The Intimate Relationships of Contemporary Spinsters

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Abstract

Several theorists of social change have argued that there are profound transformations in social interactions emerging in the context of wider social, cultural and economic change, including a shift to greater choice and fluidity in personal relationships. Alongside this, there has been widespread academic support for the notion of individualism as a major explanation of family change, with several commentators raising concerns that changing familial forms signal increasing self-centredness and a decline in commitments to others. Remaining single can be seen as paradigmatic of such individualisation, and single women in particular risk being characterised by their lack of connection to significant others. However, there has been relatively little empirical attention to the relationships of single people. This paper draws on research on never-married single women in Britain and analyses their relationships with both kin and non-kin in relation to claimed transformations in intimacy prevalent in contemporary debates. It concludes by considering the implications of the main findings of this research for sociological debates about the changing conceptions of both intimacy and 'the family'.

Introduction

1.1 Several theorists of social change argue that there are intense and profound changes ongoing in the sphere of personal relations. Much recent scholarship on transformations in relationships contends that inter-related changes in late modernity have led to a greater range of possibilities in the ways people relate to each other. Alongside this, a prevalent theme in debates about familial change has been the extent to which these changes signify a move towards greater individualism (Lewis, 2003). Remaining single can be seen as paradigmatic of such individualisation, and single women in particular risk being depicted as strident individualists, characterised by their lack of connection to significant others (Chandler, 1991). This paper reports the findings of empirical research exploring the personal relationships of never-married single women, research which allows a number of theoretical claims prevalent in contemporary debates about changes in ways of relating to be considered.

1.2 Several scholars have argued that processes of individualisation and the breakdown of traditional narratives and legitimating discourses are making possible diverse ways of life, and producing a 'pluralisation of domestic patterns and relationships' (Weeks et al. 1996:5). Influential sociological theorising on transformations in personal relationships by Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), building on earlier arguments about processes of reflexive modernisation and individualisation (see Giddens 1991, Beck 1992), contends that individuals increasingly have more freedom, or must make choices, in contexts where traditional and institutional norms no longer apply. Intimate relationships are consequently increasingly experienced less in terms of ascription and more as a matter of choice. Giddens' optimistic arguments about the 'pure relationship', a new form of intimacy based on people negotiating how they want to live together, contrasts with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's far more ambivalent analyses of familial change as the outcome of the related processes of individualisation and the market model of modernity. However, an important commonality is that both implicitly assume sexually based coupledom as the foundation for intimate relationships[1]; consequently, the experiences of those outwith

couple relationships are relatively disregarded.

1.3 Beck and Beck-Gernsheim do consider singleness, mainly that of the ever-married separated and divorced. Singleness is portrayed negatively, and various hazards of 'running one's life alone' spelt out, not least the need for a good job and to build a web of friendships. Success here however is presented as a potential 'danger', as these may prove an insurmountable obstacle to any close partnership (1995:145). Singleness is mainly conflated with an absence of intimate relationships, with single people's lives depicted as an exemplar of the negative consequences of modern market economies: 'the kind of existence led by single people is not a peculiar side-effect of social change, it is the archetypal existence behind a full market economy. According to the logic of the market we do not have any social ties and the more we accept this the less we can maintain close friendships' (1995:44)[2]. Singleness for women is particularly problematised. The feminisation of poverty wherein women are only 'a husband away from welfare' is highlighted, however attention is also drawn to the potential costs of a career for women, that of having no partner: 'there is another problem emerging, affecting those women who pursue an independent career but must in many cases pay a high price, the loneliness of the professionally successful woman' (1995:63)[3].

1.4 The way in which singleness is experienced is an empirical question. The limited empirical evidence provided by both Giddens and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim however is one aspect of a discourse in which the centrality of (hetero)sexual relationships is naturalised and assumed as self-evident. Yet, as Jamieson (1998, 1999) observes, intimacy can be conceived of as about other things than the pure relationship, and cannot be assumed just to exist in close associations. Feminist scholars have long argued that assumptions of the centrality of heterosexual coupledom function as part of the privileging of heterosexuality that serves to constrain options to construct alternative ways of living (see Barrett and McIntosh 1982, Van Every 1999). Such assumptions limit creativity in forming relationships, including opportunities to form primary relationships that are *not sexual* (Dunne, 1999:14, emphasis in the original). As Simon argues, expanding our capacity to picture varied social relationships extends the possibility of 'plural paths' to intimacy (Simon, 1987:110).

