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THE POLITICS OF CONCEPTS: FAMILY AND ITS (PUTATIVE?) REPLACEMENTSⁱ

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Abstract

The central concern of this paper is that there has been a move within British sociology to subsume (or sometimes, even replace) the concept of 'family' within ideas about personal life, intimacy and kinship. It calls attention to what will be lost sight of by this conceptual move: an understanding of the collective whole beyond the aggregation of individuals; the creation of lacunae that will be (partially) filled by other disciplines; and engagement with policy developments and professional practices that focus on 'family' as a core, institutionalised, idea. While repudiating the necessity (and indeed, pointing out the dangers) of providing any definitive answer to definitions of 'family', the paper calls for critical reflection on the implications of these conceptual moves.

Keywords: family, family policy, family sociology, intimacy, kinship, personal life

Introduction

In recent years British sociology has seen a move away from use of the term 'family'. This shift has been the case especially in conceptual discussions and qualitatively-based research studies that focus on how people understand their close relationships and emotional connections, behaviour and activities together, obligations and responsibilities, everyday lives and interactions, within and across households. In this commentary, we reflect on the sociological and political implications of this conceptual turn. We argue for retaining the concept of family on the basis that it enables sociologists to grasp particular aspects of social reality that may otherwise be inaccessible, and to engage critically with contemporary political rhetoric and policy developments.

The movement towards a conceptual shift that would displace the concept of 'family' (however this may be defined) seeks to subordinate and re-orientate the concept of family within, or (less commonly) replace it entirely with, ideas that focus on personal life, (particular forms of) intimacy, and kinship (for example, Allison James and Penny Curtis' (2010) discussion of parents' and children's narratives of eating practices in families uses the language of 'personal life').ⁱⁱ While these recent conceptualizations have their own value, the tendency to privilege such notions raises a number of potentially problematic issues. One concern may be that where this conceptual shift is taken up without sufficient reflection, then, sociological research may risk analytic confusion. For example, how might we understand the relationship between 'family', 'personal life', and wider 'culture'? Indeed, it was precisely the view of family life as 'natural' and somehow 'outside' of 'society' (and therefore beyond the scope of sociological analysis) that constituted a key concern in the twentieth-century feminist revival of family sociology (Yeatman 1986; Fraser, 2009). Maintaining attention to 'families' is crucial in understanding people's senses of connection and belonging in ways that stand over and above the sense of being an 'individual'. Further issues that we consider below relate to the broader politics of concepts, such as the meanings of family for marginalized groups and the politics of inclusion, and those political processes which focus on individuals and families as key sites for remedying social ills detached from any impetus towards wider transformations of those powerfully institutionalized processes that are implicated.

In contrast, work that involves statistical analysis appears to retain a commitment to the term family, albeit that it usually equates this with household (and thus with co-resident units: Sweeting and Seaman 2005). Change, as decline or increase in particular family forms or structures, is demarcated and tracked, for example (e.g. www.statistics.gov.uk/focuson/families/). A focus on 'the family' as an institution may seem to be required if some macro-sociological questions are to be posed (Bernardes 1987), such as how 'the family' functions for society, or issues of global convergence or divergence such as whether or not economic development leads to nuclear family structures. Further, governance issues underpin a 'facts and figures' retention of the concept of family: political statements and policy analyses need to refer to 'family' as a defined benchmark institution (challenging though this may be, Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2012) in legislation, procedures and guidelines, and as the potential site of professional intervention. Indeed, family has become a focus of recent intense political and policy judgement that warrants and requires sociological attention.

