Locating 'Family Practices'

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Abstract

The idea of 'family practices' is now quite widely used in British family sociology. The aim of this article is to locate this reformulation by looking, firstly, at the term's place within more general discussions of practices and, secondly, to explore the implications of a more specific focus on family practices. Through a comparison with some other possible and overlapping approaches, I consider the extent and ways in which the family practices approach successfully goes 'beyond' more established understandings of family.

Introduction

1.1 My aim in this article is to locate the idea of 'family practices' in relation to some wider developments within sociological analysis in general and family studies in particular. I do this by considering the 'family practices' approach as part of some wider practice-based analysis and, secondly, by looking more specifically at the term 'family' in this context. How far does the use of the term 'family' here provide some unnecessary limitation to the analysis, perhaps, indeed, in contradiction to the 'practices' approach as a whole? I conclude with a defence of the idea of *family* practices as a useful tool of sociological analysis.

1.2 By now the term 'family practices' (and associated terms such as 'parenting practices') is used quite widely in family studies, mostly with reference to my elaboration of the term in 1996 and subsequently (Morgan, 1996; 2004).[1] I was certainly not the first person to use the word 'practices' in general and I have discovered at least one other use of the term 'family practices' prior to 1996 (Adams 1994). My aim in 1996 was to provide a term which avoids some of the, by then widely recognised, dangers of writing about *the* family while acknowledging that family, however understood, remained an important feature of everyday life. Having adopted the term 'family practices' I attempted to spell out in some detail what was implied by this usage.

1.3 Since 1996, the term came to be widely used in British (and, to a lesser extent, elsewhere) family analysis (McCarthy and Edwards, 2001; 88-91). In some cases the term might be used without further elaboration (e.g. Oinonen, 2008). But it was also used more extensively in some other studies. Thus, we find it in an analysis of post-divorce families (Smart and Neale, 1999) where the authors see the term of overcoming the familiar divide between structure and agency. Later, we find the term being used in a study of 'non-heterosexual lives' (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001), south-East Asian Muslim families (Becher, 2008) and the family lives of people living and working in the hotel or hospitality industry (Seymour, 2007). These are just a sample of the usages I have discovered. For the most part, the researchers were attracted to the idea of 'doing' family and the fluidity of the topic.

1.4 I assume that most readers of this Special Section have some familiarity with the idea of family practices and my purpose here is not to present a more detailed elaboration which is available elsewhere (Morgan, 2011). In summary form, the key features of the practices approach in general are:

- An attempt to link the perspectives of the observers and the social actors;
- An emphasis on the active or 'doing';
- A sense of the everyday;

- A sense of the regular;
- A sense of fluidity or fuzziness;
- A linking of history and biography. (Mills, 1959)

Practices in General

2.1 I have suggested in other writings that these points, certainly if each one were to be taken in isolation, do not seem particularly new. Any originality this argument might have is the attempt to put all key features together within a particular package and in my attempt to explore what might be meant by the term 'practices' when applied to family studies. Certainly, there was no novelty in using the word practices since the use of the term and, more specifically, practice theory, had been around for some time (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 1996). My thinking on these matters did not take place in a vacuum and I was subjected to numerous influences, some recognised at the time I has developing these ideas and some less so.

2.2 Peter Martin identifies a process of a critique of some key sociological models or accounts of social collectivities in favour of an understanding of social life 'as enacted by real people in real situations' (Martin, 2010; 34). Among these collectivities he includes society itself, community, classes, organisations – and families. The general critical attack, therefore, is directed against forms of sociological holism and possible reification. Instead, he argues, the emphasis is increasingly one of looking at 'processes of *symbolic representation* and the *enactment of social relations*' (Martin, 2000: 41).

2.3 The influences on this climate of critique were various and could not, except in the loosest sense, be seen as constituting a coherent or co-ordinated set of texts. These influences included:

- Feminism, with its requirement that we should look critically at the way in which sociological collectivities conceal or obscure gender divisions;
- Ethnomethodology, with its scepticism about sociology's claims to re-present the social world and its desire to explore everyday practical life and accounting procedures;
- Post-modern thought, with its critique of grand sociological (and other) narratives and its emphasis on fluidity and openness;
- The 'auto-biographical turn' (Chamberlayne, Bornat & Wengraf, 2000) with its emphasis on the importance of narrative;
- The work of Pierre Bourdieu which is distinct from all these afore mentioned influences but which addresses some of the similar problems.