1.5 Feminist analyses of the political and conceptual significance of 'the family', alongside increasing diversity in familial forms in recent decades, have contributed to shifts in the way that both familial relationships and intimacy are understood. Changes in the notion of family across the range from formal blood or marriage ties to the subjective meanings of intimate connections, enable a wider range of relationships and practices to be considered, and there is much contemporary empirical and theoretical work being produced on the varied ways in which people are 'doing' family in a context of wider social change[4] (see Dunne 1997, Silva and Smart 1999, Smart and Neale 1999, Wright and Jagger 1999, Budgeon and Roseneil 2004). Theoretical arguments of shifts to greater choice and fluidity in relationships suggest other forms of social connectedness may also be experiencing transformation. Nevertheless, there is relatively little attention in this literature to the relationships of single people[5].

1.6 Personal relationships are a key site of socially and personally constructed interactions, and arguments for the significance of these as a source of intimacy and sense of belonging as well as care are particularly pertinent to single people: those who do not have one 'significant other' must rely on varied others for emotional and other support[6]. The importance of friendship in affirming a positive sense of self-identity and confirming self-worth (Allen, 1989:155) is especially significant for single women, particularly likely to be subject to stigmatisation as socially isolated and lonely (Sandfield and Percy, 2003)[7]. This paper draws on empirical research on never-married single women and considers the extent to which their varied relationships support claims of transformations in practices of intimacy in a context of wider social change.

Methods and Sample

2.1 This article is based on analysis of in-depth interviews conducted in 2002 for a research study examining the meanings and practices of contemporary spinsterhood, and how these may have changed over time. Rather than make claims on behalf of all single women, the intention of this study was to consider in detail a specific set of women, and the data are drawn from the narratives of thirty-seven white heterosexual spinsters aged between thirty-five and eighty-three, from a range of social backgrounds. Qualitative interpretative research methodologies have come to be seen as 'quintessentially feminist' (Maynard and Purvis, 1994), however all research methodologies are supported and framed by a particular view of the social and how the social can be known. The analysis presented here represents a particular understanding of the meanings and experiences of the personal relationships in which these women were embedded, based on a specific set of discourses derived from interviews set in a particular cultural context.

2.2 Singleness was defined for the purposes of this research as never-married and not having been in a cohabiting relationship for at least five years. While all participants defined themselves as single, three were in ongoing non-cohabiting relationships with men. Seven of the women were mothers: two had unplanned pregnancies and were not in a relationship on the birth of their child, one participant had a child while in a long-term cohabiting relationship which has since ended, and another in an ongoing non-cohabiting relationship. Three women had opted into single motherhood via artificial insemination and adoption. The majority of participants lived in cities or large towns, and interviews took place mainly in the central belt of Scotland, five in London and one in the South West of England. Pseudonyms are employed throughout.

Friends as Family, Family as Friends

3.1 The narratives of many participants depicted close, affectionate and supportive relationships with both family and friends, and these were clearly important to the emotional and social lives of the women in this research. As such, these interviews support previous findings of the centrality of relationships with both kin and non-kin to the lives of never-married women (see Simon 1987, Allen 1989), research which counters understandings of intimacy as residing only in couple relationships.

3.2 Theoretical arguments of transformations in intimacy in the context of wider social changes claim a shift from ascribed relationships to 'elective affinities' wherein people freely choose relationships in accordance with personal inclination (Beck-Gernsheim, 1998:56). Giddens (1992) contends that couple relationships are becoming more like friendship, as individuals seek more democratic, negotiated and open relationships. Yet, rather than a distinction between friendships as voluntary reciprocal relationships and family as encompassing duty and obligations, these elements were variously evident in both. This was indicated in part by the terminology used in describing these relationships, and a theme common to interviews across all ages was the use of familial terminology to describe friendships, which the narratives suggest was in order to intimate the importance and value of these relationships. This is illustrated in Franny's interview. Franny, born in the 1940s, had no siblings and both her parents were deceased. Talking about friendships, Franny commented:

> 'Somebody said that in this day and age really you create your own family around you, rather than the family you're born with. I think that that's actually true [...] I would say that some of my friends are as close as family. You tell them things that you would only tell very close friends and family, and you rely on them'.

