

# **Introduction to Special Issue Relationality in family and intimate practices**

Katherine Twamley, Andrea Doucet, Eva-Maria Schmidt

## **Introduction**

This special issue explores the relational ties that shape family practices and decisions, and the ways that scholars work with relationality – theoretically, methodologically, epistemologically, ontologically – in their family research. It emerges out of a symposium at the Work and Family Research Network conference in Washington DC, held in June 2018, on the same theme. Leading that panel led us to reflect that although relationality has emerged as an increasingly popular lens and framework through which to examine family and intimate practices, there are very diverse approaches which come under the rubric of ‘relationality’. These iterations have different implications for how we approach the study of families and relationships and the different foci we take up in our scholarship. This Special Issue of *Families, Relationships and Societies* brings together a selection of studies that reflect the myriad approaches to mobilizing relationality in family and relationship research. In this short introduction, we reflect on the theoretical, methodological, and empirical scholarship about relationality, with a particular focus on families, intimacy and gender research.

### *Relationality in family and relationship research*

Although it is widely recognized as decisive in shaping family practices, scholarship to date has tended to engage with a relatively ‘weak’ definition of relationality, focusing on the consideration of relations of import and how these may shape meanings and practices (Roseneil and Ketokivi, 2016). Thus, a large body of research demonstrates the ways in which people are embedded in relationships with others, networks, and communities. For example, Carol Smart’s scholarship around ‘personal life’, in which she emphasizes the work individuals do to maintain relationships with others as well as the role of significant others in individuals’ decision-making (Smart, 2007), has been influential in this regard. By using the term ‘personal life’, her work decentres biological or married relationships, shifting our attention to a wider pool of connections. This body of work acts as a counterbalance to popular theses of individualization, whose scholars agree that relationships and intimacy are no longer embedded in the moral frameworks of families and local communities. Zygmunt Bauman (2003) and Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002), for example, argue

that the political and social restructuring of society away from collectivism resulted in personal relationships being undermined by values of autonomy and individual attainment. The ‘relational turn’ in the social sciences can be seen in part as a repudiation of the extreme ends of the detraditionalisation argument that fails to take into account empirical work demonstrating the enduring importance of kith and kin in our lives.

We agree with Sasha Roseneil and Kaisa Ketovi (2016), however, who argue that a ‘stronger’ definition of relationality has been lacking in family and intimacy research. Taking a psychosocial approach, they direct attention to internal processes of negotiation as well as the potentially more easily accessible (for researchers) externalized negotiations of practices and meanings. This approach entails a consideration of the negotiations of practices and subjectivities between *and* within subjects, as well as acknowledging how the self is embedded within relational processes. Such theorisations emphasise the cultural and social mores participants draw on in these internal dialogues, which emphasises the dynamism of social structures and reminds us of their potential for change.

Drawing on interviews about people’s experiences and choices of residence over their lifetime, Jennifer Mason (2004) arguably demonstrates a ‘strong’ relational approach in family research. She writes of her participants, ‘Their practices and identities were embedded within webs of relationships, their own and other people’s, and to understand these we need to be able to keep the *processes of relating* in focus just as much as, if not more than, the individual or the self (Mason, 2004, p. 177). Such relational practices, she furthers, may be ‘warm’, but also ‘conflictual’ and ‘oppressive’ (p. 177). We observe, however, a tendency in family research, and particularly in couple research, for relations to be conceptualized as existing between two (or more) autonomous individuals, or rivals, who defend their separate positions. Such a focus overlooks the enduring emotional ties between family members as well as the contextual fabric of family members’ lives. Relational ambivalences and tensions *between* family members may also reflect the relationality of one individual family member who has to deal with different social-structural conditions and relations in his/her daily life, like class, age, gender, or family roles (Connidis & McMullin, 2002).

Bringing relationships into the frame has implications for policy and practice, as we begin to see how interventions focused only on the individual are unlikely to transform behaviour. For example, drawing on the concept of ‘family practices’, Lynn Jamieson (2016) argues that attention to relational practices has the potential to reveal new ways we can challenge environmentally detrimental behaviour, which are embedded in how families relate with one another. Several of the papers in this special issue examine couples’ negotiations

around parental leave, a key policy mechanism with the potential to transform divisions of paid and unpaid work (Gornick and Meyers, 2009), and one where a relational perspective is particularly merited. As these authors point out, a considerable body of research has shown how decisions about parental leave are embedded in the wider relations of parents, such as those with work colleagues, friends, and extended family.

