



## 'Extending the Analytical Lens'<sup>[1]</sup>: A Consideration of the Concepts of 'Care' and 'Intimacy' in Relation to Fathering After Separation or Divorce

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### Abstract

This article adds to theoretical debate among British sociologists of families and relationships by considering the analytical potential and positioning of intimacy and care as concepts. Drawing on qualitative data from a study of fathering after separation or divorce, it explores the conceptual value of care as a means to advance understanding of fathering relationships. Raising the question of labour and the question of power, the discussion demonstrates the distinctiveness of care as an analytical tool, alongside, but not equivalent to, intimacy. I argue that intimacy and care are not interchangeable concepts and that care should not be limited as a purely descriptive term. The article presents care as a valuable concept which sheds particular light on the interplay between practical, ethical and emotional dimensions of family relationships, arguing that it has a deeply embedded ethical dimension which lies at the heart of its analytical potential.

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**Keywords:** *Divorce, Fathering, Care, Feminist Ethics, Gender, Intimacy, Theorising Family Life*

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### Introduction

**1.1** This article considers how, in pursuing theoretical development, sociologists with an interest in families and relationships have taken up the concepts of both care and intimacy as potential resources (Doucet 2006; Edwards & Gillies 2012; Gabb & Silva 2001; Jamieson 2011; Ribbens McCarthy 2012). Both are seen as able to reflect diversity and complexity, and both can be seen to fit within the prevailing focus on the processes and practices involved in relationships and connectedness. A key theoretical challenge has been to accommodate diversity and reconcile the historical, prescriptive tendencies of the social scientific concept of 'family', with the on-going resonance of the term in the everyday lives of individuals (Morgan 2011; Ribbens McCarthy & Edwards 2011). Yet, intimacy seems to have gained a substantially higher profile within social scientific analyses of families and relationships. Intimacy has been explored, not just as progressive in terms of moving beyond the prescriptive and heteronormative connotations of the term 'family', but often as a concept which can incorporate others relating to aspects of significant relationships; including care. Intimacy has featured within debates over the decentering of the concept of family (Budgeon & Roseneil 2004), and also its continued relevance as an 'institutional regime' (Gildin 2010) or an ideology (Gillies 2011).

**1.2** Both Ribbens McCarthy (2012) and also Smart (2007) call for the extending of theoretical frameworks; frameworks that retain the term family 'in the lexicon' (Smart 2007: 187) but which attend to the complexity of human connectedness in the most textured and nuanced ways possible. In her most recent contribution to this debate, Jamieson (2011) argues that intimacy overlaps with other terms seeking to capture the processes that bind people together (2011: 1) and would include, as one of those terms, care. This paper emphasises the distinctiveness and value of care as an analytical tool, and argues for its extension beyond the descriptive. I suggest that care sheds particular light on the moral deliberations and complex emotions involved in, and the interplay between subjective and socially produced identities and expectations bound up with, caring roles and relationships. I argue that care has a deeply embedded ethical dimension and that this is at the heart of its 'analytical potential' (Jamieson 2011: 1). The paper therefore considers the *analytical* work that care and intimacy can do; what particular aspects of

relationships they may reveal. The two concepts are not positioned in opposition or seen as dichotomous; but I do argue for the significance of care as a theoretical resource in its own right for the sociological analysis of families and relationships. I demonstrate the analytical value of care, through its application in a qualitative study of fathering after separation or divorce. My concern is that care may risk being subsumed into intimacy; my argument is that care and intimacy are not equivalent or interchangeable terms.

**1.3** In section one I review the development of intimacy and care as analytical tools. I consider the early discussion of intimacy within the work of Giddens (1992), and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 2002) and briefly trace the contributions of Jamieson (1998, 1999, 2011), Gabb (2008) and Dermott (2008). I then move on to trace the analytical trajectory of care in sociological work on families and relationships. I highlight in particular the scholars of a feminist ethics of care (Gilligan 1982; Ruddick 1989; Sevenhuijsen 1998; Tronto 1993) and recent British qualitative sociological work on non-traditional relationships (Duncan & Edwards 1999; Ribbens McCarthy Edwards & Gillies 2003; Smart Neale & Wade 2001) as examples of how the analytical rather than descriptive potential of care can be utilised. In the remaining sections I go on to illustrate the analytical potential of care using examples from my own research on fathering relationships after separation or divorce (Philip 2012).