3.3 Franny's narrative indicates she associated this reliance on friends more with social change than her single status per se. It also showed clearly she felt she could depend on these friendships to, as she said, 'share the good times and bad times' and for emotional and other support, describing offers of financial help when she was recently made redundant as well as with other problems such as illness: 'I have got friends who would drop everything and rush over to me'.

3.4 The use of familial terminology for relationships with non-kin suggests a desire to emphasise characteristics such as affection and closeness conventionally associated with family. In describing a relationship she had with an ex-partner and his wife, a couple who hoped to have a baby, Franny commented 'I'll be almost an aunt if they do'. Yet, such terminology is also indicative of the ideological strength of assumptions about familial relationships and, as Pahl and Spencer state, its usage may reflect the strength of normative expectations about how family members might relate to each other, rather than necessarily their own actual experience (2003:17). Franny, an only child, emphasised the closeness of a relationship she had with a cousin by describing this as 'as close as brother and sister'.

3.5 Participants who described problematic family backgrounds also used familial terminology, suggesting a desire to intimate a certain level of support and affection putatively associated with the family. For example Louise, born in the 1960s and who recounted leaving home at 17 due to a difficult relationship with her step-father, described her friends as 'sort of like a substitute family in a way'. Wendy, born in the 1940s, described a wish to live with others, a desired community she described as 'a surrogate family' that would be there for her in a way that her biological family 'certainly hasn't been'. This suggests both the enduring cultural supremacy attached to the notion of family, and the subsequent limits of vocabulary to encompass emotional ties not based on biological or conjugal relatedness. However, several scholars have sounded a note of caution about the pluralisation of the concept 'family' to address all intimate relationships (see Riley 2002, Butler 2002, Trimberger 2002, Roseneil and Budgeon 2004). As well as impeding the possibilities of more radical social transformations, it is argued that such an emphasis - what Riley refers to as 'all-embracing kinship' - risks failing to address the hierarchies and inequalities of power often associated with families, and the ways in which some non-familial intimacies may be superior.

3.6 Another common theme was the use of friendship terminology to describe familial relationships, indicating a desire to imbue these with positive qualities typically associated with friendship. This flexible use of familial and friendship terminology, as well as the values and importance attributed by several participants to their relationships, suggests a 'blurring' of a distinction in relationships with kin and non-kin. Rather than a transformation from families of 'fate' to families of 'choice' therefore, this research supports arguments of a 'social suffusion' between given and chosen relationships (see Pahl and Spencer, 2003). This is illustrated in the following excerpts from interviews with two participants living in the maternal home. Tanya, born in the 1950s, was living with her widowed mother, having returned to the parental home in her late thirties after many years living in Spain. She described her relationship with her mother as 'immensely important', and referred to her sister as her 'best friend'. These relationships were a source of both emotional support and companionship, with Tanya and her mother holidaying abroad together. Tanya also talked about other valued relationships, describing a friendship with a married woman during many years living abroad in the following terms: 'when we lived [in Spain] we were constantly together, and basically people said that when that when I left she was like in mourning, you know, I was more of a partner than her husband'[8].

3.7 Debra, born in the 1960s, had moved in with her divorced mother for financial reasons on returning to full-time study at 26. Now in her late thirties, she continued living there with her youngest brother. She referred to her mother as 'the best friend you could ever have' for supporting Debra financially and otherwise while studying, including taking her on holiday every year. Debra's 'very close' family included a married brother who lived locally with his wife and young children, who had decided against employment requiring relocation as he wanted his young children to remain near his maternal family. Debra described a pleasurable social life involving activities with both family and friends. She talked about an annual long weekend abroad with her sister-in-law and other female friends, and a forthcoming holiday with her mother,

two single brothers, her married brother and his wife and children, as well as three friends (a married couple and a divorced friend) whom Debra had introduced to the rest of her family. She had also holidayed on several occasions with a married couple, once while with a partner, again with the same man but after they had ended their romantic relationship, as well as subsequently on her own. Her narrative illustrates her awareness of this as atypical, however this friendship was clearly agreeable to all:

> 'They (couple) didn't have any problem at all about me sharing a room with them, because it had two big double beds and we were great friends […] A lot of people thought it was strange that I was going on holiday with a married couple […] But because we were so relaxed and happy with each other we were totally comfortable in doing that'

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3.8 Recent empirical research on the family and community life of older people finds that strong kin ties, including with a spouse, can 'limit the scope of relationships which can introduce people to new social ties and contacts' (Phillipson et al. 2001:256). Debra's narrative suggests the creative possibilities for social interactions and practices of intimacy in the absence of spousal relationships, not just for Debra but also her divorced mother.