In turn, retaining and using family as a primary concept raises its own problematics. For example, one key issue is quite how to avoid pinning down the concept of 'family', maintaining a critical reflexive sociology of family (Heaphy, 2011), and keeping its fluid everyday meanings clearly in sight, alongside an analysis of how the language of family works as a privileged relational form at a macro-level of policy, law, and politics (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2012). This is the point from which we are engaging with academic, political and policy debates, which construct a particular version of family and its members that is variously individualized, classed, raced, and so on. In what we acknowledge to be a provocative commentary, we argue that however problematic the concept of family may be, it needs to be retained alongside other concepts for its own particular theoretical, empirical and political value and the specific analytic and critical work that it enables. The concept of family allows sociologists to capture important aspects of people's connected lived experiences, and to engage directly in political debates about contemporary family policies and their consequences.

We begin our commentary by looking at debates against and for using the concept of 'family' to address a range of intra and inter generational ties and relationships and domestic and residential lifestyles. We then consider its sociological consequences and implications in three analytic respects: (1) the inability of other concepts to capture the particular sets of understandings raised by 'family'; (2) other disciplines filling the vacuum created by the sociological shift away from 'family'; and (3) the ability to engage critically with major political and policy developments in the family field. For such purposes, it is precisely the focus on 'family' that is needed, as a problematic but crucial feature of fluid everyday language and practice, rather than any particular definition of 'family' (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2012).

Debates About Turning Away From 'Family'

A reason put forward for the conceptual turn away from focusing on families at all, or at least subsuming and reorienting them within a (putatively) broader term, is the limits and problems identified with normative and functionalist ideas of 'the family'. In Carol Smart's call for a new direction that takes the idea of personal life as its starting point, she points out that the strong second wave feminist critique of 'the family' as an ideological stereotype of a heterosexual two-parent nuclear family with breadwinning husband and father, home-making wife and mother, and their biological children, is a significant reason why researchers may avoid using the term:

Ever since the interventions of feminist scholarship into the area of families, the private sphere, domestic life and gender relationships, the term 'family' has been rendered problematic ...

Following this, feminist work not only tried to avoid using the word family, but to strip away the ideological veil that shrouded discussions of families by deploying more neutral terms...

(Smart 2007: 26/27)

For many second wave feminists then, as Smart usefully identifies, the normalized benchmark of (nuclear) family as institutionalized within economic, employment and educational systems, and as repressive for women and children, has had longstanding effects that need to be countered, including in sociological analyses.

The conceptual turn away from family that stemmed from a feminist critique has been reinvigorated by ideas associated with individualization theses. Indeed, part of Smart's concern is to avoid subsuming the individual within the family (or household) – undoubtedly a significant, continuing and appropriate concern of feminist scholarship. Versions of the general individualization thesis of sociological theorizing over the last two decades or so, go further than this, however. They have in common an argument that there has been a qualitative change in the character and meaning of commitment and relationships. Ideas about autonomy and equality have ousted, or at least are beginning to replace, the traditional obligations and gendered and generational hierarchies associated with familyⁱⁱⁱ. The statistical analysis of trends that retains a focus on family structures that we referred to earlier, ironically, is drawn on as evidence for this change: increased rates of divorce, cohabitation, and growing diversity in family forms (but see Gilles 2003, for a critical review of some of this evidence). Conceptually, Anthony Giddens has referred to the family as a 'shell institution' in which the form has changed and opened up (along with nation, work and other traditional concepts): 'The outer shell remains, but inside they have changed' (1999: 19), while Ulrich Beck terms family a 'zombie category' that is 'dead and still alive' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 203). In this context, Giddens (1992) particularly focuses on one version of intimacy (termed 'disclosing intimacy' by Lynn Jamieson 1998), which in his version of the individualization thesis now carries the weight of the meaning of closeness of self and other. In Giddens' view, then, disclosing intimacy is posed as a replacement focus for addressing the contingency and diversity of contemporary personal relationship. For others, the notion of kinship is said to be able to capture contemporary fluidity in ties and residence (e.g. Finch 2006).