## **The Analytical Potential of Intimacy**

**2.1** The term intimacy enters the sociological theoretical field through the work of Giddens (1990, 1992). Giddens is seen as a pivotal contributor to theoretical debate over personal relationships, through his claims about their 'transformation' as a result of broader social change. Notwithstanding this significant contribution, it is notable that whilst *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992) contains numerous definitional statements, what does not appear is any sustained discussion of intimacy as a concept, or of the analytical resources that it may offer. Giddens defines intimacy in a number of ways: as a sphere of social life: 'the liberated personal domain' (1992: 96); a distinctive type of personal relationship, characterised by the 'opening out to' another (1992: 94); and as a process: 'a transactional negotiation of personal ties by equals' (1992: 3). So, it is from these starting points that interrogation of the empirical and analytical potential of intimacy begins.

**2.2** Social theorists Beck and Beck-Gernsheim engage with the broader thesis within Giddens' work on intimacy; that human emotional and sexual relationships are radically altered by social and structural change. Whilst, again, not offering a substantive discussion of the concept of intimacy, Beck and Beck Gernsheim consider the transformation of relationships in relation to their theory of individualisation (2002). The analysis they produce contains similar themes to that of Giddens, in terms of contingency, agency and the potential for greater gender equality, but their suggestion is that contemporary life is experienced as a 'collision of interests between love, family and personal freedom', resulting in the 'quite normal chaos of love' (1995: 1-2). This is arguably a somewhat less optimistic outlook than that offered by Giddens' 'pure relationship', but what both pieces of scholarship imply is a need for new or different ways of analysing such transformations in human relationships.

**2.3** In her early work in this field, Jamieson (1998) begins the process of teasing out, not only what intimacy might mean, but what it might illuminate, as an analytical tool. She highlights Giddens' emphasis on 'knowing and opening out to another' to suggest that intimacy can be understood as a qualitative characteristic of relationships, based on mutual disclosure. Such 'disclosing intimacy' (1998: 1) is then critically evaluated as both a descriptive term and as a normative ideal. In this way, Jamieson raises the issue of whether intimacy could be used analytically to understand contemporary relationships, or to examine cultural discourses that regulate them. Jamieson also, importantly, offers a more sustained consideration of what she call the 'dimensions of intimacy' (1998: 8), to discuss more precisely what it is that the concept might shed light on. Drawing out a number of potential components of intimacy, Jamieson suggests that 'disclosing intimacy must include close association, privileged knowledge, deep knowing and understanding and some form of love, but it need not include practical caring and sharing' (1998: 13). In making such distinctions Jamieson's work arguably hones the analytical potential of intimacy, but may equally suggest something about the conceptual distinctiveness of care.

**2.4** Gabb (2008), in her extensive engagement with intimacy, identifies what she calls critical junctures in its theoretical and empirical application, emerging chronologically but being inter-related (2008: 65). In summary these are: sexuality, democratisation, embodiment, and the interrelationship between personal and public. In terms of examining the analytical potential of intimacy, Gabb offers particular contributions in relation democratisation and embodiment. In relation to theories of detraditionalisation, producing more egalitarian relationships between, for instance, men and women or parents and children, Gabb recognises that 'mutuality does not account for relationships that are imbalanced' (2008: 79). In theorising relationships, there is a need to adequately map and attend to 'socially differentiated intimates' and Gabb considers two possible directions and sources for this kind of analytical work; the concept of asymmetrical reciprocity taken from Young (1997), and that of 'significant otherness' drawn from Haraway (2003). Gabb seeks to explore these conceptual possibilities through her empirical study of intimacy in families, but contends that the conundrum of differences in status, resources and social position, and the impact these have on close relationships, 'has yet to be resolved in analyses of intimacy' (2008: 79).

**2.5** Gabb also emphasises the material and symbolic significance of bodies in any understanding of relationships. Her concern with embodiment arguably forms part of another development of the concept of intimacy, that of 'practices of intimacy' (Jamieson 1999). Gabb highlights the importance of embodied aspects of intimacy, including issues of touch, nudity, the sharing of domestic space, and expressions of affection. This insistence on the significance of the body adds to the analytical terrain that intimacy might illuminate. The term practices of intimacy, operationalised in Gabb's work, offers a productive analytical direction for intimacy in that it shifts its position as a potential higher order concept, to one that could

form part of an analytical toolkit (Smart 2007), alongside other concepts, including care. Conceptualising intimacy in terms of practice arguably facilitates a more dynamic analysis of relationships: 'Intimacy refers to the quality of close connection between people and the process of building this quality' (Jamieson 2011: 1). In this way, Jamieson and Gabb offer a particular analytical direction for intimacy, focusing more on its capacity to reveal the workings of relationships rather than their categorisation.

