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Published paper

Smart, C. and Shipman, B. (2004) Visions in Monochrome: Families, Marriage and the Individualization Thesis, *British Journal of Sociology* 55(4) pp.491-509

Visions in monochrome: Families, marriage and the individualisation thesis

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Abstract

This paper takes issue with the way in which the individualisation thesis – in which it is assumed that close relationships have become tenuous and fragile - has become so dominant in 'new' sociological theorising about family life. Although others have criticised this thesis, in this paper the main criticism derives from empirical research findings carried out with members of transnational families living in Britain whose values and practices do not fit easily with ideas of individualisation. It is argued that we need a much more complex and less linear notion of how families change across generations and in time.

Keywords

Choice; individualisation; sociology of the family; transnational families

Revised 17th June 2004

Words: 8,485

Visions in monochrome: Families, marriage and the individualisation thesis

Introduction

The general diagnosis is that people's lives are becoming more mobile, more porous, and of course more fragile. In the place of pre-given and often compulsory types of relationship is appearing the 'until the next thing' principle, as Bauman calls it, a kind of refusal of lifelong plans, permanent ties, immutable identities. ... Instead of fixed forms, more individual choices, more beginnings and more farewells. (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002:41)

The theme of individualisation is becoming pervasive as a motif for capturing what is unique about close personal relationships in post-industrial societies. Authors such as Giddens (1992), Sennett (1998), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), Beck-Gernsheim(2002) and Bauman (2003) have captured the sociological imagination through their analyses of changing forms of intimacy, the changing moral character of ordinary people, and/or the effects of divorce on people's willingness to commit themselves to long-term relationships. Although the individualisation thesis was not at first primarily or exclusively about intimacy and personal relationships¹, it has become a core metaphor through which sociological analysis of family life is now pursued. This is an interesting turn of events because it has revitalised, in the domain of grand theorising, an interest in families and even in policy issues related to family life. But it has its disadvantages too because it provides such a prominent inferential framework of understanding for contemporary family life.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim for example (1995) write extensively on changing family landscapes and the ways in which divorce is changing gendered relationships. They argue that love is becoming much more central to our lives, precisely at the time when it has become more unreliable and risky. They focus on the push-pull experience of contemporary intimacy, where the decline of traditional certainties (as they would have it) produce individuals who yearn for meaning in close personal relationships, while at the same time those individuals seek the

freedom that comes with the demise of traditional societies and family arrangements. Thus they argue that what is now most desired is most tenuous². Recently Bauman (2003) has contributed to the growing volumes of essentially theoretical work on relationships and intimacy. His work is reminiscent of Giddens and Beck-Gernsheim in that he speaks of couple relationships becoming more contingent. But he also makes reference to kinship which is perhaps less common in this genre³ with its preoccupation with discrete adult heterosexual couple relationships or sometimes parenthood. Kinship, which is, he argues, 'given' has become 'affinity' through the transformative workings of choice. Thus he argues, in an apparent oversight of anthropological work on the complexity of kinship and its many meanings (Franklin and McKinnon, 2001), that modernity has turned kinship into something tenuous, and that this in turn has rendered what once was solid and certain into something highly contingent. He sees the availability of choice as the undoing of fixed relationships; but choice is also the new taskmaster of modernity. Thus choice is not to be confused with something positive, rather it is the undoing of commitments. He states:

Unless the choice is restated daily and ever new actions are taken to confirm it, affinity will wilt, fade and decay until it falls or crawls apart. The intention of keeping affinity alive and well portends a daily struggle and promises no rest to vigilance. For us (sic), the denizens of the liquid modern world that abhors everything that is solid and durable, that is unfit for instant use and allows no end to effort, such a prospect may be more than one would willingly bargain for. (Bauman, 2003: 29)

This is a chilling perspective for not only does it suggest that the contingent nature of kinship requires constant attention in order to survive, but that *we* are almost certainly unwilling to put the work into sustaining these relationships because they take too much effort. Indeed the tone of much of this work verges on the apocalyptic at times. The genre appears to revel in its dystopian vision and ugly metaphors and it often chimes with a longstanding tradition of writing about family; namely those texts which see only misfortune and dysfunction arising from any movement away from the traditional family⁴. Modernity and individualisation are depicted marching inexorably forward together. One can, it seems, begin to predict the growth of

societies where kinship networks cease to exist, where few couples will commit to each other beyond a few years, where children who have experienced their parents' divorce become deeply ambivalent about marriage, and where there is almost frenetic emotional mobility and only fleeting, serial relationships.

