

# Introduction to Special Section Gender, Intimacy, Equality: (Un)comfortable Bedfellows?

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## Introduction

- 1.1** The topics of gender, equality and intimacy are becoming increasingly established as important subjects of investigation in the social sciences, with much recent work exploring their intersections, particularly in the context of personal life ([Gabb 2008](#), [Jamieson 1998](#), [Smart 2007](#)). One conclusion of this work has been that, while some theorists predicted a straightforward correlation between greater 'equality' between men and women, and enhanced intimacy in personal relationships (see, for example [Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995](#), [Giddens 1992](#)), this has not necessarily been the case. Instead, empirically grounded work has revealed the three concepts of gender, intimacy and equality to be 'uncomfortable bedfellows'. An important trend in this work, then, has been to explore the clash between 'ideal' relationships promoted by policy, expert and self-help literature, on the one hand, and the pragmatics of family life, on the other ([Gillies 2009](#), [Jensen and Tyler 2013](#), [Barker 2012](#)). This discomfort is especially evident, for example, when ideological commitments (to, say, gender equality) cannot be backed up by material support (from the state or employers). Thus while there is a commitment to encourage equality in working cultures and family life in contemporary UK policy, wider cultures of parenting rely on heavily gendered models of appropriate care; these combine with a lack of material resources to reproduce very 'traditional' family models ([Dermott 2008](#), [Faircloth 2013](#)).
- 1.2** This special section showcases work which has explored how intersections of equality and intimacy are experienced by men, women and families. In particular, the papers look at the subject of *sexuality* as a practice of intimacy ([Jamieson 2012](#)). As editors, this builds on our own research, which has sought more explicitly to examine whether and how intimacy is a mediating factor in couples' division of labour and care work. Twamley's ([2012](#)) research with Gujarati Indian couples found that women were willing to ignore instances of inequality in their relationships if they felt 'loved' by their partners and, in a more recent research project, that notions of love and care for a partner, stand in contrast, or even opposition, to notions of 'gender equality' ([Twamley 2015](#)). For some couples gender equality and/or feminism are viewed as antithetical to intimacy goals ([Twamley 2015](#)). Faircloth's work with new parents in London ([this special issue](#)) makes the related point that, despite an ideological commitment to gender equality before the birth of children, afterwards there appears to be a shift back into more traditional patterns. Even in cases where parents *can* afford a more equitable division of labour and are able to take advantage of recent policy changes around parental leave and childcare, many women seem to explain this as a matter of preference – albeit one which may have serious implications of resentment and anger for their intimate relationships. Further research indicates that intimacy and intimate relationships shape a couple's ability to co-parent ([Cowan and Cowan 2000](#)), and inequality in divisions of domestic work reduces relationship stability among parents ([Kurdek 1995](#), [Schober 2013](#)).
- 1.3** The task of treating sexual practices as a lens on the subjects of intimacy and equality cannot be undertaken without consideration of encounters between gendered bodies. A large collection of research has shown that gender stereotypes and expectations shape sexual behaviour and intimate relationships, perhaps

especially heterosexual relationships. Janet Holland and colleagues' (Holland 1993, Holland et al. 1998) influential work in the 1990s, for example, found a 'male oriented definition' of heterosexual sex and an associated passive definition of female sexuality amongst young people in Britain. This contrasts with Giddens's (1992) assertion of 'plastic sexuality' heralded in his book *The Transformations of Intimacy*, published in the same decade. Giddens argued that sexuality had been opened up by advances in contraception that 'liberated' sex from reproduction and gave more autonomy to women (and men) in their sexual practices (1992:28). The papers presented here give credence to the more cautious approach advocated by Jamieson (1998), which highlights both material and ideological constraints on this more fluid model of sexuality.

- 1.4 Drawing on very different empirical examples, the authors in this special section explore how discourses of appropriate sexual intimacy shape the personal lives of men and women. The theme of 'normality' runs through all these papers, as research participants report comparing themselves to some idealised heteronormative couple or family, or notion of a gendered self. Using sexual intimacy as a lens to think about how relationships between individuals have become increasingly 'mediated', both at the level of personal lives, and in public discourses, the articles show that contemporary intimate relationships fall far from any 'pure relationship' ideal, and that gendered, heteronormative discourses exert as powerful an influence as ever. All the papers focus on heterosexual relationships, in a bid to problematize those relationships which are often taken to be most 'traditional' or 'normative' (at least as they relate to sexual orientation; Morris and Layne's work explores the concept of 'singleness' in relation to parenting, as we discuss below).

