilience in young people (Newman and Blackburn, 2002; Gilligan, 2003), and, as indicated, the respondents were made aware that the interview would touch on such relationships beforehand. Specific questions on supportive relationships followed the completion of the life grid. This was important ethically since the life grid conversation covered diverse aspects of the respondents' lives, allowing them to

disclose both positive and more sensitive experiences and relationships at their own pace, rather than in response to direct interviewer questioning. The few subsequent questions on 'important relationships' were contextualised by this life grid discussion and, as a result, seemed to flow relatively easily.

These questions did elicit many accounts of supportive relationships both within and outwith respondents' families. As such they allowed respondents to 'display' a coherent family narrative (Finch, 2007). Perhaps inevitably, however, in response to these questions, but also elsewhere in their interviews, some respondents reflected on the absence of such support from expected family sources. The fact that these reflections often seemed relatively unprompted by particular questions suggests that this was a significant subject that respondents wanted to use the interviews to discuss. In part, this unexpected finding, as well as the interviewer's sense that some respondents felt themselves to be in a 'hidden' group, is what prompted this article. While a small minority of respondents were upset by such reflections, all wanted to continue the interview, and the interviewer took particular care not to revisit issues and relationships that the life grid conversation had suggested were particularly sensitive to an individual respondent.

The following table presents a snapshot of the family circumstances of the 14 respondents, identified by pseudonyms, cited in this paper. Overall, several respondents had experienced one or more family 'reconstruction', nine had grown up primarily with a sole parent and 15 were from 'intact' families with both birth parents. The table reflects this diversity. While all but three of these respondents (Calum, Kyle and Leanne) were no longer living with their substance-using parent, all except

two (Gerry and Robbie who had spent long periods ‘in care’), had done so within the previous two years and most within the past year. Many of these respondents still lived near to one or more parent. Others had moved further away, but several of these respondents (including Anna, Kelly and Mia) remained in close communication with at least one parent.

The table highlights the difficult family circumstances experienced by these respondents. These often-connected circumstances included parental substance misuse, violence and emotional abuse by a parent (experienced by 25 respondents overall) and domestic violence (witnessed by 14 respondents overall), parental mental illhealth, caring for a parent or siblings and periods in care. All of these respondents’ immediate families (except those of Alice and Calum) lived in deprived circumstances. While, as previously discussed, the ‘ordinary complexity’ of kinship renders any definition of ‘difficult family circumstances’ almost impossible, it seemed that, for the respondents, the circumstances highlighted reflected, or were associated with, significant breaches of expectations around family life.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Difficult Family Circumstances</b>	<b>Residence (at interview)</b>
Alice	19	stepfather’s alcohol use violence, fear of sexual abuse carer for mother and siblings	university (distant from family)
Anna	19	father’s alcohol use emotional abuse, fear mother’s mental illhealth carer for mother	university (distant from family)
Calum	16	father’s drug use emotional abuse sexual abuse of sibling by non-relative	with parents
Carine	19	father’s alcohol use	supported housing

		domestic abuse violence, cruelty	(different area to family)
Craig	18	mother's drugs use previously in care, residential school aggression and emotional absence	with dad, near to mum
Gerry	19	father's alcohol use mother's death, neglect numerous care placements	in hostel (different area to family)
Kelly	21	mum's alcohol use and mental illhealth violence, emotional abuse father previously in prison carer for sibling and mother	on own in different city
Kyle	19	mother's drug use sexual abuse by relative period in residential school carer for grandparents	with mum
Leanne	18	mother's alcohol use emotional abuse	between friend and mum
Lucy	17	mother's alcohol use father in prison domestic abuse by mother's partners violence, emotional abuse previously in care	on own with child, but near to mother
Mia	18	mum's and stepdad's polydrug use and mental illhealth carer for siblings	with partner in different city
Rachel	17	mother's alcohol use violence, neglect carer for mother	with partner, but near to mother
Robbie	25	various foster parents' alcohol use emotional abuse, violence domestic violence numerous care placements	on own
Rory	18	stepfather's alcohol use domestic violence violence	supported housing in different city

**Young people's accounts of their 'families of origin'**

Like young people interviewed in other studies (Mason and Tipper, 2008; O'Brien et al., 1996), these respondents' accounts reflected the influence both of idealised notions of the nuclear family, as well as a concern for the 'quality' of these relationships, indicated by practices of support (Becker and Charles, 2006). As illustrated in this section, the latter, alongside illustrations of the emotional effects of breaches of expected parenting practices, were particularly salient within their accounts.