3.9 Nevertheless, participants' narratives also indicated an awareness of a lack of cultural validation accorded non-normative intimacies, and that this could result in difficulties for participants. Prevalent stereotypes of spinsterhood have included an attribution of this status to possessive relationships with parents (Cargan and Melko, 1982:69), and Debra anticipated negative reactions to her recent decision to buy her mother's house and continue living there: 'people could laugh at me and say "you're such a spinster"'[9]. Other participants who had or were living with parents, particularly those undertaking caring responsibilities, similarly described this somewhat defensively (see Simpson, 2003). The appropriation of familial terminology reflects the cultural significance of 'family' as an exemplar of values of affection, closeness and care to which participants may wish to lay claim. Similarly, employing 'friendship' terminology for kin emphasizes the chosen and congenial nature of such relationships, and its use may in part reflect a desire to rebut a stigmatised subject positioning.

3.10 Moreover, the values commonly associated with friendship include mutuality and reciprocity. Debra clearly cared about and felt concern for her mother, for example stating her unwillingness to go out on New Year's Eve as it meant leaving her mother alone[10]. Yet, Debra depicted much of her domestic work being undertaken by her mother, whom she stated 'loves looking after her children!'. There are long standing feminist concerns with issues of power and inequalities within families, despite an ideology of the family as a mutually supportive unit, and several scholars have highlighted the various axes, such as gender and age, along which this can occur (see Barrett and McIntosh 1982, Delphy and Leonard 1992). The work done by Debra's mother for her adult children illustrates that the emotional closeness ascribed to a relationship does not necessarily preclude inequalities in that relationship; as Jamieson (1998) has noted, empirically intimacy and inequality continue to co-exist in many personal lives.

3.11 As well as a lack of cultural validation, several narratives also referred to a lack of institutional support for the intimate relationships in which they were embedded. Tricia, born in the 1950s, lived near to her divorced sister, whom she saw every day. While she referred to not having to compromise as an advantage of singleness, she observed 'I do compromise with my sister'. Tricia recounted that she had considered moving to the countryside, however has decided against this in part because, as her sister doesn't drive, 'her life would be narrower, more difficult if I moved somewhere that was longer, harder [to get to]'. Tricia's life was clearly bound up with her sister's in various ways. However, she referred to not having the option of making her sister a beneficiary of her occupational pension, an exclusion that she saw as unjust and experienced with some indignation and resentment:

> 'If I were to die comparatively soon after being given a pension […] then it is somebody else's wife or husband who will benefit. And I think that is absolutely shocking, and when I get my act together I might actually start some sort of petition about it, because it is so unfair'[11].

3.12 Many participants described mutually supportive relationships with both family and friends that encompassed a sense of responsibility for the others' welfare. Nonetheless, whilst several participants had undertaken caring work for their parents or children, only one participant referred to performing this for non-kin[12]. Sarah, born in the 1930s and a qualified nurse, described caring for an older friend, visiting her on a twice-daily basis for six months prior to her going into a nursing home. Continuing to work full-time during this period, Sarah stated this had left her 'thoroughly exhausted'.

3.13 Trimberger (2002) emphasises the importance of care beyond the family and market context, arguing that providing this through a large friendship network does not create the loss of personal independence that care by one or two family members entails, and that care provided within friendships, as voluntary relationships encompassing values of choice and democracy, may be 'more genuine and supportive'[13]. She cites in illustration research documenting the unprecedented mobilisation of networks of people not related by traditional family ties to care for gay men with HIV/AIDS, primarily young men providing care to peers often estranged from their family of origin (see Sullivan 1998, LeBlanc and Wight 2000). Such research calls into question the claims of earlier work on friendship, that 'in practice the basis of solidarity within the tie does not generally facilitate high levels of long-term unilateral support' (Allan, 1989:108). Nevertheless, caring work undertaken by individuals for non-kin is largely unsupported by public policy. As Trimberger argues, the lack of institutional support and cultural validation for friendship may mean the moral obligations of friendship being perceived as less binding than commonly understood and legally

inscribed familial duties and rights (see also Pahl, 2000)[14]. Participants did describe both providing and receiving substantial emotional support from friends, as well as practical support such as offers of money. The absence of reference to substantial care within non-kin relationships in this research however may also indicate something about the limits of friendship, and suggests the need for further research.