It is important to note, though, that there have been other conceptual responses and rejoinders to a second wave feminist critique of family, and to the conceptual tensions between ideas of family and of individualization (Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards, 2011, pp. 1-2). Widely used and accepted responses include adoption of the term 'families' to acknowledge the diversity of lifestyles and relationships that might be referred to as 'family', and/or using the word 'family' as an adjective as in 'family lives' or 'family practices', or a verb as in 'doing family' rather than as a noun (with Morgan a leading influence in such conceptual grammar, e.g. 1996, 2011). Crucially for our argument here, the second wave feminist critique of 'the family' was challenged by Black feminists who argued that, while white middle- and upper-class women may experience family as a source of stultification or oppression, for minority ethnic and working-class women it can be a place of refuge and resistance in a racist and unequal society (e.g. hooks 1982; Bryan et al. 1985):

... concepts which are central to feminist theory become problematic in their application to black women's lives: [including] 'the family' ... We need to recognize that during slavery, periods of colonialism, and under the present authoritarian state, the black family has been a site of political and cultural resistance to racism.

(Carby 1996 (1982): 63/64)

Sexuality presents a further site for debate around use of the term family. On the one hand, there are arguments that not only is the concept of family unable to contain the sheer diversity of practices around intimate and caring relationships, but that it is inherently heteronormative and exclusionary. Using the term family at all is said to invoke an imitation of 'traditional' nuclear families, taking blood family as a basic point of reference, and confusing varied sets of relationships built on different values (e.g. Budgeon and Roseneil 2004):

We are reduced to playing subversively with normative identities – attempting, for example, to 'resignify' the family for communities that defy the usual assumption about what constitutes a family. These efforts, while valuable, can have assimilative rather than subversive consequences; having de-gayed themselves, gays melt into the culture they like to think of themselves as undermining.

(Bersani 1995: 5)

On the other hand, as the above quote from Leo Bersani indicates, in the context of sexuality studies there are those who advocate a continuing engagement with the language of 'family' as a political,

emotional, social, material and practical project (e.g. Goss and Strongheart 1997; Weeks et al. 2001). The term 'families of choice' in particular is used to affirm a range and mix of blood, partner and friendship ties and commitments that stretch beyond the conventional couple. Using the word 'family' in this view, then, denotes, in Jeffrey Weeks' phrase: 'The world we have won'; a world in which non-heterosexual families of choice are part of a broader politics of inclusion:

Many LGBT people, traditionally seen as excluded from the scope of conventional family life, are simultaneously rethinking the meaning of same-sex relationships and developing new meanings of family ... Non-heterosexual relationships and families of choice are part of a wider struggle over meaning, both participating in and reflecting a wider transformation of family relationships ... We may see [family] as a series of practical everyday activities which we live: through activities such as mutual care, the division of labour in the home, looking after dependants and 'relations', all of which practices LGBT people regularly engage in.

(Weeks 2007: 180-1)

In sum then, family can be summoned up as much in debate and agenda that are challenging oppression and tradition, as it is used to shore up stultifying and repressive norms. Part of this ability to challenge may well rest in the conceptual work that 'family' does.

What Does 'Family' Do Conceptually?

David Morgan suggests that while family is not necessarily superior to or more important than other relationships, it nonetheless remains of significance and value to people as a distinct, designated aspect of their everyday activities and experiences (2011: 33-53, 172-177). Indeed, it would be hard to understand the significance of his concept of 'family practices' if this were not so. Both intimacy and personal life may overlap with family, conceptually and empirically, but they do not equate to it:

In the case of intimacies and personal life I have suggested that these are not simply more general terms which include or encompass family relationships ... While there are many points of overlap and connections between the study of intimacy, of personal life and family, these areas can be studied separately while also being aware of points of overlap and articulation. (p. 176).

Indeed, for Morgan, family practices are illuminating sociologically because of the particular ways that different dimensions of social life (such as time, emotions, bodies) are overlaid within them.