The work of Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and Bauman (2003) appears at times to merge the concept of individualisation as a social process with individualisation as personal motivation arising from the choice of individuals to fashion new styles of intimacy. This means that it brings with it the idea of the social agent who can instigate change rather than merely react to structural change. This represents a move away from an overly deterministic model where the individual is inevitably seen as reacting to social forces rather than initiating change. But this shift also introduces the concept of 'individual' choice into the debate, indeed choice is constructed as the core component. Choice, as a concept, can be problematic because it can be read to mean 'free' or 'individual' choice rather than, in more sociological terms, contextual choice amongst socially constructed options, or relational choice taken in the setting of attentiveness to others. In sociological terms there is a very significant difference between the concepts of 'individual' or 'free' choice and contextual or relational choice. The more a narrative leans towards 'individual' choice the more it appears to depict the individual as solely responsible for making the choices which are then presented as dubious, insufficiently committed or superficial. Thus the individualisation thesis can slide into becoming less a form of sociological analysis and more a moral rant.

This is particularly problematic when speculation on how people are behaving in the sphere of intimacy appears to be deduced from the pages of popular magazines⁵ or from the popularity of self-help texts on relationship management and breakdown rather than from empirical research. The presumptions that people are making easy, selfish choices and abandoning the hard work of

commitment and care are in fact being challenged by a growing body of new research that casts doubt on this theoretical framework (Bengtson *et al*, 2003; Lewis, 2001; Smart *et al* 2001). For example Ribbens McCarthy *et al* (2003) have argued against Beck-Gernsheim and others on the grounds that the family members they have interviewed do not see families, partnership and kinship as contingent at all. They interviewed couples in step-families, namely those who have been divorced and are embarking on a new marriage or relationship the second time around. These would be precisely the people one would imagine fit with the image of the individualised, self-actuating, risk aware, and contingently committed man or woman of the twenty-first century. Yet Ribbens McCarthy argues that these couples with their children created a ‘community of need’, giving priority to support and obligation between family members. Their study depicts a very different picture of how people are actually living family life when compared with the dystopian visions promoted by the work of the sociological theorists.

While our own work on families and divorce would support the position put forward by Ribbens McCarthy *et al*, in this paper our criticism of the individualisation thesis starts from a different perspective. Our particular disquiet rests on the extent to which the thesis presents an homogeneous picture of family and married life. The vision depicted is culturally monochrome. It largely excludes an understanding of different forms of marriages, relationships and intimacies which are to be found in diverse and complex societies. Precisely because Giddens and others have captured the sociological imagination, one might think that the story they tell holds good for everyone in Britain. Yet not only are there always likely to be various marriage practices in any complex society, but there may be other stories to be told about the meaning of marriage and family above and beyond the quest for personal identity and fleeting emotional satisfaction. In this paper we shall explore, through a study of transnational families in Britain, the extent to which there are people who hold very different kinds of values to those depicted by the individualisation theorists. We describe the study briefly and discuss some of our findings,

particularly those that focus on the question of marriage. We shall then give consideration to how this contemporary theorising needs to be attentive to the more nuanced and specific findings of studies like ours which are being carried out on the actuality of modern family life.

The Study⁶

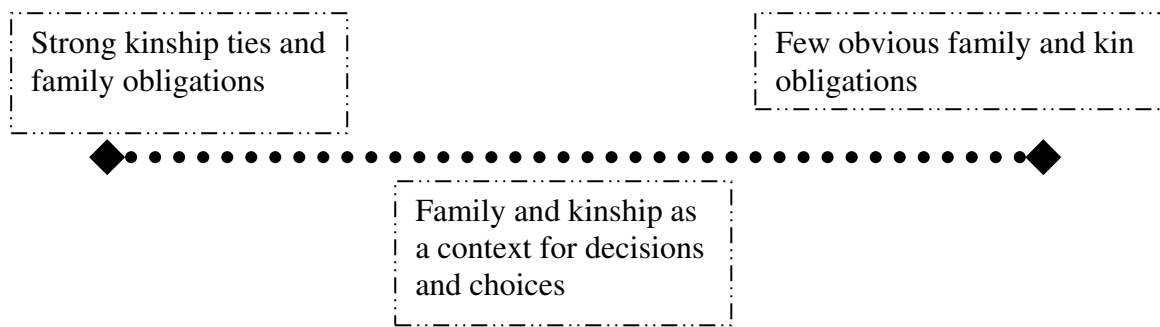
We rely here on a qualitative study carried out with members of transnational families living in Yorkshire. In this study we interviewed 69 individuals who had lived in Britain for at least five years, but who had close relatives living in a different country. We were interested in how people managed to 'do kinship' and sustain obligations and commitments across wide geographical boundaries. We explored the impact of physical distance on both emotional closeness and the practicalities of caring for family members. The values that informed and underpinned these practices were also a focus of our analysis.