The Influence of Gender and Partnership Status

4.1 These interviews demonstrated the influence of a range of factors shaping the relationships of participants with both family and friends; as such, they pose a challenge to notions of the freely chosen nature of personal relationships. As Jamieson argues, such relationships 'are not typically shaped in whatever way gives pleasure without the taint of practical, economic and other circumstances' (1999:482). Gender has long been considered an important factor shaping social interactions, with women's identity particularly associated with the expressive functions of managing relationships. However, this research highlights the significance of both gender *and* partnership status. Several narratives illustrated the influence of both these factors on the relationships of participants, in varying ways. For example, most participants describing friend-like relationships with kin were referring to relationships with mothers and/or sisters, themselves often widowed or divorced, while Debra's discussion of her close family life did not include her divorced father, whom she rarely saw. Several participants described as a disadvantage of singleness a difficulty in finding someone with whom to go on holiday; their narratives indicated this meant someone female and single, with some referring to the unavailability of friends following their partnership or marriage.

4.2 A normative prioritising of partnership over other relationships was illustrated in several accounts of participants having friendships 'relegated' subsequent to friends' forming partnerships, and exclusion from activities undertaken by friends as couples. Allan (1989) observes that one factor affecting people's involvement in the rites of friendship is the 'space' there is in their lives for sociability, with other aspects of people's lives such as work, domestic obligations and material circumstances encouraging or limiting the way these friendships are 'serviced'. This research suggests that a cultural privileging of partnership is also an important factor in the servicing of relationships. Gordon's (1994, 2002) research on single women suggests that family members may hold an implicit stereotype of the glamorous lifestyle of the 'city single', with the perceived contrast with the humdrum of family life meaning they were hesitant to invite single women to their homes or parties (2002:52). However, single mothers in this research also described experiences of exclusion. Thus Birgit, born in the 1950s and with a pre-school age child, stated 'one bad thing about being a single mum […] even though I have a child I am still viewed as single and am therefore not included in weekend activities that [friends in couples] do with other couples'. This suggests the significance of partnership status, rather than 'family life' per se.

4.3 Allan (1989) draws attention to class and gender differences in patterns of friendship, many of which are the consequences of classed and gendered inequalities in access to resources. The narratives of participants in this research demonstrate various ways in which both gender and partnership status were imbricated with factors such as time and income in the shaping of personal relationships. Gordon (1994, 2002) noted the difficulty single women could experience in sustaining interactions with married women whose family ties meant meeting outside the family context was more difficult to organise. The accounts of several participants in this study similarly indicated that relationships with partnered women were influenced by their familial responsibilities. This included friends over retirement age undertaking caring roles for grandchildren, for example Olive, born in the 1930s, described a relationship with a widowed friend who is now involved in looking after her grandchildren, as a consequence of which 'she doesn't have much time for friends of her own'[15].

4.4 Several participants reported working very long hours, and described this as a factor restricting their social interactions. Some attributed this to the necessity of financial self-sufficiency, while for others this was also related to low-paid employment. Katy, born in the 1940s, described regularly working overtime because 'there's just one wage coming in'. Combined with the requirements of self-provisioning in terms of domestic tasks, this left her with little free time:

> 'I do work six days a week, I try not to do seven, I try to have one day off to do my shopping, stock up on the freezer, wash the car, do the front garden – but my day off is normally spent doing chores, rather than relaxing or socialising'

4.5 Katy also attributed foregoing her previous trade union involvement, including serving as a shop steward, to time constraints. As with several other participants, she described eagerly anticipating her retirement as this would give her more time for her friends. Changes in employment in recent decades, such as an intensification of work (Gregg and Wandsworth 1999), have been accompanied by changes in the welfare state and an increasing individualisation of the management of risk (Rowlingson, 2002). As previous research has emphasised (see Simon 1987, Gordon 1994), while single women can be said to work 'like men', they get paid as women. The experiences of several participants demonstrated gender and partnership status interacting with employment demands in ways which curtailed opportunities for both personal relationships and wider activities.

