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Cultures of Intimacy and Care
Beyond ‘the Family’: Personal Life and Social Change in the Early 21st Century

In an era of powerful processes of individualization, issues of intimacy and care have assumed a renewed importance for sociologists. The question of how people organize their personal lives, loving and caring for each other in contexts of social, cultural and economic change which increasingly demand the pursuit of individual life strategies is central to the sociological agenda of the 21st century. In this article we argue that if we are to understand the current state, and likely future, of intimacy and care, sociologists should decentre the ‘family’ and the heterosexual couple in our intellectual imaginaries. We recognize that the idea of ‘family’ retains an almost unparalleled ability to move people, both emotionally and politically. However, much that matters to people in terms of intimacy and care increasingly takes place beyond the ‘family’, between partners who are not living together ‘as family’, and within networks of friends.

The first section of the article provides a critique of family sociology and the sociology of gender for the heteronormative frameworks within which they operate. It proposes an extension of the framework within which contemporary transformations in the realm of intimacy may be analysed, and suggests that there is a need for research focusing on the cultures of intimacy and care inhabited by those living at the cutting edge of social change. In the second part of the article we draw upon our own research on the most ‘individualized’ sector of the population – adults who are not living with a partner. We explore contemporary cultures of intimacy and care among this group through a number of case studies, and argue that two interrelated processes characterize these cultures: centring on friendship, and decentring sexual relationships.
Thinking Beyond the Heteronormative Family

As the global distribution and mainstream success of a plethora of television series such as *Friends*, *Seinfeld*, *Ellen* and *Will and Grace* attests, popular culture is proving rather better than sociology at proffering stories which explore the burgeoning diversity of contemporary practices of intimacy and care. If we were to seek our understanding of cultures of intimacy and care solely from the sociological literature, we would be told that they are still almost solely practised under the auspices of ‘family’.

There have been significant shifts within specific subfields of the sociologies of family and gender. For example, they have sought to meet both the empirical challenge of social changes in family and gender relations, and the theoretical challenge of anti-essentialist, postmodern, black and minority ethnic feminist, and lesbian and gay emphases on difference and diversity. They have, most notably, moved on from an early focus on the study of ‘family and community’, which were ‘yoked together like Siamese twins’ (Morgan, 1996: 4), through the early phase of feminist intervention, which focused on unequal gender divisions of care and intimacy in the family, to a predominant concern today with the analysis of family change – particularly through the study of divorce, repartnering and cohabitation – and recognition of family diversity.

Moreover, many British and US family sociologists have engaged with the problem of the concept of ‘family’ in a time of increasing levels of family breakdown and re-formation. David Morgan (1996), for instance, suggests that we should use ‘family’ not as a noun, but as an adjective, and proposes a notion of ‘family practices’ to counter the reification of the concept. Others have sought to deal with social change and the challenges posed by lesbian and gay movements and theorists by pluralizing the notion of ‘family’, so that they now always speak of ‘families’. The approach currently dominant in Anglo-American sociologies of gender and family emphasizes the diversity of family forms and experiences, and how the membership of families changes over time, as they break down and reform. Certainly, in its more liberal-minded incarnations, this approach welcomes lesbian and gay ‘families of choice’ into the ‘family tent’ (Stacey, 2002).

This shift has been an important one. It acts as a counter to the explicitly anti-gay and anti-feminist political discourse of ‘family values’, which developed in the US and UK during the 1980s and 1990s. However, these moves to pluralize notions of ‘family’, even when they embrace the study of lesbian and gay families, are insufficient to the task of understanding the contemporary and likely future experience of intimacy and care, for two reasons. First, they leave unchanged the heteronormativity of the sociological imaginary; and second, they are grounded in an inadequate analysis of contemporary social change.
Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner have recently argued that heteronormative public culture in the US constructs belonging to society through the ‘love plot of intimacy and familialism’, restricting ‘a historical relation to futurity . . . to generational narrative and reproduction’ (Berlant and Warner, 2000: 318). Their argument is a powerful one. However, it is not just US public culture that finds it hard to see those who are not heteronormatively coupled as centrally part of the social formation, and to think of the future outside a generational mindset. Sociology continues to marginalize the study of love, intimacy, care and sociality beyond the ‘family’, even though it has expanded the scope covered by this term to include a wider range of ‘families of choice’.

The sociologies of family and gender, in which the study of intimacy and care is largely conducted, are undergirded by heteronormative assumptions; in other words by ‘institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent – that is, organized as a sexuality – but also privileged’ (Berlant and Warner, 2000: 312). In other words, sociologists in these fields continue to produce analyses which are overwhelmingly focused on monogamous, dyadic, co-residential (and primarily hetero) sexual relationships, particularly those which have produced children, and on changes within these relationships. Jo van Every’s (1999) systematic survey of British sociological research and writing on families and households published in 1993 found ‘an overwhelming focus on the “modern nuclear family”’ consisting of married couples who lived together in households only with their children. She argues convincingly that ‘despite all the sociological talk about the difficulty of defining families and the plurality and diversity of family forms in contemporary (postmodern?) societies, sociologists were helping to construct a “normal” family which looked remarkably similar to that which an earlier generation of sociologists felt confident to define’ (van Every, 1999: 167).