**2.6** Dermott (2008), in her work on contemporary fatherhood also considers this analytical direction for intimacy. Dermott discusses what she sees as five prominent themes connecting intimacy and fatherhood; sexuality, reflexivity, equality, fragility and communication. These themes appear to present intimacy in terms of its capacity to reveal facets of relationships; most specifically the emotional, psychological, subjective and embodied aspects of, in this instance, father-child relationships. Similarly to Gabb, she considers questions of power and gender within parental relationships, to critically engage with the idea of equality and Giddens' thesis of democratisation. Like Gabb, she questions any inevitable equality arising from intimacy, and recognises that questions of difference, otherness and power in significant personal relationships need to be theorised in appropriately nuanced ways. In this section, I have discussed ways in which intimacy has been interrogated as an analytical resource. Whilst it seems particularly productive to develop the idea of 'practices of intimacy', there may be more to do in terms of theorising the complex workings of power within relationships that may be emotionally significant or mutually beneficial, but which are imbalanced (Gabb 2008).

## **The Analytical Potential of Care**

**3.1** The concept of care has deep roots within sociological work on families and relationships. Clearly the conceptualisation of care in relation to gender has been a core element of feminist sociological work on families; care as labour and the gendered division of domestic and child rearing work have been central to the project of establishing gender as a mainstream unit of analysis and illuminating social inequality (Oakley 1985). However, in terms of its analytical potential, it is also important to acknowledge the particular conceptual usage of care stemming from feminist moral philosophy and most specifically the feminist ethics of care (Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1984; Ruddick 1989; Sevenhuijsen 1998; Tronto 1993).

**3.2** Two central aims of feminist moral philosophical scholarship on care, have been to interrogate and expand the concept; to examine how caring practice becomes gendered, and with what consequences. As part of this process, a number of recurring debates have emerged: the relationship between care and gender, between justice and care, and the potential of care as a basis for moral and political theory. More specifically, the feminist ethics of care seeks to theorise care in more nuanced ways, as a practice, a discipline, and a way of thinking, arising out of relationality and interdependence with others. Tronto and Fisher define care as:

'A species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our "world", so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web' (Tronto & Fisher, in Abel & Nelson 1990: 40)

**3.3** In order to extend the conceptual reach and value of care, key theorists, such as Ruddick (1989) and Tronto (1993) have focused on the mother-child relationship as a significant instance where ethics and everyday life are intrinsically linked. However, such writers make clear that they use women's caring experiences as mothers in very particular ways: firstly, in order to both make visible their deeply deliberative and relational qualities, and then to argue the validity of such experiences for ethical reasoning in other contexts. Thus theorists of a feminist ethics of care have sought to assert the analytical value of care in moral philosophy and political theory, and to use women's experiences as a lived context from which ethical relationships can be understood and extrapolated. The challenge has been how to present and make use of women's experiences without further consigning them to be 'natural' carers for evermore, and without idealising or sentimentalising women as mothers.

**3.4** In the UK it is possible to trace a longstanding theoretical interest in the place of care and ethical reasoning within families (Graham 1983; Finch & Groves 1983; Finch & Mason 1993). This interest has continued in sociological work seeking to develop an inclusive analytical framework for understanding relationships and connectedness (Ribbens McCarthy 2012; Rogers & Weller 2012). Central to a growing body of qualitative work on non-traditional relationships is the idea of caring roles and identities. Research, for example, on non-heterosexual partnership, friendship, lone-parenting, post-divorce and step-parenting has explicitly sought to demonstrate and extend the range of contexts in which caring relations and responsibilities exist and are struggled with (Duncan & Edwards 1999; Smart, Neale & Wade 2001; Weeks, Heaphy & Donovan 2001). In addition there has been a focus on revealing the moral aspects of family lives, and the 'work' involved in moral deliberation, responsibility or accountability (Philip 2010; Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards & Gillies 2000; Thomson & Holland 2002).

**3.5** Sociological theoretical work with care has also been developed by authors such as Lynch, Baker & Lyons (2009), and Bowlby, McKie, Gregory & Macpherson (2010), to argue the relevance of care for political and policy responses to social and economic inequalities and opportunities, and for the 'salience of care and love as goods of public significance' (Lynch et al 2009: 2). Drawing directly on feminist moral philosophical understandings of care and of personhood, such work sustains a critical focus on gender and inequality; extending theoretical frameworks by developing concepts such as 'caringscapes' (Bowlby et al 2010) and 'affective inequality' (Lynch et al 2009). Such work aims to integrate care into mainstream social science and policy, using care as an analytical resource to address inequalities in both the doing and receiving of care work.