Our sample comprised 28 men and 41 women with ages ranging from 16 to 84, although the largest group was in their 40s and 50s. It was our aim to interview at least two generations in each family, but this was not always possible. This means that our respondents came from 46 different families and we were able to explore generational differences in many instances. Our interviewees were selected from three different minority ethnic communities: Indian, Pakistani and Irish. These ethnic differences also mapped onto religious differences such that most of the respondents defined themselves as Hindu, Muslim or Catholic. Degrees of commitment to a religious faith naturally varied within the different groups, but nonetheless religious belief formed an important background to the values held by our respondents. The sample as a whole spanned all socio-economic classes and educational levels.

Marriage as a system of obligation

Today's marriage rituals are less about creating social relations than about constructing personal identities. (Gillis, 1999:52)

Gillis is far from being an individualisation theorist yet in this statement he does reflect the pervasive idea in Western sociology of the family, that marriage is about 'finding oneself', about self actualisation, and about a rather private and personal journey. Yet, for many people getting married may actually be partly or primarily about forging alliances between kin, or the outcome of negotiations between competing interests of family members. For others these concerns may not be central, but deciding whom to marry may not be a simple 'free choice' taken independently of the wishes and desires of parents and other kin. People may be attentive to the feelings of parents and others and thus marry a person of the same nationality, ethnicity or religion. And they may do this almost 'automatically' in the sense that they feel it is the right thing to do; not because it is imposed on them. Thus specific family cultures and the preservation of certain traditions may be a very important for the exercise of relational or contextual choice in marriage. It may be that we should think in terms of a continuum along which degrees of attentiveness to kinship structures and parental wishes fluctuate. Thus we are interested in exploring the range of possibility from those arrangements where there is negotiation, compliance and also agreement amongst kin about who a chosen marriage partner should be through to those that appear to be 'individual' choices but which may, nonetheless, show degrees of attentiveness to the wider family. Our continuum can be envisaged as stretching from a point where there are very strong kinship ties and arranged marriages, through to a mid point where kinship and family culture provides the context for choice, and on to an end point where elements of individualisation are more clearly evidenced.



What is particularly interesting in a context where it is assumed that ‘free choice’ is the most desirable way to organise one’s personal life, is that there are people for whom this is an unattractive way of proceeding. There are those who hold different values and who make decisions based on a different sense of obligation and family or kin commitment. We suggest that the moral reasoning provided by people who enter into relationships on very different bases to those identified by Beck-Gernsheim and others deserves more serious attention. Moreover, we do not suggest that these alternative modes are simply practices that are yet to catch up in the individualisation race⁷; rather we see them as relating to different forms of kinship and different ways of ‘doing’ family. But we also suggest that they show how one dimensional the thesis is because, even where some elements of the individualisation thesis can be found in many family practices, they do not necessarily cohere together as an entity which in turn defines contemporary relationships.

The continuum starting from the point of strong kinship ties

Q: And was your marriage arranged or was it a love marriage?

Zahid: Arranged.

Q: Arranged. So how did the marriage come about?

Zahid: [My wife’s] sister was married to my cousin. ... I didn’t mind actually cos I actually saw her in my cousin’s wedding film so when I was asked I said I would marry that girl.

Q: And do you think that your links with Pakistan have been strengthened as a result of marrying somebody from there?

Zahid: Well, I think it has because of the in-laws, but at the same time I also have in laws here you know. She has brother and sisters there, she has brother and sisters here. But I think it just strengthens that little bit because of her side of things.

Zahid's comments on how his marriage came about are quite matter of fact. Cousin marriages and marriage as a means of sustaining and even strengthening kinship ties are routine in Pakistani Muslim culture (Shaw, 2000; Afshar, 1994). The fact that the marriage was arranged did not undermine Zahid's sense of himself, nor his identity. Indeed it might be possible to argue that his identity⁸ was embedded in his kinship and religious culture where arranged marriages are seen as the best basis for marriage⁹. Such marriages therefore seem a long way away from the basic tenets of the individualisation thesis where it is held that people seek marriage partners who fulfil a psychological and emotional need or gap in the psyche of the single person. Zahid selected his wife from a video, but this was against the background of his own expectations about how he would come to marry, and the video itself was taken in the context of his extended kinship network. But Zahid was at one point on our continuum and not all Pakistani Muslims in our sample shared his approach exactly. Thus some parents felt flexible about the extent to which marriages should always be arranged:

Shameem: If [my children] come to me and say "Mum, I want to get married and I've never met anyone" then I will arrange it for them. And if I've got another child who has a completely different personality who is out and about and who's met somebody then I have to say "OK, that's fine" but I will draw the line I think for them marrying out of their faith, out of their religion.