The ‘non-standard intimacies’ (Berlant and Warner, 2000) created by those living non-normative sexualities pose a particular challenge to a discipline which has studied intimacy and care primarily through the study of families. Some lesbians and gay men refer to their emotional networks quite consciously – often with a knowing irony – as ‘family’. However, when writers such as Kath Weston (1991), Jeffrey Weeks et al. (2001) and Judith Stacey (this issue, pp. 181–97) adopt the term ‘families of choice’ to refer to lesbian and gay relationships and friendship networks, this may actually direct attention away from the extra-familial, radically counter-heteronormative nature of many of these relationships.

Considerable evidence from sociological and anthropological research suggests that friendship, as both a practice and an ethic, is particularly important in the lives of lesbians and gay men. Networks of friends, which often include ex-lovers, form the context within which lesbians and gay men
lead their personal lives, offering emotional continuity, companionship, pleasure and practical assistance. Sometimes rejected, problematized and marginalized by their families of origin, lesbians and gay men build and maintain lives outside the framework of the heterosexual nuclear family, grounding their emotional security and daily lives in their friendship groups. Weeks et al. (2001) and Roseneil (2000a) draw attention to the blurring of the boundaries, and movement between, friendship and sexual relationships which often characterizes contemporary lesbian and gay intimacies. Friends become lovers, lovers become friends, and many have multiple sexual partners of varying degrees of commitment (and none). Moreover, an individual’s ‘significant other’ may not be someone with whom she or he has a sexual relationship:

It has finally come into our vocabulary that Tom is my significant other. After eight years, we have finally acknowledged what to others has probably been self-apparent all along.

Tom cares for me virtually every day, and when he cannot be with me himself, he arranges for others to help. He buys my groceries and keeps his Tupperwared lunches in my refrigerator. He knows which underwear I want to put on any given morning, and which drawer he’ll find it in.

Tom’s significance is more than logistical. He is my medical and legal power of attorney, the who if and when it comes time, will decide what measures should be taken to let me live or die. He will plan my funeral. He is the sole beneficiary of my will.

Although he has spent many nights in my apartment, we have never had sex. . . . But to call us merely best friends denies the depth of who we are to each other. (Preston with Lowenthal, 1996: 1)

Practices such as these within non-normative intimacies – between friends, non-monogamous lovers, ex-lovers, partners who do not live together, partners who do not have sex together, those which do not easily fit the ‘friend’/ ‘lover’ binary classification system – and the networks of relationships within which these intimacies are sustained (or not) have the following significance: they decentre the primary significance that is commonly granted to sexual partnerships and mount a challenge to the privileging of conjugal relationships in research on intimacy. These practices, relationships and networks largely fail to be registered in a sociological literature which retains an imaginary which, without ever explicitly acknowledging it, sees the heterosexual couple as the heart of the social formation, as that which pumps the life-blood of social reproduction.

In fact, little has changed since Beth Hess pointed out in 1979 that there is ‘no large corpus called the “sociology of friendship”’ to provide an alternative archive for the study of intimacy and care beyond the family. But it is not just the heteronormativity of the discipline which has rendered friendship largely invisible. Equally important is the fact that the sociological tradition, from the founding fathers onwards – Tönnies’ distinction between
Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, Marx’s work on alienation, Durkheim on forms of social solidarity, Weber on bureaucratization, the Chicago School on urbanization – has assumed that the development of modernity renders social relationships increasingly impersonal, and affective bonding is seen as increasingly marginal.10 The result is that the discipline has never granted as much importance to the study of informal, private and sociable relationships as it has to matters of public, economic and political organization.11

Friendship lies in the realm of the pleasurable, emotional and affective, areas which have been relatively neglected by serious-minded order-seeking sociologists concerned with issues of structure, regulation and institutionalization. There have been exceptions, as in the work of Simmel (1950), in the ethnographic work of Whyte (1943) on ‘street corner society’, of Litwak and Szelenyi (1969) on ‘primary groups’ of kin and friends, and in the 1950s and 1960s, in the British tradition of community studies. More recently, there have been a small number of studies of friendship,12 and there is a growing field of research on new forms of sociability facilitated by new technologies,13 but there is no subfield of the discipline devoted to the study of friendship comparable to the well-established sociology of family and kinship. It is time for this to change, time for more research which focuses on friendship, ‘non-conventional’ forms of sexual/love relationships, and the interconnections between the two.

Personal Life and Social Change – Expanding our Understanding of the Transformation of Intimacy

A substantial body of literature takes as its starting point the belief that we are living through a period of intense and profound social change in the sphere of intimacy. For example, in the context of a wider argument about the undoing of patriarchalism, Manuel Castells (1997) suggests that the patriarchal family is under intense challenge, and that lesbian, gay and feminist movements around the world are key to understanding this challenge.14 Anthony Giddens’s (1992) argument about the ‘transformation of intimacy’ and Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim’s (1995, 2002) work on the changing meanings and practices of love and family relationships suggest that in the contemporary world processes of individualization and detraditionalization and increased self-reflexivity are opening up new possibilities and expectations in heterosexual relationships.15

With a (rather cursory) nod in the direction of feminist scholarship and activism, such work recognizes the significance of the shifts in gender relations mainly due to the changed consciousness and identities which women have developed in the wake of the women’s liberation movement. Giddens considers that the transformation of intimacy currently in train is
of ‘great, and generalizable, importance’ (Giddens, 1992: 2). He charts changes in the nature of marriage such as the emergence of the ‘pure relationship’ characterized by ‘confluent love’, a relationship of sexual and emotional equality between men and women. He links this with the development of ‘plastic sexuality’ freed from ‘the needs of reproduction’ (Giddens, 1992: 2). He identifies lesbians and gay men as ‘pioneers’ in the pure relationship and plastic sexuality, and hence at the forefront of processes of individualization and detraditionalization.16 Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002: 22) argue that ‘the ethic of individual self-fulfilment and achievement is the most powerful current in modern society’. They believe the desire to be ‘a deciding, shaping human being who aspires to be the author of his/her life’ is giving rise to unprecedented changes in the shape of family life. Family membership shifts from being a given, to a matter of choice. As social ties become reflexive, and individualization increasingly characterizes relations among members of the same family, we are moving into a world of the ‘post-familial family’ (Beck-Gernsheim, 1999).