**3.6** Such conceptual engagements with care demonstrate the important analytical value of the term. I

suggest that it offers particular insights into the complex relational and moral dimensions of significant relationships, and facilitates consideration of aspects of human connection such as responsibility. Care can enable an analysis of human needs in relation to the distribution of, and deliberation over, resources on both a personal and societal level, in ways that reveal the intertwining of their practical, ethical and symbolic elements. Because of its capacity to illuminate ethical dimensions of relationships, part of the analytical potential of care may also lie in its ability to examine, in nuanced ways, the complexities of power and difference in significant relationships. To further explain this position, I now turn to my own work on fathering after separation or divorce. I briefly describe the research and outline ways in which I utilised the analytical potential of care. I then present two examples where care facilitates important insights into fathering relationships.

## **Researching Fathering after Separation or Divorce**

**4.1** This qualitative, cross-sectional study involved 23 biological fathers' accounts of fathering after separation or divorce. These fathers identified themselves as having maintained contact with their children over time and across households<sup>[2]</sup>. The aim was to explore the detail and commonality of fathers' narratives of post-separation fathering, rather than to compare fathering across a fixed set of variables. All the fathers had at least one biological child where the relationship with the mother had ended and had been separated or divorced for at least one year<sup>[3]</sup>. The 36 dependent children in the sample ranged in age from two to 18; of these 17 were girls, and 19 boys. Just under half the group had caring responsibilities for subsequent children, either as biological or social fathers, through forming new partnerships, and nine were resident fathers to either biological or step-children at the time of interview. The interviews focused on fathers' caring arrangements for their children and how these had developed; on whether/how their working lives had changed with becoming a father and with divorce, and on the emotional and practical aspects of their relationships with children. I interviewed only fathers because my focus was specifically on men's experiences and perceptions. Whilst clearly I heard only one part of a bigger story of post separation parenting, my aim was to shed light on how men, as fathers, perceive the process of sustaining fathering roles, identities and relationships in this context. The interviews were coded for their relational, practical and moral aspects, using an analytical framework informed by feminist moral philosophy and a technique known as the 'Listening Guide' (Gilligan et al 2003; Doucet & Mauthner 2008). This approach requires multiple readings of interview transcripts, in order to explore and appreciate their complexity. I undertook readings for self-presentation, or the narrated self (Doucet & Mauthner 2008); for my own role in the story-telling, and thirdly for what Gilligan et al (2003) call, the 'contrapuntal voices' within the narrative; enabling me to move beyond notions of contradiction and attend more carefully to tensions and ambivalence within fathers' stories. This reflexive and iterative process, involving both external concepts and participant terms, produced the central themes around fathering, moral identity and strategies for 'working' at relationships.

**4.2** The purposive sample all lived in a rural region of Eastern England, and the majority were of White British ethnicity. Three main access routes were used to recruit fathers: family support organisations (two fathers) including two fathers' groups<sup>[4]</sup> (six fathers), employers or places of work (11 fathers), and my own professional and social networks (four fathers). Again, because of the deliberately non-prescriptive nature of the recruitment process, the sample was varied in terms of age, employment, type of caring arrangements in place, and the reported quality of co-parental relationship with mothers. What this diverse group of fathers had in common was some experience of attempting, and wanting, to sustain relationships with their children, and to navigate co-parental relationships with mothers.

**4.3** Of the 23 participants, 15 fathers reported consistent weekend, staying over contact with their children, who also stayed with them for periods of school holidays. Included within this group were three fathers who were main carers, where mothers had weekend contact with their children. Of the remaining eight fathers, one had a shared-care arrangement, where he and his ex-wife each cared for their son for half of the week and alternate weekends. Two fathers, whose children lived further away, had longer periods of contact during school holidays along with regular phone or email contact. Two fathers had regular supported contact with their children, either via a contact centre, or with another professional present as a chaperone. The last three fathers had unstable weekend contact, in a situation of ongoing dispute with an ex-partner.