Elsewhere one of us has elaborated the ways that the notion of family enables analytic attention to a sense of connected 'close-knit selves' and the 'social person' that is hard to grasp through theoretical and methodological frameworks that emphasise the individual, however relationally conceived (Ribbens McCarthy, 2012, forthcoming). People can use the language of family in their everyday lives in a way that is a vital cultural and personal signifier of deep and ambivalent desires for and fears about togetherness, belonging and connectedness. Ideas about personal life and kinship informed by notions of relationality rather than individualism (e.g. Mason 2008, 2011; Smart 2007) usefully draw attention to how individuals may identify and act upon affinities and ties, but they cannot deal with any meaning of family as a collective fusion beyond an aggregation of individual persons-in-relationships, where the communal interest is experienced largely as equivalent to self-interest, and the sum is greater than its individual parts:

If we focus primarily on personal lives ..., we have to work at ensuring the relational is also kept in focus. But if we use 'family' as our conceptual lens, we are inevitably focusing on relationships and relationality ... 'Family' is able to pull many disparate relational experiences together – including the possibility of family culture in its own right, the significance of time past and future, and the sense of being part of something bigger – in a way other terms are unable to do.

(Ribbens McCarthy, 2012, forthcoming)

Indeed, ideas about personal life and kinship affinities trap a consideration of familial generational connections across time in a combination of 'past present' and 'future present' (Adam and Groves, 2007), with past and future generations of family all pivoting around a present individual self, however relationally conceived. For example, while the lens of personal life may pose a concern with genealogy as the individual person seeking a sense of connectedness across generations that says something about their own identity (the past present), alongside this desire, there may be reasons that transcend individual connection and personal identity. These can involve an individual decentring that stretches backwards and forwards in time: a sense of responsibility, reverence and respect for ancestors that has

both sociopolitical and spiritual components; and a sense of generational continuity that passes knowledge about previous generations down to future generations:

A gift of social memory, a place in social and family history ... a social responsibility to the future of history ... a search for meaning that extends and transcends personal identity.

(Hackstaff 2009: 140/142/143)

Indeed Karla Hackstaff quotes an African-American woman's pride in her forebears and family history: '... we've served in the military, we've served, we've bought property. I mean we haven't been little, shoddy people at all, not at all' (p. 143). Here the individual is an integral element that is not distinct or clearly separable in any way from the generational familial 'we'. Such collective genealogical understandings and ideas about families enduring through time can be especially important and powerful where people's minority collective identities and memories have been devalued or attempts made to erase them.

The circumvention of the concept of family has undoubtedly also generated important and sophisticated insights into the way that relationships are lived and understood, but in doing so the alternatives used place the individual as the core unit of social life, obscuring other qualities. The sense of deep belonging, 'we'ness and collectivity that we are arguing the term 'family' can capture in ways that notions of personal life, intimacy and kinship cannot, is not warm, cosy and idealistic. As we have indicated above, it is ambivalent, and there is of course a political core to family relationships and practices too. Power is exercised between family members through the processes associated with social divisions and institutionalizations of gender and generation. Inequalities and exploitation in the division of labour, hierarchies and discrimination in the distribution of resources, and oppression and subordination through domestic violence and abuse, are features of families and family life alongside – or indeed as a fundamental and inextricable part of – relations of care, obligation, commitment, belonging and togetherness (Ribbens McCarthy, 2008). Indeed, families may be the site in which people first experience institutionalized and categorical inequalities and hierarchies, which then come to be felt as 'natural' and inevitable in (for example) educational or employment contexts (Ribbens 1994). Such a double-edged politics to everyday living is part and parcel of the concept of family, and points to the importance of retaining and using the term to enable a much-needed analysis of its sociological and political significance. Instead, as we now discuss, other disciplinary perspectives may be gaining a purchase on our understanding of the nature of family life.

What Fills the Analytic Lacunae?