2.4 We can appreciate the way in which these influences mingle and converge, as well as reflecting (as Martin reminds us) deeper currents in sociological thought by considering some well-known oppositions:

- The opposition between 'theory' and 'practice'. This is a popular, if imprecise opposition but, it could be argued, one which lies beneath the surface of some of these critical discussions.
- The opposition between 'discourses' and 'practices'. These discourses may be theoretical accounts but they may also be ideological definitions or popular understandings. Both discourses and practices are legitimate topics for sociological enquiry and may, indeed, be closely related, but it is important not to mistake the former for the latter.
- The opposition between 'rules' on the one hand and 'strategies' or, perhaps, 'negotiations' on the other.

What a consideration of these oppositions suggests is that the elaboration of the practices approach represented some main currents in sociological thought and in popular understandings.

2.5 These oppositions can be seen, in a variety of ways, as playing out in the writings of Pierre Bourdieu. His distinction between official and practical kinship, for example, is a clear applied exploration of these distinctions (Bourdieu, 1990). In a variety of metaphors, we can see the elaboration of these oppositions. Thus, there is the familiar distinction between the rules of a card game and the actual play, depending upon the cards dealt and the skills of the players (Bourdieu, 1977; 58). Another striking metaphor refers to the 'abandoned roads on an old map' (1977: 38). This serves as a reminder that family and kinship ties have to be 'worked at' if they are to be maintained and to remain in any way meaningful. Genealogists may be able to draw lines between individuals but without the continued work, the practices, of the participants these may become like overgrown footpaths.

2.6 What emerges from this brief discussion of the 'practices' approach seen in its wider context? The first point, clearly, is the emphasis on doing, on action, or social action. Whether we are talking about the work of office holders in a public bureaucracy, daily encounters between professionals and clients, or the everyday experiences of marriage and parenthood what matters are the day to day practices rather than any formal prescriptions or descriptions. Yet, and this is stressed in the writings of Bourdieu, this action is rarely a matter of rational calculation and is more a matter of routinised, taken-for-granted attention to practicalities.

2.7 What follows from this is the idea that in carrying out these everyday practicalities, social actors are reproducing the sets of relationships (structures, collectivities) within which these activities are carried out and from which they derive their meaning. Friendship, for example, is more than an indication that such a person is a friend but much more a matter of activities and thoughts which reproduce that particular friendship and, to some extent, the very idea of and expectations associated with friendship. There is, therefore, an inevitable circularity between these practices and the sets of other individuals and relationships within which these practices have meaning.

2.8 Another theme to emerge from this brief discussion is the idea of fluidity. Once the collectivities which are found within sociological textbooks are called into question through the emphasis on practices, then we recognise a certain fluidity in the boundaries of these structures or systems. This arises, partly, out of a recognition that the constructions of an external agency or observer may not coincide with the everyday understandings or practices of the persons subsumed within these constructions. Different sets of people may see sets of practices in different ways. But it also recognises that a given set of practices might be described and accounted for in different ways. Thus, for example, friendship practices might also be seen as gendered practices or power practices of inclusion or exclusion. To the outside my friends may seem more like cronies, concerned with maintaining access to valued and limited resources such as professional gossip or social esteem or with reproducing certain modes of collective masculinity. To those on the inside they may be seen as, simply, 'mates' or 'pals'.

Family Practices

3.1 In the previous section I considered the 'practices' part of the term 'family practices'. I argued that talk of 'practices' was already widespread in several branches of social enquiry and that this approach itself reflected a range of different influences. It could be said that the practices approach was 'in the air' towards the end of the twentieth century and I attempted to give a little more substance to this vague phrase. Scholars responded to different aspects of the practices approach but common to most of them was a critique of some standard sociological collectivities, an emphasis on action and doing and a concern with the everyday.