## **Care as an Analytical Tool for understanding Fathering after Separation or Divorce**

**5.1** Care, defined as a social and ethical practice incorporating practical, relational and emotional dimensions (Tronto 1993), resonated powerfully with the research interviews. Care shed valuable light on men's lives as fathers, and on the importance of gender in shaping the process of caring for children after separation. Using care as an analytical tool provided me with a means, and a vocabulary, to attend to fathers' perspectives carefully and critically; to foreground fathering whilst still retaining a focus on gender difference and the constraints and opportunities this produces for men as fathers. The focus on care as a relational practice and as a way of thinking was also valuable. This deeply informed my analysis and my attempts to capture how fathers felt they tried to 'stay close to', 'provide' and 'be there' for their children<sup>[5]</sup>. Again, it was the expanded concept of care, as a means of including the activities, emotional responses and forms of moral reasoning involved in sustaining relationships with children and with mothers, which was particularly productive.

**5.2** Using the concept of care also enabled me to highlight the normative dimensions of fathering, which in turn can help to explain the personal, emotional and social investments involved. Moral identity is part of being a father or a mother in most contemporary Western contexts, and this moral identity is, in different ways, at risk as a result of separation or divorce. This means that continuing to be parents to children beyond the ending of the couple relationship involves moral and relational, as well as practical

and emotional challenges, and using the feminist moral philosophical conception of care allowed me to illuminate these, and argue their importance. My analysis offered a grounded insight into fathers' perspectives and 'moral tales' (Ribbens McCarthy et al 2003) whilst also making arguments about the gendering of care and of the moral space in which this takes place.

**5.3** My engagement with theorising fathering relationships therefore led me to think critically about the analytical potential of care and its conceptual position in relation to intimacy. Whilst intimacy has gained considerable prominence within theoretical work on personal and family relationships, it is important to retain care as an analytical tool in its own right and to consider the particular light it may shed; for instance on the symbolic or ethical meanings attached to practical or mundane acts. To continue this consideration of care and intimacy as conceptual tools, I now turn to two inter-related examples from my research: the question of labour and the question of power.

### **Understanding Fathering: The question of labour**

**6.1** Within the study, fathers consistently identified the importance of the routine in terms of sustaining relationships with their children and preserving a meaningful role in their lives. This preoccupation was present for fathers of both young and older children, although the specificity of, and contexts for, doing 'ordinary' things did change. Providing routine acts of care were also intertwined with fathers' feelings about and presentation of themselves as being a 'good father'. Here, both Gary and Dan illustrate this sense of the additional moral significance attached to mundane activities, carried out consistently, such as picking children up, turning up on time and doing household chores:

'I'd pick 'em up, if they wanted something for school I'd get it for them – I know money isn't the answer, and you don't buy people, but I was always there, I'd go to their school, I'd pick 'em up'

(Gary, father of Hannah, now 20 and Danny, 17; consistent weekend and holiday contact since time of separation)

I think people who know me, they know that I do work really hard, I'm always where I'm supposed to be at a certain time, and the house is run, y'know, I'll be up until the early hours making sure that everything's right

(Dan, father of eight year old Isobel and six year old Max; main carer, regular weekend contact with mother)

**6.2** Fathers who no longer lived with their children demonstrated a certain re-thinking of the significance of practical caring tasks (such as cooking, eating, washing) and of ordinary activities (watching television, shopping, gardening). In the context of having limited or more formally designated time with children, fathers in this study actively sought to combine the special with the ordinary, in order to provide and to receive what they described as 'the real dad experience'<sup>[6]</sup>. This was important in order to retain what they saw as 'normal' and 'good' fathering, which included routine care, and emotional closeness but also the ability to maintain some level of authority over children's lives.

I try to say just how important homework is and, he's got a couple of football teams, so I encourage him to do that as well, and I try and coincide my one day visits with a football match and also taking him to football matches when he comes up to see me  
(Martin, father of 11 year old Tom; periods of school holidays and regular phone calls)

'I mean, something really simple, but crossing the road, yeah, I've actually managed to teach Megan, y'know, 'when you get to the end of the road, you stop, and you wait for daddy' y'know cos she runs off- and I've instilled that into her, y'know, that's something I've managed to achieve with Megan'

(Micky, father of three year old Megan; had just achieved unsupervised contact at weekends at the time of interview)

**6.3** For Micky in particular, as a father who had experienced a considerable journey through the court and contact centres, the significance of having time to take care of, and do 'normal stuff' with his daughter was hugely important. Throughout his interview, his enjoyment and pride in the ability to have sole care of Megan, to play with her, and to 'teach' her things was prominent, and had also shaped his sense of moral identity as a father who had 'stood by his kid'.