Most accounts of the structure of reconstituted families were quite matter of fact:

*I've got two brothers and one sister. [...] Paul stays with my dad in [area 1], Joe stays with my mum and her boyfriend in [area 2] and my other [siblings] stay with their mum in [another town]. See it's complicated [..]. My dad had me and Paul with my mum and had my brother Dean and my sister Melanie with another woman. And my mother had another bairn with another man (Craig 18, mother drug use).*

Craig's use of the word 'complicated' was more an artefact of the difficulty of representing his family visually on the life grid tool than an attempt to highlight a non-traditional family structure. Further, this quotation suggests that the incorporation of new siblings into the family was not difficult, although not inevitable. As in several other respondents' accounts, the status of Craig's separated parents' new partners is less assured, however, in that none seemed to have attained the status of 'step-parent'.

This observation suggests the importance of practices to building and maintaining relationships, and many respondents highlighted ways in which parents had breached normative, embedded expectations of parenting practices. Here, Kyle reflects on the absence of his biological father who he had met only twice:

*Bairns deserve to have two parents eh? [...] I was always a football player. [...] And there wasn't any dad there to watch me play, there wasn't any dad to take me to training, there wasn't any dad to go to parents' evenings at school, ...to give me a birthday card, [...] ..take me places, doing all the normal things what a dad should be doing (19, mother drug use).*

The emotional and symbolic importance of such practices to the respondents is further reflected in the accounts of a significant minority (15 overall) who, in contrast to Mason and Tipper's younger respondents, recounted that they had, or thought they should, reject not only 'proper' family members, but their biological parents, for having breached what they saw as fundamental obligations to them. For example:

*I went into care and [...] he didnae even bother to fucking phone me or fuck all. So I just tell him to fuck off (Gerry, 19, father alcohol use).*

*SW: So how do you get on with your mother?*

*Kelly: (laughs) I don't. Never spoke to her since she threw me out. [...] You might think this is sad but I wouldnae even bother if she died tomorrow because of the things that were said and done (21, mother alcohol use).*



Further, a few of these respondents, including Craig, had presented a parent with an ultimatum in relation to their behaviour or were in the process of trying to reduce or break off contact at least temporarily.

In isolation, the two accounts presented above might suggest a logical, even easy breach in relationship with their families of origin where expectations of certain practices were disappointed. However, closer analysis revealed the difficulty of such processes which seemed to offend embedded moral obligations to parents, as well as reflecting the emotional significance of not being able to draw on a coherent family narrative. Rachel's use of the metaphor of 'breaking the chains' attaching her to her role as her mother's carer illustrates this vividly:

*Rachel: It's hard but ..... I've got to break away, I've got to break the chains.*

*SW: That's the way you see it? Like chains? [...] Feeling that you should be looking after your mother?*

*Rachel: I should be looking after her, but I can't. Cos I want to get on with my own life now (17, mother alcohol use).*

Importantly, this metaphor, developed through discussions with friends, also provided her with a positive narrative for a development which she feared others might characterise as 'selfish' in the light of her mother's problems, and which deprived her of her role as carer which she had previously valued. Similar moral uncertainty is suggested by Kelly's emphasis on her mother's, rather than her own, role in severing their relationship. In the above excerpt, she emphasises angrily that she did not care whether her mother lived or died. Here however, her words reflect the continuing emotional conflict associated with leaving her mother:

*If I'd just left on my own will [...] maybe stuff that's happened might have been my fault.... I think that's maybe why [...] I stayed so long. I don't know why I stayed so long.... It was my mum! [...] But I wasnae the one that chose to leave (Kelly, 21, mother alcohol use).*

She further reflected on the potential future consequences of this non-contact:

*Like female friends they're really [close] with their mums..they can always go back, and sometimes I think what happens when I have a kid and you're meant to have your mum there?*

Unlike the members of same-sex 'families of choice' interviewed by Weeks et al. (1999), these respondents' accounts suggest that for them, claiming to have rejected members of their family of origin, and particularly a biological parent, was not easy. Rachel's 'narrative of self-invention' was exceptional in our sample, as well as expressive of this difficulty. Furthermore, several respondents saw their difficulties in laying claim to a family of origin as a source of shame (Finch, 2007), illustrating the haunting nature of these blood ties (Smart, 2007: 45). A degree of idealisation of other families' relationships and sense of loss at her own pervades this quotation from Lucy, for example:

*If I was at my chum's house, which I always was because I was never at home...and just to see how well they got on with their mum and their dad and all their brothers and sisters. They were so happy sitting having meals together. Going out and doing stuff. And I found it pretty hard just to think why could I nae have a family like that? (17, mother alcohol use).*

Carine stated that she had ‘no family’, and recounted physical feelings of panic on meeting any member of her family of origin. However, like Lucy, she felt embarrassed by this situation and reported finding everyday circumstances that highlighted this absence difficult:

*Carine: The first time I registered [at the doctor’s], they asked for an emergency contact [...] I put like my support worker [...] [upset]. They asked me why I didn’t want to put my parents in and I went, I went ‘you don’t need to know why I don’t want to put my parents in you [angry]..I just don’t want to..’*

*SW: You felt quite defensive about that...*

*Carine: Whenever anything comes up about my family I get very defensive, and start arguing (19, father alcohol use).*

The enduring significance of both actual and idealised ties to families of origin is further illustrated by many respondents’ accounts of trying to maintain, nurture and rebuild relationships with parents, in spite of current or past difficulties. One or two respondents spoke of excellent relationships with parents:

*I can talk to my dad... There’s certain things I can’t speak to my granny about [...]. But my dad and Lewis and Jake I can speak to about anything (Craig, 18, mother drug use).*

Like others, this account reflected a degree of idealisation of a relationship with the one parent the young person felt they could trust; Craig had not always been able to rely on his father, who had spent time in prison. However, he strongly contrasted his current relationship with his father with that with his drug-using mother, who he described as being emotionally absent.

Several respondents worked hard in their interviews to defend parents from potential criticism:

*She's never, ever believed in hitting any of us kids [...]. She's always made sure we're bathed, fed, clean bed [...] Even though she done [amphetamines] [...] she was a good, she is a good mum (Mia, 19, mother polydrug use).*

*The drink never affected my ....wellbeing... My mum, she always done her best in me [...] Made sure that I was at school and that I had nice clothes (Leanne, 17, mother alcohol use).*

Such accounts of parents having 'done their best' to meet basic needs, do not reflect Giddens' notions of mutual disclosure or 'pure relationships' (1992). They suggest other expectations of parenting practices, influenced, perhaps, by long experience of parents' problems, potentially by caring for that parent, as well as a concern to defend a parent, often a sole parent, who had shown they cared *about* them (AUTHOR D et al., 2008). They also suggest the symbolic importance of family to the respondents and their willingness to maintain, and if necessary rebuild, parental relations in spite of very difficult emotional or practical circumstances. This concern is illustrated by Anna's reflections on her father's attempts to make up for years of heavy drinking:

*I think whatever problems mum and dad both had...they still loved us and... want us to be a family and it was a strong sense of like, [...] they were good people at heart. It's just whatever things got in the way (19, father alcohol use).*

A poignant illustration of the symbolic importance of families of origin is provided by the three respondents who named much younger siblings, who did not live with them, as very important people in their lives. For example:

*SW: Who are you closest to now?*

*Rory: My brother. [...] He's four...still young. He's just started school [...] and he loves school [...] and so I'm glad he's no going down the same path as [me].*