While this body of work perhaps overstates the degree of change, and underplays the continuance of gender inequalities and class differences in intimate life (e.g. Jamieson, 1998), it maps the theoretical terrain from which investigations of the future of intimacy and care must proceed, and has proved extremely influential on those conducting empirical research on family change. However, that literature does not exhaust the resources for theoretical analysis of contemporary social change on which those seeking to understand cultures of intimacy and care should draw. Following Roseneil (2000b), we propose an extension of this analysis to consider how the wider sexual organization of the social is undergoing transformation. Roseneil (2000b) argues that we are currently witnessing a significant destabilization of the homosexual/heterosexual binary which has characterized the modern sexual order. She suggests that there are a number of ‘queer tendencies’17 at work in the contemporary world, which are contributing to this fracturing of the binary. For example, there is a trend towards the ‘normalization’ of the homosexual (Bech, 1999) in most western nations, as there are progressive moves towards the equalization of legal and social conditions for lesbians and gay men.18 Most significantly for our argument, there is a tendency towards the decentring of heterorelations, both socially and at the level of the individual.

The heterosexual couple, and particularly the married, co-resident heterosexual couple with children, no longer occupies the centre-ground of western societies, and cannot be taken for granted as the basic unit in society. This is a result of the dramatic rise in divorce rates over the past 30 years, the increase in the number of births outside marriage (and to a lesser extent outside any lasting heterosexual relationship – births to mothers who are ‘single by choice’), the rise in the proportion of children being brought up
by a lone parent, the growing proportion of households that are composed of one person, and the increasing proportion of women who are not having children. Individuals are being released from traditional heterosexual scripts and the patterns of heterorelationality which accompany them. By 2000, only 23 percent of all households in the UK comprised a married couple with dependent children (National Statistics, 2001), and broadly similar patterns are observable across Europe, North America and Australia.

Postmodern living arrangements are diverse, fluid and unresolved, constantly chosen and rechosen, and heterorelations are no longer as hegemonic as once they were. We are experiencing the ‘queering of the family’ (Stacey, 1996), as meanings of family undergo radical challenge, and more and more kinship groups have to come to terms with the diverse sexual practices and living arrangements chosen by their own family members. At the start of the 21st century there can be few families which do not include at least some members who diverge from traditional, normative heterorelational practice, whether as divorcees, unmarried mothers and fathers, lesbians, gay men or bisexuals. At the level of individual experience, as heterorelations are decentred, friendship networks become more important in people’s everyday lives, and the degree of significance and emotional investment placed in romantic coupling comes to be re-evaluated.

This queering of the social calls into question the normativity and naturalness of both heterosexuality and heterorelationality. It increasingly means that ways of life that might previously have been regarded as distinctively ‘homosexual’ are becoming more widespread. Giddens’s rather throw-away remark that lesbians and gay men are forging new paths for heterosexuals as well as for themselves is picked up by Jeffrey Weeks, Brian Heaphy and Catherine Donovan, who suggest that ‘one of the most remarkable features of domestic change over recent years is . . . the emergence of common patterns in both homosexual and heterosexual ways of life as a result of these long-term shifts in relationship patterns’ (Weeks et al., 1999: 85). They see both homosexuals and heterosexuals increasingly yearning for a ‘pure relationship’, experiencing love as contingent, and confluent, and seeking to live their sexual relationships in terms of a friendship ethic (Weeks et al., 2001).

Alongside the need for more research exploring the impact of individualization and reflexive modernization on people’s intimate lives, there is a need for empirical investigation of the extent to which the destabilization of the homosexual/heterosexual binary, as posited by Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan and by Roseneil, is taking place. Our research therefore sets out to explore both the individualization thesis and the queering of the social thesis, by examining the extent to which, across the spectrum of sexualities, there might be:
A decentring of sexual/love relationships within individuals’ life narratives;
An increased importance placed on friendship in people’s affective lives;
A diversification in the forms of sexual/love relationships, and the more widespread embracing of forms, such as those discussed earlier, which are less conventionally heteronormative, and more commonly associated with lesbians and gay men.

Methodology and Sample

We carried out in-depth narrative interviews, lasting between one-and-a-half and two-and-a-half hours, with 53 people aged between 25 and 60, living in three localities in Yorkshire, UK. These localities were chosen as being representative of differing gender and family cultures, drawing on Simon Duncan and Darren Smith’s (2002) work on the geography of family formations in Britain, which mapped spatial differences of gender and family cultures according to four indices – a Motherhood Employment Effect, a Family Conventionality Effect, a Traditional Household Index and a Family Restructuring Index. Our localities compare:

1. A deindustrialized ex-mining town which is more conventional in terms of gender and family relations and traditional in terms of household form;
2. A small town in which alternative middle-class, ‘down-shifted’ lifestyles and sexual non-conformity are common; and
3. A multiethnic, inner-city area, characterized by a diversity of gender and family practices, a higher than average proportion of women in the labour force, and a large number of single-person and non-couple households.