These iterations of relationality necessarily shape how research is conducted, yet limited attention has been given to the theoretical, ontological, epistemological, and methodological configurations of relationality in research design (but see Doucet, 2015, 2016; Mauthner and Kazimierczak, 2018; Mauthner, 2018; Morgan, 2011; Schadler, 2019); we also address these concerns in this Special Issue. In the following section, we consider how the nine research articles and five Open Space pieces in this special issue speak to these various aspects of relationality and family research, and we discuss some future areas for development.

### **Contributing Papers**

Drawing on feminist, sociological, and cross-disciplinary scholarship that emphasizes the relationality of persons, the relational negotiation of decisions and practices, and relationalities in knowledge making practices, the papers in this Special Issue explore how families navigate various practices and relations, including decisions around parental leave uptake, paid working hours, infertility, intimate ties, work-care responsibilities, technologies, and everyday practices. They contribute to the question of how couples and other family members negotiate and make decisions on diverse issues, and how these practices are embedded within biographical, cultural, and structural contexts. The 14 papers examine relationality by incorporating a range of aspects: within-couple relations, intra-relational processes, relations between family members, relations to emotions and feelings, relations to socio-economic circumstances and working conditions on an individual and couple level, relations to policies, relations to cultures, relations to time, and relations within knowledge making processes. They offer various methodological and theoretical approaches and analyses from within diverse national contexts and different family settings.

Our Special Issue opens with two contributions that focus on relationality in knowledge making practices—one by Andrea Doucet and the other by Natasha Mauthner. Although these authors have collaborated extensively, especially on developing a relational narrative analysis approach to data analysis (e.g., Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; Doucet and Mauthner, 2008), over the past decade, they have been developing their own parallel ethico-

onto-epistemological approaches, which both exemplify ‘strong’ relationality in research practices. These papers then frame the later substantive papers which draw primarily on the analysis of empirical data. The issue starts with Doucet’s paper – “What does Rachel Carson have to do with Family Sociology and Family Policies? Ecological Imaginaries, Relational Ontologies, and Crossing Social Imaginaries”– which engages with the work of feminist philosopher and epistemologist Lorraine Code and Code’s case study of the late American environmentalist Rachel Carson. Doucet leans on Carson to help her to work through a large challenge that she is facing in her research program, which combines mixed methods, team-based and collaborative research, and research aimed at policy change. She asks: How does one work within non-representational research paradigms while also attempting to hold onto representational, authoritative, and convincing versions of truth, evidence, fact, and data? Navigating between non-representational and more-than-representational knowledge making practices, Doucet developed two case studies, with the first (about Carson), guiding the second (on her research on families) and which combine several relational dimensions: relational ontologies, the ethics and politics of knowledge making, the crossing of social imaginaries (between representational and more-than-representational ways of knowing), and attending to the overall purposes of knowledge making.

Meanwhile Mauthner (“Karen Barad’s posthumanist relational ontology: An intra-active approach to theorising and studying family practice”) works with and further extends the posthumanist relational ontologies developed by feminist philosopher and physicist Karen Barad. Mauthner explores relationality as intra-actions, which are posited as social-natural or material- discursive relations that are ontologically inseparable and mutually constitutive. Her article draws on examples from her own research program, including her development of a non-representational method of diffractive genealogical analysis and her co-authored qualitative research on families’ engagement with ubiquitous digital technologies in domestic settings for personal and work-related activities. Mauthner’s contribution deepens and widens relational ontologies for relational sociology and makes a significant contribution to ‘strong’ relational approaches for theorising and studying family practices.

Returning to Roseneil and Ketokivi’s delineation of ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ approaches (which we apply as a descriptor, rather than as an assessment), we find that several authors in this Special Issue focus more on the former. For example, Esemée Hanna and Gough Brendan’s article, “Male infertility as relational: An analysis of men’s reported encounters with family members and friends in the context of delayed conception” reports on a study of men’s

experiences of infertility in the UK via a qualitative questionnaire. They observed that the men engaged in significant ‘emotional labour’ in managing relationships with others, feeling ‘alone’ and misunderstood while also experiencing envy and anger at those who had not experienced infertility. This research embeds experiences of infertility within relational networks, demonstrating how experiences of infertility are both shaped by relationships with others and may sever (or consolidate) intimate attachments.