*SW: And why are you close to him, do you think?*

*Rory: I dunno, it's just ever since the day he was born [...]. Even though he stays down South I still like phone him up and [...] like he'll talk back and aye it's sound (18, stepfather alcohol use).*

*SW: You mentioned that you were quite close to your wee brother?*

*Leanne: I used to be. I love him to bits because he's my brother but he doesnae really see me as his sister, eh. He's only 8. But he might do when he gets older.*

*(17, mother alcohol use).*

These respondents were not, therefore, necessarily in close contact with the younger relatives identified, nor, given the age difference, could these relationships have been based on mutual disclosure (Giddens, 1992). The fact these relationships were constructed with much younger relatives, whose situation could not influence their own, may also reflect their negative experience of power within family relationships. However, they seem to be creative attempts to construct and maintain a narrative of close or potentially close kin, reflecting the enduring symbolic possibility of family relationships to these young people, as well as the importance of both giving and receiving love (AUTHOR D et al., 2008: 475-7). In the next section, it is argued that

the emotional and symbolic significance of normative notions of family and kinship practices to the respondents is further illustrated by their accounts of developing 'family-like' relationships outside of their families of origin.

### **Young people's accounts of developing family-like relationships**

The importance of 'family-like' relationships has been explored in various contexts discussed earlier (Weeks et al., 1999; Becker and Charles, 2006; Mason and Tipper, 2008). Here, several respondents highlighted the great emotional and practical importance to them of these relationships during certain periods. Further, their accounts suggested that a particularly broad range of people, including family members, family friends, friends and even professionals, were incorporated into these relationships.

Like the members of the 'families of choice' analysed by Weeks et al. (1999), but unlike the children interviewed by Mason and Tipper (2008), Craig, and other respondents including Kelly and Gerry, spoke of certain of his own friends in family-like terms:

*Jake's mother's been friends with my mother since we were wee....my [parents] stayed right next door to Jake's mum and her boyfriend and we'd all do things when we were younger. My dad used to babysit him and his mum used to babysit me... So actually I can talk to Jake about it, and ... to his mum [...] And I can talk to Lewis about it because [...] he used to come up my house when we were laddies. [.....] They know what I've gone through right, because they know what she was like before (18, mother drug use).*

At the same time, Craig emphasises several aspects of these friendships which recall Mason and Tipper's (2008) explorations of how younger children 'reckoned' family-like relationships with their parents' friends. Notably, he stresses elements of 'shared biography' in the way these friendships were embedded in their parents' relationships over time, and particularly, that these friends and their parents knew him and his mother before she developed a drug problem.

Similarly, Kyle emphasised his 'shared biography' with a cousin ('Davie') who he called 'friend' and with a friend ('Joe'), who he calls 'brother':

*I talk to my cousin Davie eh. My cousin Davie, my wee 'brother Joe' [laughs]. That's what he's like, wee Joe, he's been like a brother. My cousin, my brother, my pal (19, mother drug use).*

Some respondents also had very strong relationships with adult friends of their parents or with friends' parents, but unlike the younger children in Mason and Tipper's study (2008), a few used much closer family terminology to describe these relationships and to emphasise their emotional and practical significance. These adults were presented as substitute 'normal' parents for a particular period of time. Alice, for example identified her mother's best friend, who was also her godmother, as the most important person to her:

*Whenever there was a big problem she was..always there for me. And I always felt she was a second mum. I know that if something had happened to my mum, as a child I would have moved in with her (19, stepfather alcohol use).*

Carine emphasised the importance of a friend's mother who acted in the 'motherly' way her own mother did not:

*We went to our prom night and she was like 'wait, wait I need to take your picture' (laughs) and 'you need to make sure you get home on time!' acting like my mum'*

She further explained:

*I would go there [friend's house] so often and her mum would say.... 'you are like a daughter to me' (19, father alcohol use).*

Unlike Alice who could draw on her confidante's official status as godmother, Carine therefore emphasised that this perception of a mother-daughter relationship originated with, or was reinforced by, her friend's mother, a point to which we will return. Other respondents, including Kelly and Leanne, also emphasised that very close friends' parents allowed them to stay the night whenever they wished, often arriving at very late hours and without warning.

