

Ties that blind: on not seeing (or looking) beyond ‘the family’

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Reading Edwards and Gillies’ commentary on the continued importance of the concept ‘family’ made us wonder whether we had somehow missed this supposed paradigm shift in sociology, where everyone had abandoned the family and were now instead talking about personal life and non-familial intimacies. Had the queer revolution in sociology finally happened and we had just failed to notice? It was not even a decade ago that Roseneil and Budgeon (2004: 136) highlighted ‘the heteronormativity of the sociological imaginary’ and stressed the importance of moving the focus of the discipline beyond ‘the family’. Therefore, we were left questioning whether so much had really changed in the past decade. Last time we checked, Family Studies with a capital F still appeared to be pretty high profile in the social sciences.

So the first point to raise is whether we have actually seen such a ‘shift away from the use of the term “family”’, as Edwards and Gillies (2012: 63) suggest. It is crucial to question *where* these shifts in academic discussion have taken place and to note that these debates have tended to exist in a fairly small (often UK-centric) subfield of sociology. We would argue that a normative (often heteronormative, always mononormative) understanding of ‘the family’ still dominates many fields in the social sciences (and outside the academy). Moreover, the narrative of ‘the family’ is frequently still an exclusionary force that positions non-familial subjects as either invisible or abject, and that conjures up images of the married couple, biological kinship, reprocentric futurism, business as usual.

So has the family really been ‘slipping from view’? Edwards and Gillies (2012: 66) claim that there has been a ‘recent intellectual move away from the concept of “family”’ towards a new sociology of personal and intimate life. However, this overlooks the ways in which researchers working within the sociology of intimate and personal life still often utilise the concept of ‘family’, looking at familial relationships *alongside* a broader array of intimate attachments. The family has therefore not necessarily slipped from view in new work on the sociology of personal life. In this context, Edwards and Gillies’ argument seems a somewhat strange proposal to be putting forward – *a plea to return to a concept that has never actually been abandoned*. We were left questioning whether we really need these ‘deliberately somewhat provocative notes’ (Edwards and Gillies: 2012: 63). Is the time right for such a provocation? Sociological work on intimacy beyond the family is still in its infancy, and still faces many challenges in what could still be considered a predominantly heteronormative field. Forms of intimacy beyond the family continue to be marginalised and trivialised within sociology, and it feels too soon to even begin to ask for a return to the concept of ‘family’. Although clearly not the authors’ intentions, might Edwards and Gillies’ reflections have some quite reactionary consequences? Might a return to the concept of ‘family’ be taken up in a whole host of uncritical ways, and form part of a backlash against the significant (but still relatively minor) gains that certain social scientists have made in exploring

forms of intimate life beyond the family? Edwards and Gillies' commentary focuses on the risks associated with decentring the 'family', yet we argue that it is equally important (if not more so) to remember the risks associated with reinstating the importance of the family in a continually heteronormative discipline. Here, then, we offer some notes on possibly *not* retaining the concept of 'family', or at least some questions about the work that 'family' does and whether that is still work we need.

Paranoid readings and false oppositions

One key thing perplexed us about Edwards and Gillies' commentary – why was it necessary now? What was the pressing agenda behind writing this piece? Was the commentary simply a reflection of the way the academic game so often works, critiquing what has come before, proposing something new and supposedly 'better' in its place? The new sociology of personal life is depicted as a threat to existing ideas about the sociology of the family; could Edwards and Gillies' comment be seen to be creating false and unhelpful oppositions between academic viewpoints, rather than looking at the connections and continuities between these two approaches?

Edwards and Gillies base their argument largely on Gilding's (2010) declaration that there is now a 'new orthodoxy' in sociology where scholars focus on open-ended reflexive freedoms rather than institutionalised connections and restraints. However, Gilding's argument is founded upon an oversimplification of sociological work on intimate life. Although it is true that many key writers in the sociology of personal life have explored issues of reflexivity and personal choice, they have often done so *while still paying close attention to the wider institutional frames that constrain people's intimate lives* (Roseneil, 2004; Smart, 2007). The main body of work that falls under the subfield of the 'sociology of personal life' has, in the vast majority of cases, tended to consider issues of connection, convention and tradition while at the same time not overdetermining people's lives – by also looking at new ways of doing intimacy and new way of negotiating agency and change within these broader social structures. Although the individualisation thesis has undoubtedly been a useful framework for studying some forms of intimacy beyond the family, Giddens' (1992) and others' ideas about intimacy, freedom and democratisation have also been critiqued and re-appropriated by those working on the sociology of personal life. We therefore suggest that there is a need to differentiate between theories of 'open-ended intimacy' and the sociology of personal life, as the two are wrongly conflated in Edwards and Gillies' (and Gilding's) argument.