Concern about the direction of theorizing in relation to family has also been raised by Michael Gilding (2010), who has argued recently in the *British Journal of Sociology* that what he calls 'the new orthodoxy' of the sociology of personal life has two main dangers. First, it overstates open-ended reflexivity at the expense of institutionalized convention, and second, it cedes significant areas of the study of family that could be informed by sociology to other disciplines, notably evolutionary psychology and behavioural economics. The examples that Gilding provides concern paternity uncertainty, family inheritance and family businesses. He argues that evolutionary psychologists' preoccupation with biologicistic sexual strategies at work in parental uncertainty has received more attention than is warranted, ignoring the overwhelming evidence of enduring institutional effects of marriage and monogamy. In the case of family inheritance studies, these have had the attention of economists stressing utility maximization, muting a sociological focus on the trajectory of inheritance law and the norm of equal inheritance among children. Similarly, family business studies are shaped largely by economic theories that are concerned with competitive advantage and collective utility, but leave aside the interesting sociological issue of the endurance of primogeniture. According to Gilding, theories of personal life and open-ended intimacy cannot address the continuity of normative familial conventions, and thus prevalent understandings of family in the fields that sociology leaves untilled are imbued with ideas about biologicistic competition and neo-liberal economic rationality:

The new orthodoxy not only directs attention to reflexivity at the expense of convention, but also abdicates understanding in the field to frameworks grounded in biologicistic and economic understandings of human behaviour ... Not surprisingly, these disciplines routinely overlook the social dimensions of these family practices ... A sociological perspective has much to offer in understanding these family practices, but not if it insists that practices are necessarily reflexive and contingent, immune to institutionalisation.

(p. 773)

It is not just academic research understandings that are at stake if the analytic lacunae left by sociology shifting away from addressing family explicitly is filled by other disciplines. Consideration of the understandings of family that are used by professionals to channel various welfare provisions and to

determine who is the focus of their services also illustrate the need for a sociological 'take' on 'family' (as distinct from personal life, intimacy, or kinship) (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2012). This conceptual terrain has been occupied by theoretical frameworks such as systemic theory or ecological approaches, which have been developed from a more therapeutic or psychological set of concerns. Family systems theory, for example, conceptualizes a family as an organic or machine-like interconnecting unit, with family members understood to be influencing each other continuously and in a reciprocal manner, even if they may subjectively experience themselves as distant from their family. The implication for practice is that a change in one person's functioning will necessarily lead to changes in the functioning of others (e.g. Sutcliffe et al. 1998). This systemic approach has been robustly critiqued for reifying family (Gubrium and Holstein 1990), and challenged to incorporate attention to, and analysis of, inequalities and power between family members that are underpinned by powerful institutionalized processes (Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards, 2011). In response, ecological theories, which originated with Uri Bronfenbrenner's notion (1979) of family as nested within a set of progressively wider settings, have been gaining increasing prominence as professionals seek to find a framework that pays due attention to the 'contexts' in which individuals and families live.

Bronfenbrenner's developmental psychology model, Ecological Systems Theory, thus seems to offer a way of gaining an all-round picture of what is happening at (1) the individual biological and psychological level; (2) the level of close relationships in the immediate household/family; (3) in the community and social systems in which the family is embedded; and (4) the overarching cultural beliefs and norms that influence the previous three levels. Policy makers use this ecological model extensively for guidelines for professionals and practitioners (e.g. at local level, the Sure Start and On Track programmes that provide or recently have provided community-based services for families, and at the international level, the United Nations Children's Fund and World Health Organisation, e.g. WHO, 2006). Yet the model suffers from a lack of the sorts of analytic understandings described in the previous section, which a sociological focus on families can provide. The point that relationships can cut across levels of the model (such as between family and community), or exist outside of them (such as communes or religious communities as alternatives to family life), is not addressed. More fundamentally, explanations of how these levels came about, changes in the meaning of family between contexts and over time (e.g. Uttal 2009), and inequalities within and between social groups (see Houston 2002, for a critique on this basis from within the systemic field), are not even raised in this model. Sociological approaches have

much potential here to contribute what may arguably constitute more sophisticated theoretical understandings, applied from perspectives on how to link 'micro' with 'macro', 'agency' with 'structure', and issues of 'power' and 'social divisions' which are, after all, core sociological terrain. Yet this is a sociological project that has hardly begun, and may never materialize if sociologists give up on 'family'.