A small group of respondents also reflected on 'family-like' relationships with service workers, and often specifically contrasted the behaviour of these workers with that of their own relatives. As illustrated by the following excerpts, these young people again used very close family terminology to represent these relationships. They also emphasised the workers' actions and attitudes, rather than their own, in creating these relationships:

*She's [youth café worker] been like more an auntie to me than .. any of my other aunties fae my close family. She's more family than they are [..] I can talk to her about anything (Calum, 16, father drug use).*



*He's my befriender [...] and he's been more of a father than anybody (Robbie, 25, foster parents alcohol use).*

*Carine: [My keyworker] acts like my mother [laughs]....*

*SW: Yes?*

*Carine: [..] Like she'll want to come in and do my washing. And I'll be like I don't want you controlling my underwear! (19, father alcohol use)*

### **Discussion**

In a short paper, it is impossible to do justice to the full range of family relationships discussed or to their dynamic nature over time. This paper adds to a growing literature which has contested the individualisation thesis and re-evaluated kinship. Drawing particularly on respondents' accounts of parental-type relationships, it highlights the interest of exploring the emotional and symbolic significance of family and associated expected family practices to young people with difficult family experiences. As such, this paper also contributes to a developing discussion of alternative concepts of family and other relationships, and notably those proposed by Charles et al. (2008) and Smart (2007).

In contrast to the claims of individualisation theorists, this paper has highlighted the tenacity of idealised notions of family closeness and moral obligation to family among a group of young people who had experienced difficult circumstances in diverse family structures, as well as the related difficulties these discourses caused them. For example, a significant minority of respondents' accounts reflected the sense of loss and threat posed to their ontological security by serious problems in their

family of origin. Indeed, as in Kelly's discussion of being thrown out by her mother, such accounts often incorporated lengthy justifications emphasising the parent's, rather than the young person's, role in precipitating this situation. As suggested by Rachel's metaphor of 'breaking the chains', and in contrast to Weeks et al's analysis of 'families of choice', there did not seem to be discourses readily available to these young people to justify the transgression of not maintaining contact with an often vulnerable and dependent parent, or to paper over this gaping hole in a coherent family narrative. Other respondents engaged in lengthy defences of parents they saw as having 'done their best', or highlighted 'close' relationships with much younger members of their extended families, perhaps partly as a means of 'displaying' a coherent family narrative (Finch, 2007) in the interview context. The respondents' accounts of family-like connections with their own friends, family-friends and professionals further illustrated the importance to them of making a claim to a family narrative. Again, Carine and others preferred to point to the role of these others in creating these relationships, perhaps partly as a way of emphasising, in spite of their problematic relationships with their family of origin, that they belonged to a collectivity that was not constructed entirely or primarily by them, something bigger than themselves.

Reflecting on these data in the light of recent moves to develop alternative concepts to the individualisation thesis is instructive. Both Charles et al. (2008) and Smart (2007) explore the significance of 'family practices' and how these are constructed in varying socio-economic contexts. Both books point to great inequalities in social, cultural, spatial and generational 'resources' for constructing and reproducing relationships (Smart, 2007: 106-7). Indeed, Charles et al. emphasise the likelihood of increasing

future diversity in family experience, influenced by variations in class, place and identity (2008: 232, 214). To an important degree, the data presented in this paper may be usefully analysed in terms of the presence, and particularly the absence, of expected caring practices within some families, and the extent to which these may be substituted for elsewhere by younger people with few material resources.