Beyond this, the sample was drawn purposively to include (as far as was possible within the localities selected) diversity of age, gender, sexuality, relationship status, living arrangements and ‘race’ (see Table 1).

Because we wanted to explore the impact of individualization on intimacy and care, we decided to interview people who did not live with a partner, on the basis that cohabitation – resulting from the decision to share a home with a partner – tends to mark the most significant moment when individuals become ‘couples’, and is more significant than marriage, for instance. In attending to the narratives of individuals we wanted:

- To gain an understanding of how and to what extent people are living in non-conventional cultures of intimacy;
- To study the practices of intimacy and care in which they are engaged; and
- To understand the values that underpin these practices.
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<td>Men n = 33</td>
<td>Hetero n = 38</td>
<td>25-34 n = 19</td>
<td>White n = 48</td>
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<td>35-44 n = 22</td>
<td>African Caribbean n = 5</td>
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<td>'Alternative' small town n = 10</td>
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<td>45-55 n = 12</td>
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Table 1: Description of Sample Characteristics (N = 53)
Our aim was to give the people we interviewed the opportunity to tell us what was important to them, and to allow, as much as possible, their own ways of valuing their relationships to emerge. Influenced by Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson’s (2000) work on the free association narrative interview method, we did this through the use of very broad questions which allow interviewees time and space to construct their own stories, within which meaning and values gradually unfold.

Our questions allowed people to talk in a broad context about their lives, and were phrased thus: ‘Can you tell me about the people who are most important in your life?’, ‘Can you tell me about a time when you have cared for/ been cared for by a friend?’, ‘Can you tell me what it’s like to be single?’ and so on. We relied upon the fundamental premise of the narrative method, which is that people make sense of their lives and communicate this understanding through telling stories about things that are important to them.

Case Studies of Intimacy and Care Beyond ‘the Family’

We now consider four case studies from among our interviewees. Their narratives are distinctly situated within the specificity of their individual biographies, but they also illustrate some of the highly reflexive and non-conventional cultures of intimacy and care which our research found. Following Jennifer Platt (1988: 9), and for the purposes of the argument in this article, the value in studying these cases is that each ‘case may show the effects of a social context which is the object of interest’: in this instance, how intimacy and care are practised beyond ‘the family’. Each individual’s story is interesting in its uniqueness, but these stories are not exceptional; they speak of patterns of transformation in personal life that we found more generally across our sample. Our data consist of narratives that vary in content and form as well as by age, life course, gender, locality and so forth. However, the pattern that exists within or behind their diversity is made visible in discussing these cases. In particular, they tell us what care and intimacy mean in terms of practices and ways of everyday life in a context where processes of individualization have affected how people construct their personal lives.

The Individuals

Karen is 35, heterosexual, single and has two daughters aged seven and 13. She works in the film industry as a hair and make-up artist. Three years ago her 13-year long cohabiting relationship with the father of her children broke down when he had an affair. Since then her life has undergone a significant reorientation and transformation.
Polly, one of Karen’s closest friends, is 36 years old, heterosexual, single and currently running her own business with a friend in arts administration. Three years ago, Polly, who was not in a long-term relationship, decided that she wanted to have a child, and that she did not want to do this within the context of a conventional heterosexual relationship. Due to fertility problems and ineligibility for IVF treatment as a single woman, she decided to adopt a child, and was matched with Alice, a seven-year-old girl of mixed-race parentage. Polly and Alice have been together for two years.

At the time of their interviews, the decision that Karen and Polly had made 18 months earlier to buy a derelict house, do it up and raise their daughters together in the house was central to their narratives. Karen explained that they decided this at a time when both of them had hit ‘rock bottom’. Karen had just split up with her long term-partner and for Polly the process of adopting her daughter was becoming complicated, uncertain and stressful. They had been close friends for many years and had relied upon each other through many times of difficulty, but out of this particular set of circumstances came the idea to rely upon each other in a more concrete sense – that is to pool their (rather limited) resources and create a home for themselves and their children. Although Karen’s and Polly’s lives had been very different before this time, with Karen settled in a long-term relationship from her early twenties, and Polly living a nomadic life working in the theatre, at this particular juncture their needs and goals were coalescing in important ways.

Dale is 49, a heterosexual man who describes himself as ‘single’ although he has a lover whom he has been with for two-and-a-half years. He is now living in her flat, but they are clear that they do not live together, as she is working and has been living in another part of the country for at least a year. Dale works part-time as a teacher and also runs his own business as a mechanic. He has never been married but has previously been in two long-term relationships and has three children with these two women. He maintains close contact with these ex-partners as well as several of his other ex-lovers. These partners constitute, along with his friends, his sister, who is a lesbian, her partner and ex-partner, his children and several neighbours, what he calls his ‘kinship network’. Dale was articulate about his emotions and relationships and thoughtful and reflexive about his friendships.

Eleanor is a 48-year-old single lesbian who lives with a friend who used to be her brother’s partner. At the time of the interview, Eleanor was just coming out of what had been a very difficult period of her life. Over the past six years she had experienced the death of her brother, the death of her father, the ongoing illness of her mother and her own diagnosis of and treatment for cancer. She explained how having cancer, from which she has recovered, marked a turning point in her life. Where once her priorities were ‘job, partner, house, settling down’, they are now about living life less...
conventionally, travelling more and seeking out new experiences. Eleanor is not currently in paid employment but volunteers for a local charity.