Shameem's perspective is interesting because she is meshing two core elements in her approach. One is her embeddedness in a tradition which quite readily arranges marriages and which can deploy extensive kinship networks to find suitable partners. The other is her recognition that while one child might want to rely on her to do this for him or her, another might prefer to find a person to marry on their own. She appears to be equally comfortable with both routes, but with the caveat that the child choosing his or her own partner does not marry outside of their religion. Thus an acceptance of two different 'traditions' (namely arranged marriage and love marriage) can reside in one person without there appearing to be any major discomfort.

Q: OK, so how did you get married? Was it arranged through your family?

Mrigendra: Well [it is a] nice system, what we call a vetted marriage not arranged marriage, vetted marriage. Somebody proposes or there is a girl from a certain family and my family enquire about them. The members of their family enquire about myself. Everything about this includes the family, their status in the society, and then after we meet once or twice. ... If both sides goes well then it's good.

Mrigendra was a Hindu from India and his quote reveals the extent to which marriage is seen as a family matter more than just an individual matter. Vuorela (2002) speaks of family as an identity for people who live their lives transnationally, and arranged or vetted marriage is part of the way in which this identity has been preserved, even though members of families may be far flung. It is not that the individuals who marry in this way do not have their own identities, but identity often rests on different elements in transnational families. From the perspective of the individualisation thesis, arranged marriages might appear to be an assault on individual identity and certainly on 'free' choice, yet this may not be how it is experienced by all those embedded in the tradition. Mrigendra speaks of it as a 'nice system' where there is a mixture of safeguards and protections, but also contextual choice. In the process the social standing of the whole family is safeguarded.

The mid point where kinship ties and obligations provide the context for choice

The people in our Irish Catholic sample spoke somewhat differently about decisions over who to marry. They did not speak of arranged marriages but being both Irish and Catholic and living in England there was a particular awareness of cultural traditions and family obligations when it came to marriage:

Q: Your husband was English but was he Catholic?

Dorothy: He was Catholic yes he was. He was Catholic already.

Q: Was that important to you?

Dorothy: I think it was actually, I mean it wouldn't have stopped me, but I knew my parents would be happier with him being a Catholic.

In this passage it is possible to see that, although Dorothy would have married a Protestant (or possibly a non-believer), she felt much more comfortable that he was a Catholic because of her sense of obligation and commitment to her parents. Indeed many of the older generation Irish people we interviewed voiced the view that they wanted their children to marry Catholics, and many of the younger generation were well aware of this.

The quote below from Annie shows how her mother's wishes also became her wishes and that her sense of identity was tied into Irish-ness. This meant that she was glad that she had married a second generation Irishman.

Q: But was it OK for you to marry a non Irish person?

Annie: I don't know if it was. My mother said she prayed that I would marry a good Irish man, all her life. And the greatest thing for my mother was that we'd have a nuptial mass, which meant that I could go onto the alter and receive the Blessed Sacrament with my husband ...

Annie: Because to me being Irish, second generation Irish, it's my identity, it's my heritage. I'm very proud of it. I send my children to Irish dancing and you know my husband plays Irish music and to me it's very important. I don't want to be somebody who's middle class English, because I'm not. I was brought up so Irish, you know, wearing the shamrock and my grandmother spoke Irish to me, so I can speak some Irish and my mother was so proud to be Irish, my grandmother was. Being Irish was like being first and foremost.

But in the rest of Annie's story it is clear that she did not set out to marry an Irishman. Her account is a story of falling in love, apparently by chance. Yet in her account she speaks of being in England and not finding much affinity with English men, but when she met her husband they recognised that they had much in common. Their Irish backgrounds became the context for their partnership and marriage. Her cultural background did not operate in a direct manner in the sense of her kin finding a suitable match for her, but her embeddedness in her culture meant that she had an affinity with other second generation Irish folk and through this she followed a set of choices which ultimately reaffirmed her family's cultural heritage. This idea of cultural background providing the context for choosing a partner is discussed in Gouldbourne's (1999) study of Caribbean kinship in Britain. He suggests that while there are no obligations as such, the

members of Caribbean families he interviewed felt that marrying someone from the same background, or even island, was an important way of achieving ontological security in a foreign place/culture.