How professionals approach 'the family' is critical in understanding outcomes for at least some families since it can have a direct bearing on the type of public service response and 'informed interventions' that a family may receive. Policy is more and more concerned with interventions to ensure that family members make the correct (socially desirable) choices in their everyday interactions. Development of emotional literacy, the 'soft skills' of empathy and reflection, is seen as the way to address longstanding social problems and inequalities (Ecclestone and Hays 2008; Furedi 2004; Illouz, 2008; Rose 2002). The waiving of the concept of family in favour of a sociological concern with the personal and intimate has generated important insights. It is notable, though, that the language of personal life and intimacy – however unintentionally – forms a 'subterranean elective affinity' (to borrow a phrase from Nancy Fraser, 2009, p. 114) with the 'therapeutic turn' in Western society that chimes implicitly with strong contemporary policy drives. Jamieson (1999) has made a similar point that the rhetoric of pure relationships with its focus on intimacy feeds on and into a therapeutic discourse, individualises personal problems and downgrades sociological explanations. Sociological concepts of personal life and intimacy in particular risk being incorporated in the therapeutic 'regime of the self', in the same way that the sociology of 'the family' previously came to reinforce normative and functionalist ideas (Gillies, 2011). Further, a focus on personal life, intimacy and kinship tends towards a retreat from and evacuation of the public political at the very moment when, it seems to us, engagement with the new political significance accorded to family is all the more important, as we now explore.

The Politics of Withdrawal

The idea of family has long been a focus for wider social anxieties and concerns. Nikolas Rose (1987) has elaborated the 'familialising projects' of the past two centuries, whereby societies govern their citizens through discursively constructing family relationships and meanings in particular ways, which includes through institutional politics. Nonetheless, in our view, the boundary between 'private families' and 'public concerns' has shifted recently. Family and the minutiae of everyday domestic life were

previously, if only rhetorically, regarded as separate and protected from public intrusion, or at least only subject to broad brush policies and State intervention in what were defined as extreme cases. Latterly, however, in both political rhetoric and policy initiatives the State has posed family as a public rather than private concern, and as a site of uncertainty and ignorance in relation to rearing and caring for children. This reframing has resulted in what amounts to a 'professionalisation' of childrearing as a set of complex activities that need to be taught to (ungendered and unskilled) parents by experts (Furedi 2008; Suissa and Ramaekers 2011a). The rich sociological concept of family we argued for earlier is discarded in favour of a narrow understanding of goal-oriented tasks. Moreover:

Parents and parenting seem to be framed in a language that makes it difficult to think and talk about a broader sense of what it means to be in a parent-child relationship. It thereby bypasses other languages – languages drawn from the realm of values, normative judgements, ethical deliberation, and discussion of philosophical ideas about human being and acting. Yet it is precisely this realm, we claim, that is essential to articulating and understanding what it means to be a parent.

(Ramaekers and Suissa 2011b: 198)

The sociological conceptual move away from family as a stereotypical and inflexible lens means that it can be difficult if not impossible to trace how policy discourses, expectations and prescriptions concerning families have shifted and intensified over time (Gillies, 2011). It is ironic and noteworthy that the recent intellectual move away from the concept of family has occurred at the same time as family life, and parenting especially, has been under an ever-intensifying spotlight in political discussion, subject to judgment, and explicitly focused on as a designated area of policy intervention and sanction (Furedi 2008; Lind and Keating 2008). This runs from the New Labour government's 1998 Green Paper, *Supporting Families* and its ideas about 'supporting families to help themselves'; through New Labour's championing of parenting advice and skills classes via Sure Start and the compulsory imposition of attendance on such courses on parents of young offenders alongside Parenting Orders; through to 2010 with the Centre for Social Justice's *Green Paper on the Family* and its concern with the link between family breakdown and 'broken Britain' (a nascent guide for current coalition government's policy), as well as the Field Report on *The Foundation Years: Preventing Poor Children Becoming Poor Adults* stating that 'good parenting ... matter[s] more to children than money' in the realization of their potential (p.5). Followed in 2011 by the Independent Report to HM Government, *Early Intervention: The Next Steps*

recommending preventive intervention with parents (Allen 2011). Throughout these reports urging more and more intervention, the nature of family relationships and how parents bring up their children has been posed as the 'bedrock' that ensures the good parents and good society of the future:

Stable families are at the heart of strong societies ...

(Centre for Social Justice 2010: 6)

Parenting has become more important in determining life chances ... The most sought after skills today – soft skills like self-regulation, empathy and application – begin to develop in the very earliest years and parents play the primary role in developing them in children ... Parents' role as the architects of a fairer society adds mounting pressure to an already very difficult job.

(Lexmond et al. 2011: 10 – our emphasis)

Thus in policy terms, family has come to be equated with households that include children, and within this framing, the everyday minutiae of family life and parenting practices reconfigured as a 'job' that is consequent in 'outcomes' for children and society as a whole. This political and policy spotlight on families in terms of the parenting of children can be exemplified through two linked issues. First, it is claimed that particular sorts of family upbringings stunt brain size and inhibit brain capacity, resulting in the inability to feel and behave 'pro-socially' through empathy and altruism, and demonstrate the 'soft skills' that provide for social mobility referred to above (e.g. Allen 2011; Field 2010; RSA nd). Second, parenting has become understood through parental relationships, posed as central to overcoming the problem of 'dysfunctional' families (e.g. Centre for Social Justice 2010; Harold et al. 2001).

Consequently, a sociological decentring of family in a conceptual attempt to overcome its ideological baggage can miss the resilience of these very connotations as they find renewed purchase in policy framings of 'successful' and 'pro-social' families.

Within and through such policy documents and the service interventions they initiate, families as a whole are constructed and acted upon too. Lesley Murray and Marian Barnes (2010) review the trend towards 'whole family approaches' in intervention and prevention strategies, embracing and encompassing all members of a family inter and intra generationally, rather than addressing any individual causing concern. They trace the troubling use of 'whole family' discourses across a number of interrelated social policy streams, where the collective 'socially excluded family' and 'anti-social family' are set up as a contrast to the 'responsible family' and 'resourceful and risk managing family':

At one point, families are invoked as nurturers of future citizens, as enablers of citizenship and as essential to the achievement of social justice. At another they are the source of social breakdown and creators of anti-social citizens/deniers of citizenship ... these discourses are highly gendered and generational ... In order to develop our understanding of the way in which family policy may be impacting on family lives we need to explore how such discourses are embedded in practice, how practitioners determine 'what sort' of family they are encountering, how this affects the way in which they seek to work with/support families in difficulty, and how, in turn, such practice contributes to the different constructions of family.

(Murray and Barnes 2010: 541/2)

The whole family discourse of anti-social family has been further refined into the policy construction of 'troubled family' most recently (see <http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/troubledfamilies/>). The point remains nonetheless, that steering clear of the concept of family or reorienting analysis to intimacy, personal life or kinship would not have allowed Murray and Barnes' useful deconstruction of the direction and drivers of policy, nor serve to answer their concluding identification of the need to examine the implications.

Arguments that personal life, intimacy and kinship do not, as concepts, 'invoke the white, middle class, heterosexual family in the way that, historically at least, the concept of 'the family' has' (Smart 2007: 30) have a certain point. Nonetheless, it is still important to ensure that use of family elsewhere does not disappear off the agenda, along with analysis of the impacts of such invocation. It is apparent, then, that in such circumstances broad inclusivity can lack purchase. As we noted earlier, the direction of theorizing in relation to – or rather away from – family, risks becoming trapped in the idea of a reflexive, responsibilised individual self (however relational), disconnecting from the other meanings and significances around transcendent connection captured through the term family that we elaborated earlier. In particular, it sets out on a path that bypasses social inequalities and differential positioning through familialisation in and through the public political.