Further, as discussed, Becker and Charles carefully distinguish between different meanings and hierarchies of meanings or 'layers' of family in the four socially and culturally differentiated sites of the Swansea re-study (2006). These 'layers', privileging families 'of origin' and 'of procreation' and then 'like family' networks, all of which required maintenance through caring practices, are helpful in thinking about the level of relational 'resources' available to 'our' respondents. The fact that most Swansea respondents in each site saw their parents or adult children regularly reinforces the culturally isolated position of those of 'our' respondents who did not. Further, the respondents' age also limited their resources for relationship construction, since none, including the few with children, had developed a 'family of procreation'. In addition, like Kelly, Carine and Lucy, several female respondents from poorer socio-economic backgrounds reported little or not contact with their mothers, and, as such, did not have access to the kin relationship identified as most supportive by Swansea respondents living in similarly deprived circumstances. In such circumstances, the practical and emotional importance of 'like family' relationships with a wide range of others over varying periods of time to young people who cannot rely on their own families and who live in constrained circumstances (Jones, 2002; 2009) is highlighted. These data also suggest the need for further research into such supportive practices uninflected by disembodied concepts of liberal autonomy.

In these data, like those of Becker and Charles therefore, meanings of family intersected with ways of 'doing family'. The respondents paid particular attention to managing, repairing and redefining the boundaries of family in their accounts. Such boundary moves could also usefully be seen as a set of practices in response to difficult family circumstances, as well as to the ideologies, structures and institutions that surround 'family'. At the same time, however, analysing such data exclusively through notions of 'practice' or 'care' may run the risk of losing something significant from what the young people said and how they said it. As Smart puts it, such an approach can 'flatten' data, and we suggest, may not quite convey or do justice to the haunting power of cultural ideals of family and the emotional significance for the respondents of the absence of such experiences in their own lives. Illustrations of these emotional effects included Lucy's anguished comparison between her own and her friends' families, the sense of loss and longing in some respondents' constructions of 'close' relationships with much younger relatives they saw rarely, and in accounts of the importance of friends who shared memories of their parent 'before drugs'. Further, Carine's response to being required to name an adult family contact when registering with her GP suggests anger at being unable to escape from 'normative' expectations of young people's family life. These often only indirectly prompted reflections permeated some interviews, underlining their importance to the respondents and their desire to talk about these issues. However, it is suggested that their analysis might be somewhat reduced by examination exclusively through notions of practices of care or boundary work around the family, and that there is a need for further work exploring and communicating the emotional significance of such embodied absences and their effects.

Such examples point to the interest of building on explorations of practices through Smart's notion of 'embeddedness'. The types of loss described above might be explored in terms of a pronounced lack of embeddedness in relation both to immediate family and to societal norms more generally. The notion of embeddedness, or lack of it, might also more readily convey the social origins of such strong feelings of yearning and loss, including their links to the 'increasingly iconic status [...] in our cultural imaginary' accorded to family (Mason, 2008: 39; Déchaux, 2003). Illouz also highlights the pervasive influence and sociological importance of the 'psychoanalytic imagination', according to which *'the nuclear family is the very point of origin of the self- the site from which the story and the history of the self could begin'* (2007: 7). In the contemporary cultural context, it is difficult for young people whose lives cannot match up to this ideal not to feel a sense of loss at and of being undermined by the absence from their lives of, or disruption to, expected caring practices and relationships. As Gillis puts it, the ideal of 'the family' (often reinforced by legal structures) 'inflicts real pain on those who do not conform to a single, narrowly defined notion of family' (1996: 238).

In short, the analysis presented in this paper suggests that such emotional responses are socially constructed and significant. It might be justifiably argued that they form an integral aspect of an appreciation of diverse socially located and embodied family practices and of the resources available to support such practices. It is suggested however that an exclusive language of practice may nonetheless not be quite adequate to communicate the emotional, embodied nature of these aspects of what respondents tell us about their lives. In addition to further research into diverse practices and

underlying resources, it is argued that employing notions such as embeddedness, and exploring the contours and emotional significance of significant absences, can add to the depth of our analysis of family practices. Such a language might also better communicate these concerns more broadly, potentially helping to avoid the further marginalisation of such young people in political and policy rhetoric around families.

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<sup>ii</sup> This number was inflated however by our recruitment from a community prescribing facility.