The biographies narrated by these four individuals speak of significant transformations in cultures of intimacy and care. Each of the interviewees is consciously and reflexively engaged in an individual ‘life project’, and was explicit about seeking to create a particular set of conditions and a particular way of life for themselves which would meet their particular needs for connection with others. Key to understanding their life projects are the interrelated processes of centring on friendship and decentring sexual relationships. A strong emphasis on the value of friendship, and on choosing to surround themselves with a network of friends, went hand-in-hand with a deliberate de-emphasizing of the importance of conjugal relationships.

**Centring on Friendship**

Across a range of lifestyles and sexualities, we found that friendship occupied a central place in the personal lives of our interviewees. There was a high degree of reliance on friends, as opposed to biological kin and sexual partners, particularly for the provision of care and support in everyday life, to the extent that it could be said that friendship operated as an ethical practice for many.

**Giving and Receiving Care and Support**

Karen and Polly each have a wide network of geographically dispersed friends who figure centrally in their narratives, but they are also embedded locally in a network of friendships held together by a conscious mutual commitment to provide support and care. Many of these friends have chosen to live in the same area of this northern inner city in order to be close to one another. Karen and Polly’s three daughters are close to these friends, and Karen says these friends provide another ‘anchor’ for her children. Prior to the break-up of Karen’s relationship, she had been living several hours away from Polly and this circle, but after the break-up she returned to this city because of her friendships there.

Seeing Karen in a bad emotional state, this group of friends gathered together and physically moved her and her children back to the city, actively putting in place the things she would need upon her return. Contacts in the film industry found her a job, a house was rented and decorated for her and a school was found for the children. Similarly, Jenny, a good friend of Polly’s who was living a considerable distance away, had also been having a difficult time recently, and so Polly took it upon herself to oversee the purchase and renovation of a house on the street where she and Karen live for Jenny to move to with her children. It is Polly’s ‘project’ to bring the people in her
network closer to her when she sees them struggling in their lives. As she reported saying to the people who have moved to be near: ‘you’re too far away from me but I can bring you here and I know that your lives are gonna improve because I can introduce you to these people, and they’re fabulous’.

One of the strongest motivations behind Polly and Karen’s decision to buy the house together was to provide a safe and stable environment for the children, in which, as two single parents, they could help each other with childcare. As close friends they felt that they could give each other a commitment and provide support to each other and their children in a way that would be significantly more secure than if they attempted to pursue this in the context of a love relationship with a man. In effect they co-parent the children, and share the management of the household. For example, when Karen had to go away for three months to work on a film in Africa Polly took over running the house and caring for the children. The stability that this situation affords them is also bolstered by the wider context of the friendship network within which they are living. They are reworking the notion of ‘stability’ often associated with conventional family forms by refusing to invest in a sexual relationship as the basis for security, and replacing this with a reliance upon friendships.

In Dale’s narrative, the significance of friendships in providing care and support also emerged as a key theme. When he was in his early twenties, he had an extremely serious motor bike accident and was hospitalized for the better part of two years. Many of the friends he has today were instrumental in providing care and support to him during this time and in the period following this release from hospital. This care extended to his mother, who, while Dale was hospitalized, required assistance in moving house. One of Dale’s closest friends took it upon himself to look after her move.

John, he’s a very interesting man. He doesn’t make friends easily but he’s extremely loyal with the friends he does have. He’s been an enormous support to me during harder times in my life. For instance, when I smashed myself up and I was in hospital, my mother decided that she was moving out of the family home that we’d shared, that I’d been brought up in and moving to somewhere smaller quite a distance away and you know, John virtually took it upon himself to just . . . You know, I was in bloody traction in Cambridge. He got a van, went down, helped my mother move her stuff, moved my stuff back up to Yorkshire for me, picked my wrecked bike up in Cambridge and took that back up to Yorkshire, generally looked after my interest. He also – two days after I got out of hospital in Cambridge – rolled up on a motor bike at the flat where I was staying and virtually dragged me physically down the stairs, sat me on the back of this bike and drove me very fast for an hour or two just to get this out of my system, ‘there’s nothing to be scared of’, for which I thank him very much.

Care is central to Eleanor’s narrative: the giving and receiving of care is interwoven throughout the dynamics of her intricate set of personal
relationships. Her story is both about the care she has extended to others and the care she herself has received. A couple of years prior to the interview Eleanor was diagnosed with cancer. Existing networks of personal relationships often tend to operate in a ‘heightened’ mode during times of crisis. In Eleanor’s case, this meant that friends provided for a range of needs. They went to the hospital with her when she had to undergo numerous tests. They read to her while she was having scans done. At one point, Eleanor explains how frightened she was and how one of her friends helped her prepare a list of questions to ask a specialist so that she might gain some control over the situation. This friend then accompanied her on this visit. To care for Eleanor at home during her illness a sleep-over rota and cooking rota were set up to share collectively in the needed provision of care.

Friendship as an ethic is apparent here. In Eleanor’s narrative, there emerges a sense of obligation to give what is needed on the basis of friendship. Eleanor is living with a friend whom she considers to be family. Ian was the partner of Eleanor’s brother, who died several years ago. It was during Ian’s relationship with her brother and particularly throughout the time that Ian cared for Eleanor’s brother during his illness that he and Eleanor became close friends. After his death, Ian’s life spiralled out of control through addiction to drugs. Eleanor spoke of how one day Ian rang up and asked her to come and get him. Eleanor says she never thought twice about it. She brought him to her home to stay, he enrolled in a drug treatment project and at the time of the interview he had been off drugs for a year.