3.2 What happens when we turn from practices in general to *family* practices? Clearly, the implication (and my specific aim) was to turn away from analyses that were based upon *the* family to something more fluid and which emphasises doing. Cheal provides a succinct definition of family practices:

> Family practices consist of all the ordinary, everyday actions that people do, insofar as they are intended to have some effect on another family member. (Cheal, 2002: 12)

3.3 While I have some reservations about this precise formulation (what do we mean by 'intended', for example), the important feature is that these practices are orientated to another family member. More than this, in enacting these practices, the other is defined as a family member. This is another illustration of the circularity between practices and membership referred to in the previous section.

3.4 To illustrate this let us take the example used by Cheal, that of 'family talk'. Many family practices consist of or are accompanied by talk. This talk may be face-to-face or via mobile phones, skype or email. Much of it will be based upon shared, unexplicated assumptions or may include abbreviated references to past experiences or jokes. In engaging in this kind of talk, members are re-stating that a particular kind of relationship, a family relationship, exists between them. In seeking out other family members in order to have these conversations, family connections are being reaffirmed and given some kind of significance. Practices and family relationships are engaged in a complex, improvised dance.

3.5 One obvious response to this is to argue that something similar might be said about other relationships, friendship for example. Why single out 'family' in writing of 'family practices'? Even if it be assumed that 'family' here does not necessarily refer to some theoretical or reified collectivity but to a looser and more variable set of others it might be felt that the use of the term provides some unnecessary limitations on the analysis. Further, as Roseneil argues (Roseneil 2005), the reference to *family* practices is not only limiting but reproduces heteronormative models of human relationships and fails to do justice to the range of ways that individuals live their lives.

3.6 The 'family practices' approach was intended to 'go beyond' particular models of family living.[2] But did it go far enough? By continuing to use the word family, even if the word is no longer being used as a noun, am I not limiting the scope of the enquiry? There are other attempts which have been made to 'go beyond' the nuclear family model which might appear to provide a more radical critique. Some of these do so by subsuming family and family practices within some wider set of relationships. And others go beyond the family model by including family practices within some wider set of practices, some of which might seem to have little to do with family as the term is conventionally understood.

3.7 Intimacy. One example of an approach which goes beyond the 'nuclear family' model is one which places the emphasis on intimate relations. Lynn Jamieson, in her detailed overview of the topic, begins with what she calls 'disclosing intimacy', 'an intimacy of the self rather than an intimacy of the body' (Jamieson, 1998:1). But she makes it clear that this is not the only way in which intimacy may be understood:

> Close association and privileged knowledge may be aspects of intimacy but perhaps are not sufficient conditions to ensure intimacy as it is more generally understood (Jamieson, 1998: 8).

Thus 'loving, caring and sharing' may also be seen as dimensions of intimacy (Jamieson, 1998: 8).

3.8 Jamieson's study includes chapters on parenting, friendship, sexual relationships and couples. Clearly most of these overlap with family relationships but also look beyond these. The implied question, therefore, is whether it might not be better to talk of 'intimate practices' rather than the narrower set of 'family practices'? In a study of intimacy in families, Jacqui Gabb (2008) clearly shows how 'practices of intimacy' intersect with and shape wider understandings and experiences of 'family practices' in terms of making sense of the body, embodiment and bodily interactions in families (Morgan 2011: 92). In this sense, it may be that the deployment of these terms is *strategically* useful at different analytical moments, because they

focus attention of particular dimensions of lived experience. As Jamieson demonstrates in her contribution to this Special Section, the concept can also hold analytical potential for understanding social change without the blinkers of 'methodological nationalism' (Jamieson, this issue).

3.9 Personal Life. 'Personal life', as developed by Carol Smart (Smart, 2007) has some overlaps with the themes of intimacy, chiefly in that both books include studies of family relationships but are not limited to these. In Smart's analysis, family relationships occur (indeed they provide most of the illustrations in the book) but they are not automatically centred. She refers to a wide range of family and kinship relationships but also refers to same-sex relationships and, more briefly, to friendship.

3.10 While departing from the family practices approach in terms of the range of relationships considered, she still sees her account as extending my analysis. This is not simply in terms of the actual relationships that we encounter in her book but also in terms of the kinds of themes that are dealt with:

> …I acknowledge that family is what families do, I also think we need to explore those families and relationships which exist in our imaginings and memories, since these are just as real (Smart, 2007: 4).