4.6 Nevertheless, the accounts of some participants indicate that, for them, partnership status may be a relatively insignificant aspect of the complex of factors shaping their social interactions. The following excerpts are from interviews with two older participants, both living in sheltered housing and with an annual income below £5000. Faith, born in the 1910s, described varying social activities that her narrative indicated she experienced as fulfilling and pleasurable, including regular visits from relatives and an annual holiday with a friend. She was active in her Church and involved in various organisations including her sheltered housing and Age Concern, and observed 'I'll keep going as long as I'm well enough!'. Her

narrative contrasted with that of Kitty, born in the 1930s. Kitty had poor health that limited her social activities. She had experienced several bereavements in the previous decade, losing 'friends that were extremely close, that you would have done anything for'. Kitty's restricted opportunities for social interactions were not through choice and experienced negatively:

> 'I am not in great health and I don't have hobbies and I haven't been on a holiday since about 1968 […] I quite like my own company which is a good thing because it is forced upon me a lot of the time! Old age sucks, it really does'

4.7 This contrast suggests the relative *unimportance* that partnership status may hold in comparison to other factors. These excerpts highlight the importance in academic research of considering the subjective meanings ascribed by individuals to their personal relationships. Attributions of negative experiences, such as loneliness or isolation, to partnership status may reflect a failure to adequately consider the influence of other factors, such as age, health, or financial status, as well as an implicit presumption of the necessity of partnership.

Non-Couple Heterosexual Intimacies

5.1 As well as intimate relationships with both family and friends, other relationships referred to in the interviews included previous partnerships with men, ranging in time from a few months to nearly twenty years. Several had been cohabiting relationships, some involving purchasing property together. However, the relative significance attributed to these relationships by participants varied considerably, and was not necessarily related to the duration, living arrangements, or status (e.g. an engagement) of the relationship. As with the excerpts from Faith and Kitty's accounts, this indicates that the subjective meanings of relationships cannot simply be 'read off' from partnership status.

5.2 A few participants referred to relationships with men, some ongoing, in which the men were not considered 'partners' and participants did not intend these would become cohabiting relationships. For example Ellen, born in the 1960s, described an ongoing friendship that she depicted as mainly for companionship and which she intentionally kept very casual: 'I see – I don't really count it as a relationship, I've got a male friend who I see occasionally'. This friendship did not feature significantly in Ellen's narrative[16].

5.3 Such relationships may be understood as indicative of contemporary shifts in the meanings and practices in heterosexual dyadic relationships, which challenge dominant heteronormative expectations of exclusivity, obligation and commitment (see Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004). References to non-couple heterosexual intimacies were not restricted to the younger cohorts in the sample however, and varied in terms of their significance. For example Flora, born in the 1940s, described an ongoing relationship with a man that had lasted forty years. Beginning in Flora's twenties, this relationship had continued intermittently during her long cohabiting relationship with another man with whom she had a child, as well as her friend's marriage. This enduring relationship exceeded boundaries of family and conjugality: Flora described taking holidays abroad with this friend and her son, as well as meeting her friend's wife, with whom Flora 'got on very well'. While Flora's friend had subsequently divorced, he and his ex-wife were now sharing a house which has 'his half and her half', an arrangement Flora described as 'all about looking after each other in old age'.

5.4 These relationships are illustrative of a diversity of practices of intimacy and care which several theorists suggest indicate profound transformations in intimacy, and individuals 'being released from traditional heterosexual scripts and the patterns of heterorelations which accompany them' (see Roseneil and Budgeon 2004:141). However, *all* the personal relationships of never-married single women can be seen as indicative of a 'decentring of heterorelations'. The centring of personal life around friendships and the decentring of the sexual couple relationship are argued to be aspects of contemporary cultures of intimacy and care inhabited by those at the cutting edge of social change (Budgeon and Roseneil, 2004:129). Yet these processes, as this and earlier empirical research has shown (see Simon 1987, Allen 1989), are long-standing features of the lives of never-married women.