The white middle class heterosexual families who are regarded as the ideological stereotype invoked by the concept of family rarely are subject to professional interventions on the basis that the source of their and their children's dis/advantage and marginalization lies within their family lifestyles and parenting skills – though they may indeed live lifestyles that segregate them from wider society, for example within

gated communities (Atkinson and Flint 2004). Members of such families are well able to govern themselves through the discourses of familial projects and therapeutic literacy. In these and other ways, they position themselves within the 'responsible' and 'resourceful' family policy discourses identified by Murray and Barnes. Indeed, middle class mothers may immerse themselves in resource-consuming and time- and attention- intensive, morally charged, 'concerted cultivational' parenting (e.g., Blair 2010; Lareau 2003). Further, they are able to act and exercise power – and crucially are accepted by professionals – as active, responsible, and knowledgeable consumers of whole family-focused services and advice with their family's and children's best interests in mind (Edwards and Gillies, 2005, 2011). In contrast, working class and minority parents' struggles to address disadvantage and problems can set them apart from normative models of family life and parenting, and the values and judgments structuring formal parenting 'support' initiatives. They are more likely to find themselves positioned by professionals within 'socially excluded' and 'anti-social' family discourses. Mothers in such families may find themselves unable to exercise any power or leverage; treated as clients of services (rather than consumers) who should accede to professional judgment because they lack the knowledge to diagnose their own needs or know where their children's best interests lie, or even not care about them (Edwards and Gillies, 2011).

Concluding Summary

We have been motivated to write this commentary because we believe that there are consequences and implications for sociological understanding and engagement of the movement towards subordinating and reorientating the concept of family within, or replacing it entirely with, broader ideas such as personal life, intimacy and kinship. We are not calling for a rejection of these terms and their concerns. They each have their particular illuminative conceptual worth. But we are stating that they cannot subsume or replace the concept of family without cutting off a valuable lens for understanding key aspects both of people's lives and policy developments. This does not entail evoking or privileging particular definitions of 'family', but of approaching its practices, discourses and politics as a key focus for sociological analysis.

We have identified the analytic strengths of family in transcending a concern with individual actors and their identities and relationships, to identify collective fusions within and across generations – however

ambivalent or oppressive these may be. We have raised concerns about what other disciplinary notions fill the vacuum or gap created by sociology's turn away from engagement with family, with notions of evolutionary biologicistic competition and neo-liberal economic rationality used to describe how families work, and ecological systemic ways of thinking infusing professional practice. This led us to consider how – if sociology is to address the increased and explicit familialisation of policy and public political normative judgments, and focus on social divisions of class, race/ethnicity and gender within this – then it is necessary to hold family as a central conceptual and analytic focus, rather than circumventing or subordinating it. Otherwise, the well-intentioned move to escape the stereotypes, orthodoxies and normative benchmarks associated with the concept of family, and the desire to encompass the complexity and diversity of relationships and experiences that is represented by arguments for sidestepping or subsuming families in a 'new' sociology, may well leave itself unable to address, or at least tangential to, a significant aspect of the public, political and policy shifts, as well as particular aspects of personal lives and relationships. The field of family risks being left open to other disciplines, just when a critical sociological perspective on the context within which people live their family lives and those family lives are judged, seems so necessary.

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ⁱ This article is an extensive development of a brief Note originally produced by Edwards and Gillies, 2012.

ⁱⁱ Although perhaps this is a recurring issue. David Morgan writes about how, in the early/mid-1990s, he felt that family studies had been superseded by and encompassed within women's and gender studies (2011: 1-2).

ⁱⁱⁱ The UK's National Marriage Guidance Council's change of name to Relate in 1988 can be viewed as part of this shift from institutional aspects of family to a focus on relationships.