Following this, three papers use a variety of methods to examine couples’ negotiations around divisions of paid and unpaid work, focusing on different-sex couple parents of young children. Jenny Alsarve (“Parental leave – and then what? A study of Swedish parents’ negotiations about work, care and parental leave”) conducted individual interviews with parents in Sweden before and after the birth of their children; Petteri Eerola, Johanna Lammi-Taskula, and Katja Repo (“Negotiating parenting practices and childcare decisions: The case of Finnish couples”) performed one-off couple interviews with Finnish parents of babies; and Katherine Twamley (“Unpacking relational resources in couples’ discussions of parental leave take-up, in the UK”) interviewed couples in the UK before and after the birth of their children, together and apart, as well as collecting data via diaries and surveys. Levels of parental leave uptake varied across the three samples, reflecting the different national contexts within which the studies were undertaken. All of the couples in Alsarve’s Swedish study had taken parental leave, and her sample specifically focused on families with a father who took more than the average amount of leave. Likewise, in Finland, the fathers had all taken parental leave, but, in general, they had taken it at the same time as the mothers, as is common there. Finally, in the UK, Twamley sampled couples who did and did not share parental leave.

All three studies reveal the relational matrices through which couple parents negotiate care and other forms of labour. Alsarve’s individual interviews analyse intra-couple negotiations, but also highlight those that take place with others, such as work colleagues and friends. The processes of couple negotiations are a stronger focus of the other two papers, with Eerola, Lammi-Taskula, and Repo noting the salience of discourses of ‘good’ motherhood and fatherhood in shaping divisions of labour and their negotiations. This way, mothers’ and, in particular, fathers’ (lack of) involvement in care work is not critiqued, potentially because that would cast doubt on them as being a good father or loyal partner. Meanwhile Twamley’s paper draws on Orly Benjamin and Oriel Sullivan’s (1999) concept of ‘relational resources’ to analyse the actual interactions observed during couple interviews, comparing them to narratives given in other individual data collection methods. She focuses

on the case of two couples where the women attempted to convince their partners to take parental leave. Similar to Eerola et al, she finds that discourses of femininity and masculinity infuse these interactions, potentially leading to more sharing of leave, but not necessarily transformations of gendered practices. Together, the papers demonstrate the similarities of issues that parents face, the relational ties both within and beyond couples that shape their practices, and how wider discourses of appropriate behaviour enter into such negotiations.

Daniela Grunow and Maria Evertsson Paper, entitled “Relationality and linked lives during transitions to parenthood in Europe: An analysis of institutionally framed work-care divisions” brings together key findings from a twelve-year cross-national qualitative collaboration that involved researchers from nine European countries. They aim to integrate two theoretical approaches that have not yet been well blended in comparative family research: life course theories and relational sociology. Drawing on longitudinal heterosexual couple data, they address the multiple relational ties that shape family practices, highlighting the interdependent construction of mothering and fathering identities, couples’ institutional embeddedness, and linked lives. They argue that a combination of gendered cultures and policy contexts shape and constrain institutionally prescribed gendered divisions of work and care.

Continuing the theme of time, but with a focus on couples’ negotiations of time as a resource, Mia Tammelin analyses joint interviews with parent couples in Finland. In her article (‘Couples’ time management systems: your time, my time or our time?’), she takes time as a social and relational construction and analyses how couples negotiate and organize their temporal microsystem in relation to others, to power structures and gender role attitudes. By analysing joint interviews, she identifies different time negotiation and management systems including different intra-couple power relations.

We finish off this section of research articles with perhaps the ‘strongest’ relational analysis of empirical data in Kaveri Qureshi and Zubaida Metlo’s paper (‘A British South Asian Muslim relational negotiation of divorce: uncoupling beyond the couple’). They explore one woman’s account of her divorce, tracing the involvement of other family members in the development of divorce plans and experiences, as well as the dialogical processes their participant, Nusrat, goes through over the course of the study. They draw particularly on Dorothy Holland et al.’s (2001) concept of ‘agentic reflexivity’, which describes ‘how people imaginatively objectify themselves as agents who can “act purposively” on the world (p. 41)’. Qureshi and Metlo show that beyond seeking advice from

the networks around her, Nusrat imagines the reactions of others in her deliberations, and these thoughts actively shape the meanings she attributes to events.