### Overview of papers

- 1.5 These papers arise from an event, hosted by the two editors, at the Institute of Education in April 2014. At the workshop we aimed to create a dialogue between junior and senior researchers, with presenters pre-submitting papers on new and emerging empirical research, whilst respondents reflected on the papers' theoretical contributions to the field. For this special section, we have brought together the papers that specifically focused on sexuality; the respondents' reflections can be found in an [accompanying blog](#).
- 1.6 The first three papers examine representations of sexuality in sex advice literature and 'communities', and the ways that these exert influence on individuals' experiences of intimacy in particularly gendered ways. The first paper, from van Hooff, explores married women's experiences of sex as these relate to idealised images of the couple relationship; the paper problematizes what van Hooff calls (after Jackson) 'everyday, mundane, conventional sexual lives' (Jackson 2008: 34). This paper explores the considerable gaps between aspiration and experience for many of her participants, a theme picked up by Woodiwiss, who looks at women's responses to what she calls a narrative of 'compulsory sexuality' in self-help literature. Both these papers focus on the ways in which cultural narratives around appropriate (hetero)sexuality impact on understanding of self and intimate relationships. These narratives around gender appropriate sexuality form the subject of the third article by O'Neill, who looks in particular at the commercialisation of intimacy through a study of men in the 'seduction community' in London. This is both a chilling and fascinating case-study into an increasingly 'mediated' intimacy. O'Neill argues that the seduction community is less of an aberration, as constructed in the media reactions to the vilified 'pick-up artist' Julien le Blanc, and more of an extension of cultural sexual norms, in particular, 'the extension of a neoliberal sensibility or rationality to the domain of personal and intimate life' (p8). The implications of O'Neill's analysis, in terms of gender equality, are bleak: the men view women as objects to attain - women who are 'consumed' and paraded as markers of status. Sex for the men in O'Neill's research has little affective texture. Like van Hooff, O'Neill uncovers essentialist understandings of masculinity and femininity, in particular of appropriate sexual desire. In contrast, Woodiwiss's research participants are 'oppressed' by a particularly modern conception of women's active sexuality. She notes that women are under the stipulation that they should neither have (nor want) too 'much' or 'too little' sex. All three papers show how discourses of 'normal' sexual behaviour are governing the lives of men and women. 'Good housekeeping has now been replaced by "good sex-making"' (Hawkes 1996:121) as Van Hooff comments (p9).
- 1.7 The second three papers look at sexuality and intimacy in the context of parenting. Faircloth explores how couples manage transitions around intimacy as they become parents, looking in particular at the tensions between an 'intensive' parenting culture and a strong emphasis within the couple on the importance of sex and intimacy. By taking into account the policy context shaping parents' lives, especially their division of care, Faircloth explores the role of the state in shaping the intimate lives of parents. Morris pursues the same themes but through work with single mothers, showcasing the competing accountabilities single mothers feel they must accommodate in order to avoid charges of deviance. Gender inequality pushed them out of relationships, but also left them vulnerable once out of them, economically, socially and emotionally. Finally, Layne's paper uses the

case study of a 'single mother by choice' providing a mirror on both Faircloth and Morris's work, showing again the uncomfortable relationship between parenting culture and the couple relationship as traditionally defined. Layne's research participant, Carmen, happily avoids the compromises involved in a marriage. She wonders whether marital intimacy is laden with negotiation around household labour and intimate exchanges. Like Van Hoof's participants who are in relationships, she expects men to want to have sex more often than women and is reticent to enter into a relationship where having sex, even when not wanting to, may be 'part of the deal'. Carmen's intensive approach to parenting, whether in part caused by lack of a romantic partner, also prohibits making more intimate adult connections.

- 1.8 Brought together, the six articles here unpack the ways that enduring gendered discourses, whether 'mediated' through policy, social discourse or self-help literature, shape intimate life, and the ways in which individuals attempt to make sense of these in their narratives and intimate practices. Far from being a straightforward correlation between greater gender equality and intimacy, a look at shifting sexual practices across a range of settings shows that this relationship appears to be more fraught than ever.

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