3.11 The kinds of themes that she wishes to explore are presented as a set of five overlapping circles labelled 'memory', 'imaginary', 'biography', 'relationality' and 'embeddedness' (Smart, 2007: 37). While there is no reason why these themes cannot enter a family practices analysis, it is more likely than not that the reader will be introduced to a slightly different set of concerns. These concerns are both slightly more mysterious than, and also closer to, everyday experience than what might appear to be the more prosaic concerns in my world of family practices.

3.12 Again, therefore, the question is one of why not 'personal practices' in place of 'family practices'? The former term not only deals with a slightly wider range of relationships without giving a privileged place to family ties but also, in Smart's analysis, introduces us to a wider range of issues, some of which are 'areas of life which used to be slightly below the sociological radar' (Smart, 2007: 29)

3.13 'Family Configurations'. The configurational approach, identified in particular with the work of Eric D. Widmer (Widmer and Jallinoja,2008) makes explicit its desire to go, in the words of the main title of an edited collection, 'beyond the nuclear family'. In addition (and again this is shared with the approaches mentioned so far) there is a questioning of the individualisation thesis and the strong emphasis on the self and individual projects to be found in some accounts of intimacy in late modernity, whether these accounts be pessimistic or optimistic. In so doing, the studies collected in this book have affinities with approaches that refer to social networks and social capital and all accounts that attempt to develop or to preserve a more relational approach to social life in a late or post-modern world. (e.g. Phillipson, Allan and Morgan, 2004; Spencer and Pahl, 2006).

3.14 In principle, the configurational approach need not deal exclusively with family or family-type relationships and could, indeed, deal with any chains of relationships and inter-dependencies within society. This seems to be implied in the work of some of the identified founders of this approach, such as Moreno and Elias. In practice, however, the studies presented by Widmer and Jallinoja do not stray far from discussions of family and kinship. Thus, one definition of configurations refers to 'sets of directly or indirectly interdependent persons sharing feelings of family belonging and connectedness' (Widmer and Jallinoja, 2008: 3). The emphasis is clearly on *family* configurations.

3.15 However, there is one way in which the configurational approach might be said to depart from the practices approach. Concepts such as 'family practices' they argue, 'do not convey the fact that family relationships, because of their complexity, are likely to remain highly patterned and embedded in the social structure of late modernity' (Widmer et al, 2008: 3). Put in other terms, the argument would seem to be that the family practices approach provides too open or free-floating a picture of family life, one that overstresses agency at the expense of structure. 'All human configurations', they write, 'evolve through time and space' (Widmer et al., 2008: 6).

3.16 Hence Widmer et al's critique of the practices approach is not so much an argument about the relationships subsumed under the particular analytical framework. In fact (as with some of the other approaches) there is considerable overlap. It is more one of the extent to which these practices (or configurations) exist within, are shaped by, other sets of relationships or structures within society. The narrowness of the family practices approach comes not from any implied exclusion of friendships or gay and lesbian relationships but from a relative failure to situate these practices within a wider structural framework. At this point we move on to two other approaches which include, but do not begin with, family or other intimate relationships.

3.17 'Caringscapes' The approaches outlined so far have two features in common. The first is that any claims to be going 'beyond' the nuclear family model represent some kind of expansion of the relationships included within the particular theoretical framework. And, second, the point of departure in each case is these particular family, personal or intimate relationships. The next two examples, by contrast, take a different approach. The point of departure is other than the family or family-type relationships and it is possible that family connections were far from being a central consideration as these approaches were being elaborated. Up to a point these two approaches reflect one of my claimed strengths of the practices approach. This approach stresses the fluidity of the boundaries between family and other sets of practices, such as gendered or class practices, for example. One of the consequences of this is that we do not need to start with 'family' in order to consider these practices and relationships. We may begin, say, with food, leisure or transport systems and find ourselves considering family relationships (Morgan, 1996).