His whole life was going down the pan and every time I went to London I’d try and go visit him and kept seeing him getting worse and worse and worse, and it was just like this unfinished thing that I had to somehow help him out with really. And I kept saying to him ‘you know you have to leave this flat’, and I was glad that he actually thought, ‘well I will go to Eleanor’ because he’s got family. But he came here, and I suppose it was not long after my cancer stuff as well.

In Eleanor’s narrative, the relationship between care and living space emerges as a focal theme. Friendship, and the practices of care and support which are central to its meaning to her, occur within a ‘private’ space of the home, which is not preserved for the conventional family.

Reconfiguring Domestic Space
For Karen and Polly, Eleanor and Dale the where of practices of intimacy and care was a matter of considerable importance. Without explicit prompting, each of them chose to talk in considerable detail about issues of domestic space, and how they were choosing to open up this space to others who are not part of their conventionally defined ‘family’. Their narratives reveal that the physical space within which their life projects were designed and lived out is very significant.
As we have already seen, the decision to live with, or close to, others is often related to immediate practical concerns about the provision and receipt of care. For Dale, thinking about reconfiguring domestic space was more of an idealistic, future-orientated project, driven by an understanding that those living individualized lives outside conventional relationships need to look to each other for support. He explained how he and his circle of close friends, his ‘kinship group’, were beginning to formulate a communal retirement plan which would involve buying some land together and custom-building houses that would address their various needs. As he has been involved in housing cooperatives in the past, he is beginning to research the possibilities of pursuing such a project.

I know a fairly large kind of kinship group around here who are all people who don’t have partners, or don’t wish to have partners, who are engaged in some kind of very individualistic ‘this is how I make my way in the world . . .’, and it is a constant source of discussion about how do we look to each other. We’re currently still reasonably young and healthy, and there are various ideas being floated about and various sort of lifestyles being practised towards reaching that which I feel a great sense of affinity for – it’s a kind of, it’s a tribalist model, I suppose. And this guy Harry is an architect. He is pushing quite hard to kind of get groups set up to actually look at housing provision for people in that situation. A lot of single parents whose children have now left home who’ve got houses that are too big for them – where would they want to move to next? And so it’s quite a currency of discussion amongst this group of people about putting some kind of co-housing project together, actually purpose-building housing that’s kind of an estate of the like-minded, buying the land, custom-building the houses, probably with a very kind of heavy eco slant on it, communal areas, collectively held areas of property where friends and relations can come and stay, but your own living space because that’s what you’re accustomed to, a door you can shut. This isn’t just like a room, and work space within that, because they’re all people who are kind of quite active or quite creative. Garden space, you get a lot of people who are into that sort of stuff. We say watch this space.

In the here and now, Karen and Polly’s decision to share a home was about meeting their need for mutual support in raising their children, but it also involved opening up their domestic space to others. They each separately talked about the constant flow of people through their house and they jokingly referred to it as ‘The Hilton’ because they have ‘hundreds of people coming to stay all the time’. The choice to live with Polly was, for Karen, also about deciding to live in a particular place – being part of a neighbourhood that is ethnically and culturally diverse. Karen wants stability for her children but she also wants to expose them to a wide range of different ways of living so they will grow up with an awareness of the wider world. She implicitly wants them to see that there are many ways to live one’s life and so part of her project is the self-conscious undermining of what she referred to as taken-for-granted ‘white, middle-class’ values, which she does through choosing to live in an inner-city area rich in diversity.
The flow of different people through domestic space was also a theme of Eleanor’s narrative. When Eleanor spoke about her network of friends and ex-lovers, it became apparent that she had lived with most of her friends at one time or another. She has opened her home to a range of different people when they have needed a place to stay; for example, one friend came to her after her relationship had ended, another while he was going through a bereavement following the death of his father. However, it was not only at times of heightened need that Eleanor welcomed others into her home. Like Karen and Polly’s house, her house was a central place for her friends to meet and spend time together. All three tended to have ‘an open door’ policy, and the space of their homes was collectively inhabited.

My normal style is to entertain and I always have parties and barbies and murder mysteries and things like that which I really enjoy and I get loads out of. And this place is, you know, I’ve had parties in the garden, and everyone considers it as their garden.

The flow of friends through spaces traditionally occupied by conjugal couples and nuclear families points to one of the ways in which the individualized lives of those living without co-resident partners destabilize heteronormativity. In many of the narratives relayed by our interviewees, there was a refusal to organize their daily lives around a distinction that divided physical space along the lines of family/friend dichotomy. This is not just indicative of a blurring of the category of ‘friend’ and ‘family’ often cited in the ‘families of choice’ literature, but a blurring of the boundaries, and the transformation of the meaning of physical space as well. Space normatively constructed as ‘private’ and heterosexual is reconfigured as collective.

Decentring Sexual Relationships

Each of the four interviewees told a story of choosing to emphasize friends over lovers, at this particular point in their lives, while also acknowledging that there had often been a considerable degree of fluidity and movement between the categories of friend and lover in their lives. Their clear prioritizing of friendship over and above sexual partnerships, however, also paradoxically served to re-establish the distinctiveness of these categories.

For Polly, the categories of lover and friend have often blurred, but it is only as friends that those who are also lovers become central to her life. In some cases, the sexual interaction continues to be an aspect of the friendship, but to her these relationships are primarily meaningful as friendships which provide an ongoing source of support. Indeed, one of Polly’s and Karen’s closest friends, who has bought a house nearby, is an ex-lover of both of them.