Edwards and Gillies claim that a return to the concept of 'family' will help to (re)politicise studies of intimate life, and help to (re)connect academic studies back to the world of policy and issues of social justice. In many ways we agree with their suggestion that studies of personal life should always take into account wider sociopolitical structures. Studies of personal life must continue to acknowledge the normative structures that prioritise certain kinds of attachment and certain kinds of family above others. However, we challenge the idea that we need to redirect our theorising away from 'personal life' towards 'the family' in order to do so. Work on intimate life and personal life (generally) does not ignore wider structural forces or

lack a political agenda. This is not to say that there has not been work done under the name of ‘intimacy and personal life’ that has been profoundly individualised and lacks consideration of broader structures (but then again plenty of work done in the name of ‘the family’ has been equally lacking). There are critical/uncritical ways to study the family and critical/uncritical ways to study intimate life. Therefore, we wish to challenge Edwards and Gillies’ portrayal of ‘the sociology of personal life’ as somehow apolitical. It is important to remember that the establishment of a field focusing on the sociology of personal and intimate life was in fact an inherently political move, one that helped to destabilise and decentre the heterosexual nuclear family.

Sounds familiar

Thus, the key issue here is not really a question of which framework is best (family or intimacy), nor is it a case of needing to reprioritise the concept of ‘family’. Rather, we propose a rather more modest, less ‘deliberately provocative’ suggestion: that sociologists must continue to acknowledge the wider structures that influence and constrain our personal lives, and that we should never individualise personal/family life to such an extent that it becomes separated from the realm of the political. Likewise, we argue that it continues to be important for researchers to acknowledge how our research agendas may privilege certain forms of intimacy by overlooking forms of attachment outside of the family.

We also want to take Edwards and Gillies’ reasons for reinstating the importance of ‘family’ and turn them around, in order to argue that now – more than ever – it is important to continue to expand our understandings of intimate life *beyond* the family. We use the term ‘beyond’ here, not to imply that we should abandon the concept of ‘family’, or that we should shift away from the family entirely, but instead that we need to think of how family studies can be seen as *part of* a broader study of intimate life rather than in opposition to it. One of the subheadings in Edwards and Gillies’ commentary is ‘Decentring or retaining the concept of family’, however we argue that this is an unhelpful opposition and that this issue should not be framed as an ‘either/or’ choice. Instead, we argue for a ‘both/and’ alternative – that *it is possible to retain the family while simultaneously decentring it*.

In previous work, Gillies (2011) has proposed that we need two different approaches – the lens of the family and the lens of intimacy. However, we argue that having two ‘separate but equal’ frameworks is insufficient. Does singling out the family as somehow separate from intimacy inadvertently prioritise it as more important than other forms of intimate attachment? A queer sociological approach aims to deprioritise and decentre the family, and positioning ‘the family’ as something that needs a separate framework cannot but mark its special status over other forms of intimate attachment. We therefore propose that intimacy and personal life should be the overarching framework that ‘the family’ simply forms one part of. This does not deny that the family may be important to many people, but it allows us to continue to understand other forms of intimate attachment. It encourages us to keep our eyes open, to see the many forms of intimate and personal life around us. Furthermore, positing ‘the family’ within a broader frame of ‘personal life’ allows us to recognise

how potentially queer moments can occur in what may appear a conventional heteronormative familial set-up. As Roseneil and Budgeon (2004: 153) highlight, 'if the study of intimacy and care remains within the frame of "the family" and the heterorelational then much of what matters to people in their personal lives will be missed'. We therefore argue that family life can easily be included in broader theories of personal and intimate life. By seeing the 'family' as just one part of intimate life we can help to challenge the idea that family is always our most important attachment. Working within theories of personal life helps to decentre the importance of family life, seeing it as just one intimate arrangement among many (yet can still be attuned to the ways in which certain forms of 'family' are privileged over others by the state). The sociology of personal life is a frame that does not shut down work on the family.

Queer critiques of 'family'

Underlying Edwards and Gillies' argument is the suggestion that earlier feminist and queer critiques of the family are somewhat outdated and no longer as applicable. In recent decades in the UK, our understanding of 'the family' has gone through some significant changes; for example, 'family' no longer always evokes the heterosexual couple. Edwards and Gillies highlight the ways in which our understandings of family have become more fluid and progressive, and that the family is now no longer such a normative and exclusionary framework. They note how the language that sociologists use to talk about the family has changed, and we have seen a shift from 'the family' in the singular, to the term 'families', which acknowledges a broader array of family formations. They also highlight the ways in which family is now often used as a verb – 'doing family' – or as an adjective, as in 'family practices' (Edwards and Gillies, 2012: 65). However, although certain sociologists may have expanded their understanding of 'family', has this been taken on board by policy makers? We argue that feminist and queer critiques of 'the family' are still as pertinent as ever, as policy makers have yet to grasp the diverse range of family formations that exist, and policy is still tied to a deeply normative and conservative understanding of family. This highlights some of the dangers of continuing to use the concept 'family'; despite researchers' best intentions, when these ideas reach the world of policy they become reduced back down to normative notions of 'the family' and 'family values'.