3.18 The idea of 'caringscapes' provides an example of an approach that begins somewhere else but which quickly comes to include family relationships. One of the articles outlining this approach (McKie, Gregory and Bowlby, 2002) begins with the gendered interface between home and work and the practices adopted by mothers in order to maintain care for children and other members while remaining in paid employment. The core concern is 'care', the focus of a considerable amount of scholarship in recent years and something that may be regarded as a fundamental human set of practices. While, in modern and late modern societies, the practices of care have been especially identified with 'the family', this identification is strongly shaped by ideological and political considerations. Care is also strongly gendered as it is principally identified with women. Care needs of individuals within family networks change over time and, while frequently identified with families, can take place in a variety of spaces. Examples of these spaces may include clinics, nursery schools or sheltered housing. What the 'caringscapes' approach achieves is a point of departure which enables us to see family practices within some wider context.

3.19 The whole 'caringscapes' perspective is neatly encapsulated in two sentences:

> A caringscapes perspective reflects the range of activities, feelings and positions in parents' or carers' mapping and shaping of caring and working.

> Caringscapes includes past and current experiences, knowledge of the experiences of others and anticipation about the changing nature of caring and work (CRFR, 2004: 1)

Important here is the way in which 'activities, feelings and positions' are linked and the reference to the interweaving of past and present and, indeed, future.

3.20 The 'caringscapes' perspective is significant in a variety of ways. First, it provides another way of decentring the family. The points of departure are issues to do with care or health rather than with 'the family' and its supposed functions. Yet, family relationships are clearly implicated within this framework but in a much more fluid way. Second, this approach provides a ready way in which issues of structured inequalities and power may be incorporated. These considerations remind us of the steepness or distance of key features within a given care landscape. Finally, this approach provides links between individuals and their life trajectories, their social configurations and relevant social institutions, all these being located within a temporal framework.

3.21 'The Total Social Organisation of Labour'. Although the 'caringscapes' approach can be seen as a mode of decentring the family, it still represents a relatively modest move, given the frequent association of family relationships and obligations with caring practices. The idea of 'The Total Social Organisation of Labour' (TSOL), developed chiefly by Miriam Glucksmann, represents a more radical departure. It is important to stress that this approach was developed from points far away from family practices. Yet the term (one which the originator now admits could have been less clumsy) provides a good demonstration of how a quite different point of departure can quickly implicate family practices.

3.22 The TSOL is seen as an open, flexible and evolving set of linked ideas rather than a fully articulated system. A point of departure was the various challenges that have been made to the equating of 'work' with 'paid employment'. A couple of quotations illustrate this origin:

> Work is not assumed to be a discrete activity carried out for remuneration in institutions …but, rather, is conceptualised as being embedded in other domains and entangled in other sets of relations (Parry et al., 2005: 4).

> …a significant proportion of labour in advanced industrial societies may also remain undifferentiated from informal, household, familial or community relationships which contain other components in addition to work (Glucksmann, 2005: 31-2).

3.23 An example provided here refers to the care of children, a necessary activity which, as we have seen, links and cuts across workplaces, households, state institutions and communities. One aspect of this may be the education of children which links home, school, state and community and which is cut across by key social divisions such as class and gender. One may think of the numerous ways in which parents are drawn into their children's education, from relocating in order to be close to a desirable school to assisting in a child's schooling and extra-curricular activities. Another set of issues emerge when we consider recent stresses on 'flexibility' at the workplace and the development of 'family-friendly policies'. These examples, which could be multiplied, represent the kind of terrain where the TSOL operates.

3.24 One of the strengths of the evolving TSOL approach is that it can be deployed at any level of generality (Glucksmann, 2000: 162). The focus can, for example, be on the individual maintaining a time diary in which daily activities are noted down in some detail. But we may also stand back in space and time and explore the historical links between particular places of employment, particular communities and particular forms of households. These accounts can, indeed, take on a global character.

3.25 It should be stressed that the ideas around the TSOL were developed at some distance from and with little or no reference to family practices. But equally clearly it is not irrelevant to these practices. Just as the TSOL approach developed out of some developing dissatisfactions with the concept of 'work' in social analysis, so the family practices approach began with unease around the term 'family'. In the TSOL approach, family practices continue to play a part but we arrive at them from a different point of departure.