**6.4** Having the opportunity to provide practical care for children was also inextricably linked to being solely responsible for such tasks, at least for periods of time, and this again brought shifts in the perception and meanings of direct care. Getting the real dad experience meant thinking, or rethinking, about the value and impact of certain activities, particularly in terms of how they may or may not facilitate father-child relationships. Both Paul and Chris, below, talked about the importance of doing ordinary things, and resisting the urge to continually do 'special treats', as part of trying to sustain close relationships with their children after separation. These quotations again demonstrate that, in this study, such processes appeared relevant to fathers of both young and older children.

'in a home relationship, you don't have these special events all the time, but then you almost feel like you're obliged to do them...whereas if you just, y'know, spend normal time, perhaps try and go and do one thing that they can interact with, even if it's like washing the car'

(Paul, father of three year old William; overnight stays three times a week)

'I want our relationship to be as natural and normal as possible, and they like it like that,

they're quite happy to sit on the sofa, y'know, and chat, for an hour or, playing hide and seek around the house, or, just do what you might call nothing, but it's not nothing, it's the real, that's the better times really'  
(Chris, father of 13 year old Gerry, 10 year old Oscar and six year old Sally; alternate weekend stays and periods of school holidays)

**6.5** Chris's broader narrative was of becoming a different kind of father through becoming more available and more intensely involved with his children since his divorce, despite, or alongside the emotional pain of the ending of his marriage. For a significant minority of cases, including Chris, the experience of direct and sole care for children, for periods of time, was presented as 'transformative' in this respect.

I'm quite happy to go swimming every Sunday afternoon because they love it and because they love it, I love it, and it really does genuinely change you I think, you do become different. (Chris)

**6.6** Such experiences had led fathers, in different ways and to different extents, to reconsider both their pre-divorce fathering and, more broadly, what being a father or a mother meant, in both personal and moral terms. It is important to recognise, though, that transformed experiences of care did not necessarily equate to greater amounts of time or overall responsibility; the most common form of caring arrangements was that fathers had children to stay for weekends, overnights during the week, and/or periods of school holidays. Yet what the study does suggest is how, following separation or divorce, the opportunities and costs of gendered caring roles and responsibilities may be inverted as fathers and mothers struggle to continue caring for children beyond the context of couplehood. For these fathers, direct care and responsibility came to be seen as important for maintaining relationships with children, and therefore also came to be seen as something sought after; something valuable; a source of knowledge about children's lives, and a source of legitimacy for any authority over those lives.

I don't know, you become a babysitter - you just don't have the same, because you're not seeing them daily  
(Tony, father of 16 year old Jess and 18 year old Sam; weekly visits and regular phone calls)

That lack of involvement in things that were happening, not being told things and what I had was, 'well, you need to find out then don't you' but, I'd never found out y'know, I was a (*sighs*), very much, distant kind of...  
(Dennis, father of 14 year old Anna and 13 year old Craig; regular weekly visits and informal weekend contact)

**6.7** Using these illustrations to demonstrate the significance of routine tasks and their role in shaping perceptions and feelings about being a father, my broader argument is that it is the concept of care which particularly facilitates this analysis. The conception of care, as relational and multifaceted, incorporating practical, emotional, and moral aspects, enables this consideration of the importance of 'love labour' (Lynch et al 2009) and also the link between such activity and ethical ways of thinking (Ruddick 1989). Sustaining parental relationships with children does involve practical and routine caring. It requires time (and time, over time) and it requires work, in physical, relational, emotional and also moral terms. As Jamieson points out 'It is difficult to spend time with young children and not be engaged in practical caring and knowing and understanding take time' (1998: 166). I suggest that using the concept of intimacy to explore parent-child relationships may neglect some of the complex processes by which these are sustained, and in particular some of the symbolic meanings and moral deliberation bound up with practical care.

## **Understanding Fathering: The question of power**

**7.1** For the fathers in the study, maintaining a morally viable sense of father identity involved retaining some level of authority and control over children's behaviour and lives. This meant they were often engaged in negotiations or conflict with mothers, children, teachers, social workers and others, but also with broader (and deeper) cultural ideas around masculinity and fatherhood. Almost without exception, fathers expressed a sense of moral responsibility to retain some level of influence over their children's lives, but the process of achieving this had become more complex and more demanding because of the ending of their couple relationship. Again whilst the context or content of such authority changed as children grew older, the preoccupation with, and ethical dilemmas involved in, retaining influence appeared relevant to all fathers in this study. In the following examples, both James and Jason offer some reflection and moral deliberation over the question of whether, and how to assert paternal authority in the context of caring for children after separation:

If I actually took control, it would be to the point of saying, y'know, she really needs to live with me, and then my daughter would start to look at me that I took her away from her mother- I suppose I was always scared that that was something that could be held against me in the future.  
(James, father of 12 year old Chloe; regular weekend contact and periods of school holidays)

I haven't been proud of myself sometimes when I have shouted at her, and I felt terrible, particularly as I only have her a short space of time, I don't really like to play the ogre.  
(Jason, father of seven year old Katie; consistent weekend and holiday contact, regular phone calls)

**7.2** In different ways, fathers expressed the idea that having some kind of paternal authority was either something they 'deserved' and wanted to retain; was something fathers 'should' have; or was something that children 'needed' from fathers. Yet, fathers also demonstrated awareness that, without the practical, emotional and symbolic elements of their marriage or partnership, exercising paternal authority was no longer any kind of given.

I think one of the biggest things they said to me once, when I was trying to tell them off, I think they must have been about 14 and 16, 'you can't tell us off, we don't live here' well, it's honest really, cos I can't ground them, y'know, and that side of things, it's quite hard.  
(Tony father of 16 year old Jess and 18 year old Sam; weekly visits and regular phone calls)

**7.3** Fathers frequently described a tension between a desire to maintain a working relationship with mothers and to retain some level of control over their children's lives and behaviour. The ready availability of a gendered model of fathers taking up a supporting parental role could be drawn upon as a way of accomplishing some kind of bearable but also morally viable solution to the problem of paternal authority. Here, Martin expresses his mixed feelings and reasoning in relation to respecting to his son's mother, whilst also indicating his own commitment to fatherhood:

I've got to appreciate that, she is looking after him 24/7, and so, y'know she's got that responsibility, that ownership and I haven't, so that's fair enough, it'd be nice if she did talk to me about it more, but she doesn't.  
(Martin, father of 11 year old Tom; periods of school holidays and regular phone calls)

**7.4** More specifically, fathers also talked about paternal authority in terms of exercising discipline over children's behaviour; setting rules and dealing with sanctions or rewards. Fathers' feelings about being responsible for disciplining children demonstrated the complexities around what may still be recognised as a conventional fathering/male role (Lewis & Lamb 2007). Many fathers expressed ambivalence about this; appearing unsure about the exclusivity of the disciplinarian role to fathers or about the costs it might involve in terms of fathers' changed relationships with their children.

I've always been torn, I suppose for the last 6 years, about whether I've stepped in, with a heavy hand to take control, of my daughter's life, education and upbringing... I don't know how to judge whether I should have done that, or whether it's been best that I haven't done it.  
(James, father of 12 year old Chloe; regular weekend stays and periods of school holidays)

I'm not particularly a great disciplinarian, y'know I could be the sort of Victorian dad sort of thing, but I just hash it up all the time.  
(Jimmy, father of 18 year old Jake and 16 year old Jess; consistent weekend and holiday contact, and main carer for Jess for two years at the time of interview)

**7.5** In the context of non-residence, some fathers felt that not only was their capacity to assert authority undermined, not least through a lack of daily information, but also that a predominantly disciplinarian role was not adequate for sustaining or developing close emotional relationships with children. Fathers again expressed ambivalent views of gender-stereotypical assumptions about fatherhood and masculinity, trying at some moments to hold on to, and at others to shake off, old ideas in an effort to be both 'good' and often different kinds of fathers. Where fathers had young children, the renegotiation of paternal authority tended to revolve around trying to agree a shared set of rules for behaviour, but with older children any such renegotiation had to directly include or be responsive to them. This was not always presented as easy for fathers to accomplish and the ability to exercise authority over older children seemed to depend on the quality of relationships and on the work invested in sustaining them. These fathers often described trying to take on an advisory role for older or teenage children. This could be understood as a relational strategy for sustaining emotional relationships, communication and common ground, but it also had a moral value attached to it in terms of being a legitimate way to exercise influence over children.