Karen says that her relationship with Polly is rather like being married,
and that it has become a different kind of relationship for them since making the commitment to buy the house together. Recognizing that it is neither a conventional friendship nor a conventional partnership, both women spoke about how their relationship causes confusion because it does not easily fit into a predefined category. In attempting to make sense of the situation people often assume that they are in a lesbian relationship, which triggers heteroreflexivity (Roseneil, 2000b) for both Karen and Polly, as they encounter the heteronormativity of the neighbours and social institutions, such as schools, with whom they come into contact. The house-sharing dyad of Karen and Polly, and the network of friends, lovers, ex-lovers and biological kin within which it is embedded, is an example of how a mode of living intimacy and care pioneered in the ‘life experiments’, or ‘families of choice’, of lesbians and gay men (Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991) is being practised by two individuals who do not identify themselves as homosexual.

For Karen and Polly, the decision to centre sexual relationships is first and foremost about providing security for their children. Karen has not been in a committed relationship for the past three years, although she has been involved in a number of brief relationships during this time. She says she fears commitment and considering everything she already has in her life – the house, her children, her career and close friends – she doesn’t need a man. Indeed, for Karen relationships have proven ‘risky’. The end of her relationship with her daughters’ father has had a profound effect on her life and her girls’ lives. As a result of these experiences, Karen’s life has been significantly reoriented and for the time being sexual relationships are not a priority. The risk of becoming a couple for Karen outweighs the benefits, and maintaining friendships and her children as priorities, she is happy to manage her involvement with men through short-term attachments, avoiding commitment in such a way as to limit their impact on her daily life.

I was in a long relationship for 13 years. We’ve been separated for three years now so I’ve been on and off single. I’ve had a variety of boyfriends and it’s been fantastic . . . I don’t want to tie myself up totally to anybody, but last year I did have somebody who came into my life who was very special, but that was so terrifying . . . I said you know, it can wait, it doesn’t have to happen now. This is more important here – my security for my girls. You know, I’d lived with someone for 13 years. I don’t need to go diving back into anything like that, for a long time. So it’s not a major part for me . . . No, I’m really enjoying this moment and I enjoy finding somebody new that comes along for a short term but I don’t involve them or try not to involve them too much with what’s here.

Dale’s decentring of sexual relationships is an established, conscious life choice. His personal history has long been unconventional; his two long-term committed relationships with the women with whom he had children also did not involve living together. Although he is in a relationship that has lasted two-and-a-half years and is currently living in this lover’s flat, he has
never lived with her and does not intend to. At the time of the interview, the two of them were living at a significant geographical distance. One of the reasons he would not relocate to be with his partner is because his 'main friendship network' is in the city where he lives, and he also admits that he is frightened that living together will 'knacker the relationship'. Dale's 'people', as he calls them, tend to remain in each other's lives as friends, despite the movement in and out of various roles and dynamics. One of his ex-partners, Marie, had a relationship with his closest friend, John, which didn't work out, but they are all still friends.

John had an absolutely disastrous affair with Marie after we split up which I could have told him was going to be a disaster, and I did tell him was going to be a disaster, and sure enough it was, because they're both very, very – what's the word? – kind of acerbic people. They're very cutting edge people. But we survived all that and remained extremely good friends. So yeah, we've been through quite a bit of stuff together.

In Eleanor's narrative, the categories of lover and friend interchange constantly. It is striking the extent to which people move in and out of particular positions yet remain central to her. Friends become lovers, ex-lovers become friends, friends' ex-lovers become lovers, and so forth. For example, she explained how Judith, who is now one of her closest friends, was the partner of Eleanor's first girlfriend in Leeds. She explained that at the time, 'I stole [Judith's] girlfriend from her and then we all stuck together and lived together. The three of us.' When Eleanor's relationship with this woman ended, Judith then started seeing her again. This relationship, however, did not last, and Judith then moved back in with Eleanor. Eleanor's narrative illustrates the intricacies of intimate dynamics which are often in such a state of flux that the relevance and meaning of categories are constantly under negotiation.

Eleanor was also sceptical about the value of sexual partnerships. She complained about friends who had become 'joined at the hip', and expressed dissatisfaction with friends of hers who act too much like 'a couple' because they need to do everything together and ask permission to do things separately. A further problem she cited is that when people become involved in a relationship they tend to drop friends. Eleanor herself has been single for the past eight years. During this time one of her ex-partners has become a very significant friend to her and it is clearly friendship networks that are central to her life. Forecasting the future, Eleanor remarked:

If you can manage to stay out of relationships you can have a great time with your friends. I like it when I hear about older people that aren't in relationships but are absolutely having a great time and I have this view of myself, I've had this since I was a kid, this idea of myself lying on a chaise longue at some point in the future and having this room full of interesting things all partying and talking and that's kind of how I've developed my life and my house, it's been a meeting place and an exchange and I love that.
Imagining Personal Lives Beyond ‘the Family’: An Agenda for Future Research

The case studies reported in this article offer a glimpse of the consciously constructed life projects which are emerging among those who are living and loving without a cohabiting partner. To sum up, we found that some of those leading the most individualized existences are choosing to centre their personal lives around friendship, and to decentre sexual partnerships, in ways which challenge the heterorelational social order. As part of this process,

- Care and support flow between individuals with no biological, legal or social recognized ties to each other;
- Domestic space is reconfigured, and its association with the conjugal couple and the nuclear family is challenged;
- Non-normative cultures of intimacy and care are brought into being, as lifestyles which were once a politicized strategy pursued by those within alternative and feminist communities in the 1970s and 1980s are extending to those who do not think of themselves as activists or radicals.