Conclusion

6.1 The relationships sustained by the contemporary spinsters in this research are significant for several reasons. They are central to the women themselves, with several citing satisfying relationships as an important aspect of their contentment with singleness. Of more general importance, they counter assumptions of loneliness and isolation associated with singleness. Furthermore, evidence of relationships encompassing values and practices of duty and care challenge claims of increasing individualisation at the cost of commitments to family, relations and friends (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995:6). The accounts of single women considered in this article emphasise the value of research which considers the subjective meanings ascribed to experience. In addition, they highlight the importance of examining how people 'do' family, rather than a focus on a particular familial structure which may limit the ability to account fully for the varying practices and meanings of the range of personal relationships in which individuals are involved.

6.2 This research on single women's varied relationships demonstrates diverse practices including the 'uncoupling' not just of sex, marriage and parenthood, but also of heterosexual relationships from assumptions of co-residence, exclusivity and obligation. The existence of such relationships did not necessarily imply intimacy and commitment, or the absence of this through other relationships. Crucially, the relationships of the single women in this study with both family and friends challenge assumptions of sexually based dyadic relationships as a necessary or exclusive source of intimacy. These interviews support previous research findings of the primacy of such relationships to the actualities of never-married women's lives. Yet, while the varied intimate relationships of participants were clearly significant to them,

the interviews also highlight continuities in the lack of cultural and institutional validation these relationships may be afforded.

6.3 The diverse ways in which contemporary spinsters are doing intimacy may reflect the 'conditions of possibility' prevailing in a context of economic, technological and social change, for example participants opting into solo motherhood or having elderly parents move into their homes[17]. Nevertheless, this research indicates the established nature of practices of intimacy across boundaries of kinship and friendship. Recent developments in sociological understandings and modes of conceptualising intimate relationships enable a wider range of relationships and practices to be considered, as this special issue demonstrates. As Morgan notes, understandings of 'family' as a variable set of relationships may come closer to the realities of everyday living than earlier sociological models such as functionalism (1999:29). Certainly, theoretical developments which facilitate a consideration of how 'family' and 'intimacy' are experienced across various partnership statuses enable a somewhat belated recognition of the longstanding nature of the centrality of non-couple intimacies to never-married single women.

6.4 As such, this research supports arguments questioning both the novelty and extent of change claimed for personal relationships. Several scholars have expressed scepticism about the thesis of a trend from the given, hierarchical nature of the 'traditional' family to families of choice, arguing this both overstates the obligatory nature of familial relationships (Pahl and Spencer 2003) and downplays the ways in which structural inequalities continue to shape personal life (Jamieson, 1999). These interviews demonstrate elements of voluntariness, reciprocity, affection and responsibility in relationships with both family and friends. Rather than a distinction, they support arguments of a 'blurring' between these relationships. Nevertheless, the interviews also demonstrate material and cultural constraints shaping the experiences and options of contemporary spinsters. The enduring influence of factors such as gender and partnership status serves as a salutary caveat to claims of radical transformations in social relations. The ways in which individuals 'do' intimacy may be potentially variable and increasingly a matter of negotiation; nevertheless, as Silva and Smart (1999) argue, these practices are located in culture, history and personal biography and do not change randomly or suddenly.

6.5 As noted above, contemporary developments in sociological conceptualisations of both intimacy and 'the family' enable a wider range of relationships to be considered. The heterogeneous experiences evident in this and other research on non-normative intimacies however raise questions as to the utility and appropriateness of existing dichotomous categories, not just in research into personal relationships, but also in the formulation of social policies. In terms of policy, the blurring of distinctions between categories of kin and non-kin suggests the need to focus on the *practices* enacted by individuals in terms of intimacy and care, rather than the status of those undertaking these. Moreover, it suggests the need to formulate concepts that take us beyond binary statuses such as kin or non-kin, family or friend, and indeed partnered or single, not least to afford due recognition to the diversity of relationships in which individuals are embedded.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] Giddens (1992) contends that 'being-a-couple' is the most sought after relationship in modern life, while Beck and Beck-Gernsheim emphasise the importance of love as the 'central pivot' giving meaning to people's lives (1995:170). As Jamieson (1998) notes, the emergence of 'the intimate relationship' as an idealised version of personal life has gained ground previously dominated by a particular idealised version of 'the family'.