I think she sees me as someone she can talk to, and I mean my older girls do too, they phone me up and talk to me about things that they can't talk to their mum about, like relationship problems...I'm a good listener.  
(Robin, father of 15 year old Helena and two adult daughters; regular weekly visits and weekend stays)

Chloe will ask me questions, that perhaps she wouldn't be prepared to ask other people including her mother... she realizes that I'll be straight and won't shy away from that, and, whether that's a good relationship to have with your daughter - I think it is.  
(James, father of 12 year old Chloe; regular weekend stays and periods of school holidays)

**7.6** The concept of intimacy is linked to claims about increasingly egalitarian or democratic relationships. However, in relation to parental and co-parental relationships, differences in the workings of power may not be so easily explained (Gabb 2008). It is important to be able to unpick the complex meanings and negotiations of power and of gender that run so deep in the interconnections between fathers, mothers and children, and which shape parental practices and identities (Miller 2011). My research has led me to consider the extent to which intimacy can really grapple with these differences and inequalities. Whilst Gabb (2008) suggests Young's (1997) concept of asymmetrical reciprocity as a means of exploring power and difference in family relationships, in general, intimacy has yet to be systematically applied to these issues. This is particularly the case with the ethical idea of responsibility and the combination of powers and constraints, and processes of deliberation it contains. In terms of analysing and theorising such

experiences, there is a need for concepts that can contain these important complexities of response, and more micro-workings of power in family relationships. My suggestion is that the concept of care helps to reveal significant processes particularly in relation to understanding the moral aspects of family lives, and may illuminate different features than is the case with intimacy. This makes it important to value and apply care as a conceptual, analytical tool, alongside, but distinct from, intimacy.

## Conclusion

**8.1** This paper has sought to demonstrate the analytical potential and value of care, as a distinctive conceptual tool. My argument is that the central contribution offered by care, comes from its deeply embedded ethical dimension, and that this can illuminate important deliberative and evaluative aspects of family relationships. I have traced the trajectory of both care and intimacy as they appear within sociological investigations of personal and family relationships, in order to consider the current prominence of intimacy but also the heritage of care as a theoretical resource. Whilst authors such as Jamieson (2011) and Gabb (2008) have developed the idea of 'practices of intimacy' and might position care as being included within, or overlapping with this, my contention is still that there is conceptual value in retaining or revisiting care as a particular analytical resource in its own right. The questions I have asked of intimacy emerged from my attempts to attend closely to the moral and relational aspects of fathers' narratives, and to do so taking a critical approach to the gendering of care for children. These questions centred on the capacity of intimacy to contain the multifaceted qualities of emotional connection to and moral responsibility for others, and its ability to attend to ambivalence and power in fathering relationships. I am arguing for the analytical potential of care, over and above its function as a descriptive resource, because of its ability to illuminate the interplay between practical acts and their symbolic and ethical meanings. I also argue for the importance of care as a concept in its own right, in that it sheds light on significant and different processes from those revealed by intimacy; specifically the deliberative, ethical dimensions of, and ambivalences within, parental and co-parental relationships. In addition, I suggest that the analytical lens of care may offer more in terms of understanding and challenging complexities of gender relations and inequalities, than appears to be the case with intimacy. Empirically, care remains heavily gendered in terms of how practical, emotional and moral responsibility is allocated and in how family roles are understood (Bowlby et al 2010; Lynch et al 2009). Without strong analytical purchase these material or empirical features of care also risk being marginalised.

**8.2** Within the study outlined here, a feminist conception of care proved a valuable theoretical resource for exploring, and thinking critically about, relationality, morality and 'love labouring' (Lynch et al 2009) in men's lives as fathers after separation or divorce. My suggestion therefore, is that in seeking to extend the analytical lens (Ribbens McCarthy 2012) and study contemporary relationships in multi-layered, textured and critical ways, making full use of the analytical potential of care may well be both productive and thought-provoking.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>This phrase is taken from an article by Jane Ribbens McCarthy (2012) and I am grateful for her permission and comments on an earlier draft.

<sup>2</sup>My focus was clearly on fathers who did have contact arrangements and who spent time with their children with some consistency, but I could not impose quantitative and judgemental limits on what counted as 'regular'. In my recruitment literature I used the phrase 'fathers who see and take care of their children' in order to allow for interpretation and self selection.

<sup>3</sup>This was a practical decision taken as part of the ethical consideration of the implications of asking fathers to retell painful stories.

<sup>4</sup>Whilst five of the fathers were recruited from an active Young Fathers project, they did not stand out as atypical. Neither my analysis of the data, or of my own interviewing practice, revealed significant differences for this small sub-group; for example, they were no more overtly 'political' in their views on fathers, and no more 'accomplished' in their construction and presentation of their narratives.

<sup>5</sup>'Staying close', 'Providing' and 'Being there' were all themes that emerged from the interviews and were developed in chapter seven of the thesis, which dealt with fathering as a practice but also as a form of gendered moral self-presentation.

<sup>6</sup>'Getting the real dad experience' was again a theme developed from the analysis of fathers' narratives and was an example of a relational strategy used by fathers to try and sustain their relationships with children.

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