The continuum at the point where individualisation and tradition are balanced

It is now quite well documented that not all second and third generation British Pakistanis and Indians want arranged or even vetted marriages. This is often seen as a sign of Westernisation (although see Shaw 2000:163 for critical comment on this) and might also be seen as an indication of the spread of individualisation. This presumes that the idea of the love marriage is entirely foreign to Muslim and Hindu culture, but perhaps more importantly it is an oversimplification to suggest that in selecting one's own partner on the basis of love, one is rejecting an entire tradition and other family and kinship obligations. Take this example from a young Indian man. He was very close to his parents and sibling; saw them and many of his extended kin everyday. He had a girlfriend he wanted to marry, but she was from a different religion although she was Indian. He had not told his parents because he was worried about how they would react and he wanted her to be accepted. He therefore planned to finish his degree and get a good job so that he can marry independently – yet he did not want to break with his parents and so wants to find a way to square the circle. He goes on to say:

Q: Why did you never want to break away? There was never any incentive?

Varun: No, no, because I like being Indian, I'm proud to say that. I'm a Hindu as well, I like to practice Hindu things and carry on tradition. I don't want to forget my culture once I get married and have kids because I'd like to pass it on to them and so we can pass it on to generations. You can't lose it, otherwise there's no point being here in the first place.

For Varun the balance is between religion and Indian-ness and he feels that it is enough that he can share this with his girlfriend. For some of the second and third generation Pakistanis in our sample there were also accounts of wanting to arrange their marriages slightly differently, while at

the same time preserving other values and traditions. The move towards love marriages was therefore complex and did not necessarily signal a break with families nor with the basic tenets of Islam. Noreen for example wanted a love marriage but one that was arranged. Her mother wanted her to marry from within her extended family, but there was no one there that she wanted to marry. She was also against marrying someone from Pakistan:

Noreen: I've seen so many people come over and their marriages have failed; they can't understand a girl's way of living in England. Men from Pakistan want or require total control, total respect, no arguments, no challenge to their decisions and I think girls from here are not like that. If your husband doesn't want you to do that, then you want to know why, and it's got to be a valid reason rather than "I said so, so you can't".

But Noreen really wanted her parents to be supportive of her and she could point to cousins who had had love marriages that their parents had supported. She was clearly attempting to balance competing demands and wishes, and wanted to sustain good relations with her parents while embracing some degree of cultural shift.

For the Irish Catholics we interviewed they often had to come to terms with their sons and daughters marrying out of the faith as well as marrying people of a different nationality. Thus they felt the need to be 'flexible' about religion as well as Irish-ness.

Pat: They [sons] didn't even get married in the Catholic Church and I didn't stop them because of the troubles in Northern Ireland. They all married non-Catholic girls and they're lovely girls, they are. They'd do anything for me; I get on great with them. But I never bring religion into anything no more. It's not worth it all.

The obligations to marry within one's ethnicity and one's religion were felt more at a personal level than a cultural level amongst our Irish interviewees. Moreover, the older generation, who were more committed to Catholicism, were battling with a huge backlash against the priesthood at the time of our interviews because of the revelations about child sexual abuse in Ireland. It was therefore hard for them to valorise their religion in the face of such criticism. So for these families we can see elements of individualisation mixed with aspirations to retain elements of the traditional. This suggests a more complex process than the one depicted by the individualisation

thesis. People weave different elements together and what is particularly interesting is that different elements may become more or less significant to younger generations at different (historical) times or at different points in the life course. Thus we encountered sisters where one wore the veil and the other wore Western dress, those who felt supported by their traditions and those who rejected them. This suggested to us that we need to create a much more complex picture of the sorts of changes occurring in families in Britain and also that we need to understand that 'tradition' itself is something under constant change and negotiation.

Adding depth and texture to the continuum

The value of understanding the relationship between individual choice, preserving kinship networks and respecting tradition(s) in terms of a continuum is that we can move away from the assumption that individualisation inevitably entails abandoning commitment to one's kin, adopting serial monogamy, and embracing detraditionalisation. As we have noted, the people we interviewed combined what might be seen as elements of individualisation (as in love marriages) with a deep commitment to other aspects of traditional cultures. Many were aware that they might feel that their commitment to their parents and kin would be stronger than their wish for a love marriage. So they did not presume that their wishes would be easily realised because they recognised that they owed such a strong obligation to parents. This meant that they knew that negotiation would be necessary; the choices they would make would be in a kinship context, not based solely on individual desire. Others thought that their religion was not an obstacle and/or felt that it was sufficiently flexible to accommodate different ways of behaving.