Our Special Issue has five shorter Open Space contributions that explore varied dimensions of relationality in research practices and policy. In ‘Research relationalities and shifting sensitivities: doing ethnographic research about Brexit and everyday family relationships’ Katherine Davies and Adam Carter reflect on their embeddedness in both the substantive topic of their research—Brexit—and in their on-going relations with their research participants. They describe how their own and their participants’ opinions at times shaped research interactions and how they were able to communicate their research findings to others. Nonetheless, they emphasise the shifting landscape of these political ‘sensitivities’ and the importance of longitudinal research in capturing how such changes can consequently shift relations over time. Relationality is also reflected in the embeddedness of researchers and research practices in the research process, particularly when interdisciplinary and international teams are doing research together. In the open space contribution, ‘A conversation with Pat Armstrong about *Creative Teamwork: Developing Rapid Site-Switching Ethnography*’, Doucet interviews Armstrong, a renowned expert on eldercare and long-term care about her book *Creative Teamwork*. From her experience of leading a large seven-year multi-disciplinary, multi-method, cross-generational, and cross-sectoral research project, Armstrong shares lessons learned about relational research practices. Through this conversation, we learn how overcoming hierarchical research structures and spatial distances, and building in time for personal and intellectual relationship building, is essential for the success of collaborative research work.

Two open space contributions address research and race issues with Black families. Sadie Goddard-Durant, Jane Ann Sieunarine, and Andrea Doucet reflect in “Decolonizing research with Black communities: Developing equitable and ethical relationships between stakeholders” on the relational processes of conducting a team project on young Black mothers with an Afrocentric community-based organization in Canada. Working with peer researchers from that organization as well as with a community member on issues of young Black motherhood in Canada, the authors outline how they attempted to build and maintain a collaborative relationship despite the historical context of universities exploiting Black communities. They draw on and further develop decolonial and anti-Black-racist frameworks to facilitate a meaningful and ethical research partnership. Patricia Hamilton (‘Researching parental leave during a pandemic: Lessons from black feminist theory and relationality’) weaves lessons from relational, black feminist, and intersectionality theories in her study of

black parents in the UK and their parental leave experiences amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the resurgence of the global Black Lives Matter movement. Her contribution raises important issues that have thus far received little attention in the parental leave literatures, including questions about the connections between parental leave design and the UK's racially stratified labour market.

Our final open space paper has a legal focus. Andy Hayward's paper, 'Mixed-sex civil partnerships and relationality: a perspective from law', deals with the question of how the introduction of equal civil partnerships has prompted conversations as to the value of relationship formalisation and what shapes this can take. His paper also entails questions of the meanings couples ascribe to different formal statuses of relationships and how they might differentiate a civil partnership from a marriage when they decide to formalise their relationship.

### **Looking forward**

Bringing together this collection of papers and reviewing the relevant literature has highlighted a number of areas we believe would be fruitful for further development in family and intimacy research. We agree with Roseneil and Ketokivi's (2016) assessment that the majority of family and couple research tends to draw on a 'weak' understanding of relationality in research. While a 'weak' approach to relationality has been incredibly helpful in prompting researchers to go beyond a focus on the individual as the centre of social life, they are right to assert that there is scope for much more in-depth work into how relational processes are also implicated in the development of human subjectivities and social constructions of personhood. Relationality research must attend to multiple perspective approaches that enhance understanding of both intra-familial and intra-individual processes and negotiations of social norms. As such, we argue for more theoretical innovation on relationality in the study of families, family practices, and intimate practices and more work on methodological innovation, including longitudinal and life course perspectives (see Grunow and Evertsson in this issue), negotiations in practice (see Twamley in this issue), multi-perspective interviews (Vogl et al 2019), relational team research (Goddard -Durant et al in this issue; see also Armstrong and Lowndes, 2018), and research which draws on and integrates such approaches with intersectional perspectives (see Hamilton in this issue). Furthermore, while the bulk of scholarship presented here has taken a qualitative approach, a relational approach not be limited to such methods and there is certainly room for more

innovation in mixed and quantitative research (Doucet in this issue) as well as via ‘big data’ (Mauthner, 2019). Finally, this special issue draws attention to relationality in research paradigms, and how relational ontologies can enact radically different – and stronger – understandings of theory, methodology, and epistemology in the study of families and relationships (Doucet, Mauthner in this issue). Taken together, these papers suggest an exciting future for relationality in family and intimacy research.

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