In discussing the twin themes of centring on friendships/decentring conjugal relationships and showing how these themes operate within practices of everyday life we have sought to highlight the significance of casting a different lens on the study of intimacy and care, a lens which focuses on those living at the cutting edge of social change. We have not been concerned with asking about the extent to which the narratives in our study are representative of the population as a whole, but rather we would like to point to the possibilities that these cases present. Jennifer Platt’s (1988: 11) defence of the use of case studies suggests that if these practices are possible in these cases, they may exist in other cases, and that they must be taken into account in the formulation of general propositions about intimate life. Thus, these case studies have implications for the research agenda of all sociologists interested in the organization of personal life at the start of the 21st century. In particular, they suggest that 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.

In the context of individualization, increased reflexivity, detraditionalization and the destabilization of the homosexual/heterosexual binary, practices of intimacy and care can no longer – if indeed they ever could – be understood solely through a focus on families and kin. We believe that an exploration of networks and flows of intimacy and care, the extent and pattern of such networks, the viscosity and velocity of such flows, and the implications of their absence, is likely to prove much more fruitful for future research than attempts to interpret contemporary personal lives through...
redefinitions of the concept of ‘family’. Focusing the sociological gaze on intimacies and practices of care wherever they take place – in domestic spaces, public spaces, work spaces, virtual spaces – between friends, sexual partners, family, neighbours, work colleagues, civil acquaintances – will bring to light practices of intimacy and care, and ethical cultures associated with these practices, that have rarely been studied by sociologists of the family. A new sociology of affective life is needed which can register a fuller range of practices of intimacy and care.

Notes

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1 It is probably the case that far more of people's affective lives has always taken place outside 'family' than has been recognized by sociologists.
2 See Young and Willmott (1957) and Frankenberg (1966).
4 See Smart and Neale (1999), Stacey (1996) and Silva and Smart (1999).
5 See, for example, Roseneil and Mann (1996), Stacey (1996), Weeks (1995) and Jaggar and Wright (1999).
6 Ingraham (1996) argues that feminist sociology and the sociology of gender, and their studies of marriage, family and sexual violence, in particular, depend on a heterosexual imaginary, and argues for a shift from the study of gender to the study of heterogender.
7 See Weston (1991), Nardi (1992, 1999), Preston with Lowenthal (1996) and Weeks et al. (2001). Weeks et al. (2001) discuss the differences between their interviewees in relation to the adoption of the term 'family' to describe their intimate relationships, and acknowledge that many reject the term.
10 More recently, Sennett (1977) has argued that there has been a historic shift towards a 'culture of personality', in which impersonality and the public sphere are in decline. Misztal (2000) discusses the balance between formality and informality in the contemporary world.
11 This argument is made by one of the few sociologists to have made the study of friendship their central field of research interest, Graham Allan (see Allan, 1979; 1989; Adams and Allan, 1998).
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13 See, for example, Rheingold (1993), Shields (1996) and Wakeford (1998).

14 Castells (1997) also sees the rise of the global informational economy and the technological transformation of biology and reproduction as central explanatory forces in the undermining of the patriarchal family.

15 The research of Finch (1989) and Finch and Mason (1993) on family obligations suggests that family ties are now understood less in terms of obligations constituted by fixed ties of blood, and more in terms of negotiated commitments, which are less clearly differentiated from other relationships.

16 In this acknowledgement of non-heterosexual identities and practices, Giddens’s work differs from that of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, whose discussion fails to acknowledge its exclusive concern with heterosexuality.

17 The word ‘tendency’ is used deliberately to suggest the still provisional nature of these shifts, and with the existence of countervailing tendencies in mind. The use of the term is indebted to Sedgwick (1994).


19 We acknowledge that the majority of births outside marriage are to cohabiting couples, and in general, we acknowledge the increase in the prevalence (Ermisch and Francesconi, 2000; Lewis, 2001) and the social acceptability of cohabitation among heterosexual couples (Barlow et al., 2001). This does not, however, diminish our argument about the significance of the social decentring of, first, the married heterosexual couple, and second, the heterosexual couple, per se.

20 Watney (1988) and Fuss (1991) made early suggestions that such a process was underway.

21 Bech (1997, 1999) makes a similar argument, but pushes it further arguing that in continental northwestern Europe, we are seeing ‘the disappearance of the homosexual’.

22 For a detailed explanation of the construction of these indices, and their application to 1991 census data, see Duncan and Smith’s (2002) paper. For a discussion of the selection of the localities which are studied by the CAVA Research Group, see Duncan (2000a, 2000b, 2000c).

23 Although this research is based upon 53 interviews, we have chosen to use a case study approach here so as to preserve the composite whole of the narratives which is central to the gestalt principle underlying narrative analysis (see Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). In this analysis it is our goal to ‘approach the understanding of lives in context rather than through a prefigured and narrowing lens’ (Josselson, 1995: 2).

24 Reflexivity is a key aspect of the narratives in our data. Those individuals who exhibited a greater reflexivity in their narratives were more likely to question taken-for-granted assumptions and normative expectations surrounding the organizations of their personal relationships. Not all the individuals in our sample did so however. For example, some individuals were arguably more embedded in cultures of intimacy where blood ties were privileged without question. This also tended to vary by locality thus supporting the logic underpinning the sampling.
strategy – processes of individualization, family conventionality and gender cultures are not uniformly distributed but are spatialized.

25 This echoes Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (1995) argument that as relationships are increasingly unstable, children become the primary love object in parents’ lives.

26 See Urry (2000) for a powerful exposition of the value of metaphors of mobility and flow for the understanding of the contemporary social world.

Bibliography


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