Sanjay: As an Indian we will follow traditions of food, clothing, customs, obviously faith and religion to a certain extent, not fully. *That's the beauty of being a Hindu, one can tailor make it to suit yourself.* Yes, I suppose I follow the tradition of an introduced marriage and we try to abide by most of the traditional values and morals that are universal, not just Indian. They stem from being of Indian origin. (Emphasis added)

Sanjay did not interpret his faith as a set of rules, but as principles to live by. Thus these too were negotiable. The second generation Catholics could also treat their religion in this way,

implying that there is no single correct way to be a Catholic and that there are various interpretations available, while still being part of the faith in a broadly conceived way.

Q: So you're not quite so staunchly into (Catholicism) as your mum, is that right?

Alice: Well *each Catholic is an individual* really. (Emphasis added)

Although the idea of a continuum is therefore useful, it would be an oversimplification to imagine that different ethnic, religious or cultural groups are discretely clustered along different points of the continuum. It would be a mistake, for example, to imagine that Pakistani Muslims can be found at one end with Irish Catholics at the other. For this reason we would take issue with the model proposed by Berthoud (2000) where he suggests that there is a single scale running from 'old-fashioned values' to 'modern individualism' and where he places Pakistani and Bangladeshi at the 'old fashioned' end, Indians and African Asians next, with 'Whites' next and African Caribbeans at the end most associated with 'modern individualism'. Moreover, Berthoud suggests that there is movement along his continuum with a kind of inexorable shift towards individualism occurring for all groups. This leads to talk in terms of some cultural groups lagging behind the 'standard white model' and he predicts that Muslims will be the slowest to change. There is much that we find problematic¹⁰ in this model of cultural change but the main problem from our perspective here is that it is so reliant on shallow, one dimensional images of different ways of life.

But not only do we find it inadequate to envisage a scale of individualisation with different ethnic groups clustered along it, we also find it problematic to imagine that first generation migrants are to be found at one end with the second or third generation located further along the continuum. We found young people who were fiercely traditional and older, first generation migrants who were relaxed about traditional expectations. We also found some Pakistanis, Indians and Irish who felt that they were much more 'liberal' than their families 'back home', but we also found those who thought that their English-based community held fast to, or celebrated,

cultural or religious values much more than their overseas relations did. So, to our one dimensional continuum it is necessary to add depth and perspective. Our theories about family life need to be able to capture the complex tapestry of competing obligations and aspirations. As Bengtson *et al* (2003) argue, we need also to understand the extent to which individuals carry with them their own personal, biographical histories, as well as the social and cultural history of their lives. The lives of the younger generation take forward, in an engaged way, the experiences and values of their parents, modified by their own experiences. This way of understanding families moves us a long way away from the highly stylised models of modern individuality to be found in the writings of Bauman or Beck. The individual of the individualisation thesis seems to exist without parents, without kinship ties, and with concerns only for their own psychic well-being. The lives of the individuals we interviewed were far more complex and committed than this.

We elaborate on this point through the use of two case studies based on the accounts of two Indian women in their early forties whose lives were dramatically changed when their marriages ended; one by death, the other by divorce. Neither of these women was planning to remarry. Their reasons were quite different however, and the ways in which they managed their problems reflect very different reactions to tradition and community. The point about using case studies is that it allows one to see how people live with contradictions and ambivalence. We can see quite clearly how each generation exists in relation to the generation that went before and the one that comes after. Again, using Bengtson's terminology, we can see the extent to which people have 'linked lives' rather than being (solely) autonomous beings. Yet while being linked they nonetheless have individuality and a strong sense of identity.

The case of Manju (aged 44)

Manju had an arranged marriage when she was 20, her own parents had moved to Kenya but she was brought up in a village in India. She had a son and was happy in her marriage, but her

husband died suddenly. As was the custom, she was living with her in-laws but once their son died they regarded her as dead too (by her own account). As a widow she says she was treated very badly and she wanted to leave, but her in-laws threatened to keep her son if she did. However, her father arranged for her to come to England. Her parents refused to let her remarry, but she was anyway reluctant to do so:

Manju: It would be against their name in the community. My father refused, I could not think earlier, I used to miss [my husband] so much that I could not think of remarriage. I could not have settled, then my health started getting worse. What if I married someone where he has children? I would need to look after them. Sometimes people do not want you to take your children to them, in any situation. I was not ready to leave my son, for anything.

Manju's first commitment was to her son, but she was also painfully aware of the shame that a second marriage could bring to her family's reputation. Manju has some concerns about being lonely later in life however, especially as she will not live with her son when he marries. Although she is very concerned for the good name of her family and appears to adhere to traditional values, she stated that she wants her son to have a love marriage and that she would even let him marry outside his caste, or marry an English girl. She wants him to be happy and this is more important than tradition. But her son wants her to remarry:

He has been telling me since he was 14 or 15; he asks me why I do not remarry. He tells me that he will not mind if I did. He still says the same because he has been brought up here, so his nature is like that. I tell him that I have to think about all the community, but he says the community will not come to help me. But I say that my parents do not want it.