[2] This argument has resonances with concerns expressed by academics and polemicists about increasing individualism undermining essential forms of obligation and commitments to others (see Bellah et al. 1985, Popenoe 1993, Putnam 2000, Jacques 2004). As Pahl and Spencer (2003) demonstrate however, such arguments have a long history.

[3] Despite claims of the late twentieth century particularity of this as an emerging problem, the depiction of professional single women pursuing career success at the expense of family life is a longstanding trope of spinsterhood (see Vicinus 1985, Jeffreys 1985).

[4] This understanding of family as an active process, whereby family represents a constructed quality of human interaction rather than a pre-given structure in which people passively reside, derives from Morgan (1996).

[5] An exception is Roseneil and Budgeon's research on adults who are not living with a partner, described as 'amongst the most individualised' sector of the population (2004:135).

[6] Recent research confirms the importance of friendship to single people. North American studies on social networks for example have found that single people spend more time than those who are married in

informal socialising with friends and neighbours (Putnam, 2000:94; see also Fischer, 1982). Other studies draw attention to gender differences, with women who live alone consistently reporting higher levels of social involvement with family and community than men in the same category (Wasoff et al. 2005:219).

[7] Popular representations of contemporary spinsterhood connote anxieties about such isolation, for example Bridget Jones' fears of dying alone and being found 'three weeks later half eaten by an Alsation' (Fielding, 1999).

[8] As noted above, the use of such terminology also suggests the lack of vocabulary available to encompass intimate relationships outwith the heterosexual dyad, a reflection of a heteronormative context in which other relationships are often invalidated or not recognised.

[9] Other interviews demonstrated enduring stereotypes of spinsterhood inhibiting social interactions. Two older participants who had met through a Christian Fellowship group described considering 'joining forces' and living together for companionship as well as financial reasons; however, their anxiety about being perceived as in a lesbian relationship was a potential barrier preventing this. Such apprehension support Simon's contention that Freudianism has 'cast long shadows' over the social acceptability of single women carving out lives together (1987:103); see also Jeffreys (1985) on the impact of psychoanalytic theories of sexuality on the stigma attached to spinsterhood.

[10] Ungerson (1983) distinguishes between 'caring about; and 'caring for'; the former denotes feelings of affection, but has little implication for how people spend their time, except that they might want to spend it together. The latter refers to servicing their needs, and involves time on the part of the carer.

[11] During discussion in the House of Lords on the Civil Partnership Bill, proposing legislation to provide same-sex couples who form a civil partnership with parity of treatment with married couples in a wide range of legal matters, an amendment was voted in to extend these rights to close family members who have been living together for at least twelve years. Perceived largely as an attempt to delay the Act and voted out, this amendment would also have been insufficient to address the relationships of those non-cohabiting or unrelated adults who may also wish to claim access to employment and pension benefits to which they have contributed.

[12] The absence of caring for non-kin in this research may in part reflect the age range of participants; with four-fifths under 65, many participants may not yet have had experience of friends with age-related caring requirements. In addition, these interviews focused on the life histories of participants, and in the main centred on biographical events in their own lives; as such, these interviews may not have captured caring tasks undertaken for non-kin that were not of a longstanding nature.

[13] Trimberger notes this notion of friendship may reflect a culturally specific understanding, citing empirical research on Vietnamese American youth for whom 'friendships, like family, are permeated by a sense of obligation, non-egalitarianism, and sharing of resources' (Thai, 1999:56).

[14] Butler (2002) uses the term 'derealisation' for nonratified relationships outwith the heterosexual dyad, similarly arguing that the toll a sense of delegitimation can take on a relationship can make it harder to sustain a bond.

[15] Recent research on employees over fifty indicates that people in their 50s and 60s are facing 'work-life' balance issues as they experience growing demands on their time to care for other family members, with less time subsequently for their family and themselves (Mooney at al., 2002). Interviews in this research suggest another consequence of these growing demands may include limitations on time for wider relationships.

[16] A recent term emerging in the United States to refer to such relationships that are not considered to be of particular import is 'friendship with benefits'. Thanks to Faith Armitage for alerting me to this.

[17] Heading one's own household is a modern aspect of spinsterhood; unmarried women historically typically lived in the households of employers or other family members (Vicinus 1985, Froide 1999). Caring for parents as the particular duty of unmarried daughter however is an enduring expectation of spinsterhood.

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