Edwards and Gillies fail to give the queer critique of 'the family' sufficient attention. Although they recognise that queer scholars have critiqued the family for being 'inherently heteronormative and exclusionary', they then go on to highlight how some scholars such as Weeks et al (2001) have continued to utilise the language of family via the concept of 'families of choice'. This leads Edwards and Gillies (2012: 65) to positively conclude that "'family" can be summoned up as much in political debate and agendas that are challenging oppression and tradition, as it is used to shore up stultifying and repressive norms'. However, here we could take a less optimistic reading, by noting how the term 'families of choice' still often upholds heteronormative values (as well as foregrounding *choice* without asking who can choose). It is therefore important to draw out the distinction between the heteronormative and the heterosexual, and acknowledge the ways in which certain

same-sex intimacies may uphold heteronormativity, whereas certain opposite-sex intimacies may challenge heteronormativity. Same-sex couples may now have been included into the charmed circle of 'the family', but the basic premise on which 'the family' is founded remains largely unchallenged. Accepting certain forms of same-sex relationships as 'family' inevitably ends up privileging certain kinds of relationships over others (Freeman, 2002). Furthermore, as Roseneil (2004: 37) highlights, the phrase 'families of choice' 'may actually direct attention away from the extra-familial, radically counter-heteronormative nature of many of these relationships'. Summoning up the term 'family' can be a dangerous strategy that continues to further exclude others, and create new forms of oppression, tradition and repressive norms.

The family of policy

Edwards and Gillies (2012: 63) claim that researchers need to retain the concept of the 'family' in order to effectively 'engage with major issues in the political policy field'. They argue that due to the increasingly overt familiarisation of policy it is now more important than ever for researchers to be able to utilise the concept of 'family'. They claim that if we reorient our analysis to intimacy and personal life, then we will not be able to effectively analyse or engage with key issues in family policy. However, as previously noted, this argument is based on the false assumption that work on intimacy and personal life ignores the family (whereas the vast majority of work that looks at intimacy beyond the family scrutinises how family policy excludes certain groups and certain forms of intimate attachment). Therefore, we would argue quite the opposite to Edwards and Gillies, that it is *because* of this increasing familiarisation of policy that it is so important that we continue to 'decentre, subordinate and reorient the concept of "family"' (2012: 63). The fact that the UK is currently witnessing an ever-intensifying rhetoric of 'family values' makes it crucial that researchers continue to think beyond the family, in order to challenge the narrow scope of government policy. Only then will we be able to recognise and support the multitude of people who fall outside of state-defined notions of 'the family'. It is more pressing than ever for us to be speaking out about the ways in which vast numbers of people are excluded by these deeply normative and conservative family policies. From this we can begin to imagine a new form of policy agenda that fully understands the significance of non-familial relationships, of friendships, of ties beyond biological kinship.

Furthermore, as geographers we are very mindful of debates about policy engagement and relevance, and have witnessed calls for a 'new public geography' (Ward, 2006) that mirrors debates in sociology (Burawoy, 2005). This agenda calls for a new way of engaging beyond the academy, in recognition of the diverse publics that our work speaks to. In terms of policy relevance, there seem to be three positions:

- work as a 'servant' of the policy state, responding to its agendas as a way to prove relevance;
- attempting to influence the policy agenda by mobilising a critique that is engaged with policy makers but not just in a 'clientised' way; or

- remaining disconnected from the world of policy, and therefore able to provide unfettered critique.

If Edwards and Gillies are in a sense trying to ‘relevantise’ sociology by keeping the term ‘family’ upfront, then we can understand where they are coming from, in terms of broader disciplinary anxieties about ‘impact’ and so on. But in the rush to prove relevance we always have to ask what is gained and what is lost, what compromises get made in keeping ‘family’ so as to be able to intervene in family policy. It also depends on what we think ‘family policy’ means. Is Klinenberg’s (2012) recent work on increases in people living alone ‘family policy relevant’? What kinds of ‘family’ are legible in government policy, and might our quest for policy relevance further exclude the already excluded?

Finally, we surely do not need to reiterate that the family (meaning, to be honest, two parents plus children) and marriage remain the basis of citizenship. The current UK debate about same-sex marriage is merely the latest turn of that screw. We also surely do not need to restate the extent to which family continues to bear such ideological weight, such oppressive connotations (and realities), and that welfare provision continues to depend on particular models of the family and to exclude anyone outside of those models. The ‘family’ of ‘family policy’ is still so often a deeply normative and oppressive concept, entwined with heteronormative, racist and classist discourses (see Smith, 1994, 2007). To us, this means we should always be wary of the idea and ideal of the family, and to reinstate the importance of the concept ‘family’ seems an unnecessary and misguided move to make at this moment.

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