Manju's adherence to customary values when it comes to her own remarriage and her parents' wishes appears to be at odds with her feelings that her son should be free to have a love marriage and that she will not go to live with him when he does marry. On the one hand she carries the values of her parents' generation and community, yet she suffered considerably as a consequence of the traditional treatment of widows in India. But this does not change her behaviour or her sense of commitment to her parents and community. On the other hand her son has been brought up in a different context in England and she does not feel she has to impose on him the

values that she was brought up with. She is a bridge between more distant generations and has herself reinterpreted certain traditions and expectations to suit the context in which she now lives.

The case of Jas (aged 42)

Jas came to England when she was 17 for an arranged marriage. She did not like the man she was to marry, but she lived with him for 13 years; during that time she had 3 children but he was violent towards her and indifferent to the children. Eventually he left her and the children.

They used to say to me “You are married and you should live with him. No matter what he is your husband. But to me, if someone abuses you, he is not your husband. Like marriage is something that you share with each other, you respect each other, you do not bully each other. ... Everybody stopped talking to me because I divorced him and my brother did not speak to me for 2 years, saying “He is your husband, you should learn to live with him the way he is”. And I just said “Fair enough, if you do not want to talk to me, that’s your decision. My decision [is] I am not going through what I have been through before, I am going to stand up and fight him back”. Which is what I did and it took me 3 years to get through, finish with him, divorce.

Jas ran their business on her own, went to college and trained as a driving instructor and then started her own new business. She joined a gym and got fit, has had a house built and was about to move in when we interviewed her. She also has a partner who she is very close to and who acts like a father to her children; but she will not marry him.

Jas was angry with the Indian community of which she was a part because she felt they treated her as if she was worthless, but she feels that all that has changed since she has made such a success of her business and because she is earning good money. She now feels she has their respect. But, in spite of some of the difficulties she experienced, she spoke about how important Indian culture was to her and how she finds it difficult that her daughters have become quite westernised. One has married an Englishman, and although she has accepted this, it is not what she might have wished for. Jas has adopted a lot of characteristics which might be defined as

elements of individualisation. She is economically independent, she has educated herself, she has styled her appearance, and she has a relationship with a man while being unmarried. Many of the things that she has done were frowned upon by the community she is part of, yet she remains clearly identified as Indian, she would not cut her hair and she wants her children to share in Indian culture and traditions.

Jas' story is quite different to that of Manju's. We might say that one is more traditional and one acts more in line with ideas about individualisation. But this is too simplistic a reading of these accounts. These two women were born in almost the same year, both came from villages in India, both had arranged marriages, both became lone mothers and they might almost have been neighbours in the same town in Yorkshire. Both were working in the context of a strong kinship network and acted as a bridge between generations. Jas' trajectory might look more 'modern' because of the kinds of decisions she took, but Manju took decisions too. She would not give up her son and this decision had risks for her because she now knows she is unlikely to remarry and she is concerned about being lonely in later life. Jas' decision to become financially independent was related to the domestic violence she suffered; she basically had two choices, either endure it or to support herself. Her own family would not support her because she was divorced rather than widowed. So her choices were really Hobson's choices, not an indicator of the brave new world of individualisation where women cast off unsatisfactory relationships and marriages at whim, and then seek new, more satisfactory ones.

One of the main conclusions to be drawn from these accounts lies in the fact that these women have lived their different lives, with different options, in parallel time. People of the same generation, in the same place, at the same historical moment are living very different lives even though they share the same religion, culture and gender. This should hardly surprise us when it is put this way, except that the individualization thesis misrepresents this unevenness of experience

and life trajectory. Beck-Gernsheim (2002) for example speaks of trends in cohabitation and divorce, and predicts that whole cultures will move in certain directions, sharing the same values and practices. Although she acknowledges that some will resist, she sees these as isolated pockets of counter-modernization. She states, when talking about what she calls succession families,

Perhaps they will not be as common in Europe as they are in the USA, but here too they will become more common. ... This does not exclude, indeed makes more likely, the appearance of counter-trends and the development of hopes and longings that the family will be a haven in the stormy seas of the modern world ... [I]t must remain doubtful whether such attempts at counter-modernization will be successful, whether a revival of the traditional family model will occur among whole section of the population and not just in isolated cases. Flights from modernity are themselves part of modernity ... (2002: 39)

It is very hard to see what this analysis has to do with the lives of people like Manju and Jas. Perhaps they are to be seen as isolated pockets of counter-modernisation because they live linked lives, embedded in wider kin networks and attentive to traditions and culture. Or perhaps Beck-Gernsheim's thesis is simply too monochrome and too one-dimensional.