Balancing the Approaches

4.1 The overall aim of this article has been to outline my approach to family practices and to attempt to

locate this approach within some wider currents of social thought. In the first place I have concentrated on the 'practices' and have sought to demonstrate that this approach reflects some varied but well-established influences and themes. It would be wrong to present these themes and influences as constituting some overall coherent package; nevertheless, taken together, they represent an overall sense of scepticism about the kinds of wholes and collectivities that have routinely been represented within sociological analysis. Yet this does not, as some critics might maintain, represent a retreat from a recognition of the ways in which lives are structured or constrained. Bourdieu, after all was concerned with inequalities and their far-reaching consequences and the same was clearly true in feminist scholars' focus on gender and power. The argument might indeed be that some of the more established sociological collectivities – societies, organisations, nations, families etc – serve to obscure our understanding of the processes of structuration and to dull our appreciation of the everyday significance of these processes. The 'practices' approach seeks to take everyday life and experiences seriously without dissolving that life into a multitude of individualities.

4.2 Family life, the core concern of this article, provides a good illustration of the general point. A variety of different scholars with different concerns have expressed an unhappiness with some usages of the term 'family', especially where this is expressed as a noun. Critics have pointed out the misplaced concreteness of the term, one which fails to do justice to the many ways in which family life is understood and experienced and to dangers of a slide from the descriptive to the prescriptive. 'The Family' as a descriptive or analytical term can readily become the normative SNAF (Standard North American Family, Smith 1987).

4.3 At the same time it is clear that 'family' is not simply just a powerful strand in ideological rhetoric but the relationships and activities that are indicated by the use of the term are important to a wide range of people going about their everyday lives throughout the world. When the term is used in everyday life it is not being deployed as an abstract and timeless category but as a flexible, and often highly localised, term that has immediate meaning to speakers and hearers at the time of its utterance. Consider, for example, an everyday sentence such as 'I've got the family coming over for lunch'. How such a sentence is heard depends upon numerous localised factors such as the relationship between speaker and hearer, the age and generation of the speakers and numerous other factors.

4.4 I have, therefore, indicated that the 'practices' approach in general represents an important ' turn' in sociological enquiry, although one which has deep roots within social analysis. But what of the 'family' part of the term 'family practices'? I have argued that the 'family practices' approach seeks to 'go beyond' particular models of 'the family' in order to provide a term which raises new theoretical issues while also coming closer to the way in which family life is generally experienced. But, it may be argued, the term 'family practices' immediately places some unnecessary limitations on our analysis, given the large amount of emotional and ideological baggage that frequently accompanies the use of the word' family'.

4.5 When claims are made about going 'beyond' conventional family models (the SNAF for example) a variety of different, if overlapping, arguments may be expressed. In the first place, as with the use of the term 'family practices', the aim may be to provide an elaborated terminology that both comes closer to everyday life while also opening up new areas of enquiry. However the 'beyond' may be seen as replacing the term 'family' for some other less loaded term, indicating a wider set of people and practices. This could be true for intimate relations, personal relations or, possibly, configurations. Yet again, the going 'beyond' may be a matter of decentring family life and seeing it in the context of some wider set of inter-related practices to do with, say, care or work, in an expanding understanding of these terms.

4.6 The various approaches, all of which claim (directly or indirectly) to go 'beyond' certain family models, outlined in the main body of this article can be seen as rivals or alternatives to the family practices approach. It is not my intention here to view these as all contenders to be played off again each other in order to produce a clear winner. (Presumably the practices approach). But it is not my intention either to argue for some grand synthesis, with each strand illuminating a particular area of some wider whole. For one thing my selection might seem somewhat arbitrary, even eccentric. Certainly some older, but still influential, perspectives such as exchange theory or rational-choice theory have been excluded. This is largely because such theories have already been widely debated and will probably be familiar to most readers. I am more concerned here with some more recent theories that, in different ways, claim to go 'beyond' more conventional models.

4.7 In the context of the present discussion, a key question would seem to be one of whether the family practices approach provides a sufficiently critical perspective on family studies. While the word 'critical' can have several meanings, I take the word as requiring some attention to the key terminology employed in a particular discussion. In this case it is the word 'family' itself which is subjected to this critical scrutiny. In addition, or as part of this scrutiny, there is the widely-recognised task of rendering the familiar and the taken-for-granted strange.