Conclusion

In this paper we have not sought to repudiate entirely the individualisation thesis, nor do we imply that authors like Beck-Gernsheim have completely misinterpreted changes occurring to family life in places like Britain. However we do argue that the ideas they champion, as compelling as they may be for some, marginalise difference. Those who do not fit with the model are seen as engaged in futile resistance. This depiction is reminiscent of some Marxist analyses which used to refer to the family itself as a pre-Capitalist mode of social relations (namely feudal). In this model the times are seen to be changing, but certain people or groups get left behind or fight a pointless rearguard action against the tide of change. It is this we find so problematic. Marginalised ethnicities are not the flotsam and jetsam of modernisation, and the experiences of transnational families need to be incorporated into a wider analysis of social change. Transnational families are far from rare and this means that families with different cultural traditions, and where traditions have different significance and meaning, live next door to

each other in post-industrialised societies. These families are not themselves static, but they relate to different cultures and histories and do not necessarily fall into step with the march of many American or English families (assuming for a moment that these families are homogeneous and increasingly individualised). In these families traditions, religion and culture may have very different significance because of the experience of migration, transnationalism and geographical distance. Moreover, what traditions 'are' and what they mean is also seen to be negotiable and subject to change. As our case studies of Manju and Jas show, members of families can avail themselves of different routes to find security and meaning by either following some traditions or breaking with some traditions. But these accounts also reveal how, even within one person, there are commitments to both traditions and change. This has to be understood in terms of the way in which each generation is actually a bridge between other generations and thus is in a continual process of negotiation and realignment. By being attentive to complexity, context and culture we can perhaps resist some of the more sweeping generalisations associated with contemporary theorising about individualisation and family life.

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Notes

¹ However, even in *Risk Society* (1992) Beck argues 'The type of the 'negotiated family' comes into being, in which individuals of both genders enter into a more or less regulated exchange of emotional comfort, which is always cancellable'. (page 89)

² Mary Evans (2003) might dispute this depiction of 'modern' love as particularly tenuous. She states for example, 'We hope that through love we will end the emotional loneliness of adult life but have to confront, like Levin in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, the stark truth that the loved other is not only unable to offer perfectly realized intimacy, but is also another person. We associate being in love, and the state of bliss of love, with the love sonnets of John Donne ... but seldom read the more sombre, later, poems of Donne in which he professes

his recognition of the limits of earthly loves and passions.’ (p 2) Her historical and literary perspective suggests that unattainable love and disappointing love have been around for some time.

³ Beck and Beck Gernsheim (2002: 97) do talk about children’s kinship but it is also in terms of how ‘thin’ and tenuous it has become.

⁴ Although we refer to the traditional family we do not accept that that this is a helpful or unambiguous concept. The problem is that it is hailed in these writings as if it did exist and as if it was uncontested, but we do not stop to engage in this debate since it is one that is already too familiar in sociological writings on ‘the’ family.

⁵ Bauman for example uses *The Guardian Weekend* magazine as one of his sources for understanding the nature of contemporary relationships.

⁶ We are grateful to the ESRC (REF M564281001) for funding the project on which this paper is based. The project, entitled Transnational Families, is part of the CAVA research group programme at the University of Leeds. We are also grateful to Dr Jennifer Mason and Professor Louise Ackers who are members of the research team on this project. Interviews were carried out by Dr Yasmin Hussain, Ms Bryony Gill, Ms Prajakta Katariya and Dr Bren Neale.

⁷ There is often a tendency to assume that ‘integration’ through education and co-existence will mean that members of minority ethnic communities will start to become like the ‘dominant’ culture. Thus, for example, Hennink *et al* (1999) predict that the behaviour of young Asian women will change to become more like their white peers in relation to sexual behaviour. See also Husain and O’Brien (2000) who discuss the ways in which they perceive Muslim families changing in Europe.

⁸ While Vuorela (2002) argues that the transnational family and its marriage practices are the basis of identity for many Muslims, Afshar (1994) argues that Muslim women lose their identity on marriage because it is a contractual arrangement rather than a matter of choice. Our data is not sufficiently focused on this issue to be able to contribute to this debate.

⁹ Shaw (2000:154) argues that ‘Cousin marriage is one of the most important expressions of this obligation [viz to honour one’s obligations to kin]. ... For them [Oxford Pakistanis], the marriages of their children to the children of their siblings in Pakistan is an important symbol of honour and respectability, a public statement that even families separated by continents recognize their mutual obligations.’

¹⁰ For example we would take issue with the idea of a standard White model.