4.8 It can be seen that the practices approach conforms to these understandings of the word 'critical'. By insisting on talking about the way people 'do' family (rather than 'the' family) our attention is drawn away, in some measure, from familiar settings and activities. For example, one implication of the 'practices' approach is that family practices can be conducted away from the familiar sites of home and household. Family practices can be conducted when negotiating a mortgage, planning a holiday or in demonstrating against government cuts. Alternatively, everyday or routine activities taking place within the home can be seen through new pairs of spectacles that make us reflect on their significance. An example here may be the very everyday practices associated with having family photographs on display (Davies, 2010; Finch, 2007). This is an activity that is normally taken for granted in that it usually comes as no surprise to see such photographs displayed. But a consideration of the processes by which these particular photographs (and not others) ended up in these positions may highlight complex intra-familial issues.

4.9 Thus it can be argued that the 'family practices' approach falls within the ambit of critical sociology. But, is it critical enough? Or does the continued deployment of the term 'family' still reproduce some assumptions (e.g. heteronormativity) which themselves require more detailed attention?

4.10 Few people, I suppose, would deny that the word 'family' continues to have considerable meaning and that these meanings, even if flexible, are reasonably widespread. The question would seem to be to do with the place of family relationships and practices within the analysis as a whole. In the range of approaches outlined here we have the following:

- Approaches where family provides a more or less central focus (Family practices and, probably, family configurations)
- Approaches where the family is a major but not an exclusive focus of interest (Intimacy, personal life)
- Approaches where family is an important but not always a central consideration (caringscapes, the TSOL).

4.11 The question is whether any strong focus on family relationships is still justified or whether some wider focus is to be preferred. Would not a critical approach ultimately require a clear decentring of family practices and relationships? I would argue that there are at least three reasons why 'family' (if not *the family*) should constitute a field of study in its own right and not be subsumed within some wider set of relationships or institutions.

4.12 The first reason for retaining the concept of family is that there are still some specific issues and questions which cannot be readily subsumed under these other approaches. In many ways these refer to the more ascribed aspects of family relationships. These would include kinship and inter-generational ties and relationships between siblings. One particular example would be relationships between twins (Bacon, 2010). What individuals do with such relationships (they can be ignored, embraced or responded to on a selective, pragmatic basis) will vary but they continue to have some potential, at least, significance. If acted upon, these relationships may become personal or intimate but in themselves they are not necessarily either personal or intimate. Put another way while it is true that not all intimate relationships are family so it is also true that not all family relationships are intimate.

4.13 The second reason why family should continue to be a topic for investigation is that discursive practices around such relationships remain influential. A Saturday broadsheet newspaper has a regular section called 'family' and family principles and obligations are regularly called upon in television soap operas and sit-coms. Family practices and display play a central part in weekly magazines such as 'Hello' and are rarely absent from the discourses of some religious and political leaders. We may seek to resist or to undermine these widespread representations by exploring their ideological functions and we should remain critically alert to how these discourses and representations work. But we should acknowledge that they do work and we should seek to explain their undoubted abiding power.

4.14 Finally, and perhaps most importantly, family continues to matter at some of the more immediate levels of everyday life. Family enters numerous everyday conversations and these conversations and the matters to which they refer occupy an important position in individuals' everyday cares, anxieties and joys. These may include, for examples, what a daughter intends to do after leaving university, a sibling's recent stroke or the death of an elderly relative. While discursive practices of the kind mentioned in the previous paragraph play a part in shaping these everyday conversations it is also likely that these everyday conversations play their part in constituting these wider discourses. This is partly why these discourses are so powerful.

4.15 Ultimately, I suppose, whether we use the term 'family' or not and what part family plays in our investigations as a whole is a matter of choice. But, as sociologists, we need to ask ourselves on a regular basis whether these choices are well-founded and what sorts of sociology they lead us to create.

Notes

[1] More detailed discussion of these themes can be found in Chapters 1 -3 of my *Rethinking Family Practices* (Morgan 2011) Basingstoke Palgrave-Macmillan

[2] A good illustration of this is found in the collection edited by Silva and Smart (1999).

Acknowledgements

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