Introduction to special issue: relationality in family and intimate practices

Article *in* Families Relationships and Societies · February 2021

DOI: 10.1332/204674321X16111601166128

CITATIONS
0

READS
37

3 authors:

Katherine Twamley
University College London
35 PUBLICATIONS **300** CITATIONS
SEE PROFILE

Andrea Doucet
Brock University
63 PUBLICATIONS **2,453** CITATIONS
SEE PROFILE

Eva-Maria Schmidt
University of Vienna
30 PUBLICATIONS **130** CITATIONS
SEE PROFILE

Families, Relationships and Societies • vol xx • no xx • 1–8 • © Policy Press 2021
Print ISSN 2046-7435 • Online ISSN 2046-7443 • https://doi.org/10.1332/204674321X16111601166128
Accepted for publication 20 January 2021 • First published online 10 February 2021

SPECIAL ISSUE • Relationality in family and intimate practices

editorial

Introduction to special issue: relationality in family and intimate practices

Katherine Twamley, katherine.twamley@ucl.ac.uk
University College London, UK

Andrea Doucet, adoucet@brocku.ca
Brock University, Canada

Eva-Maria Schmidt, eva-maria.schmidt@univie.ac.at
University of Vienna, Austria

To cite this article: Twamley, K., Doucet, A. and Schmidt, E. (2021) Introduction to special issue: relationality in family and intimate practices, *Families, Relationships and Societies*, vol 00, no 00, 1–8, DOI: 10.1332/204674321X16111601166128

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 mobilising 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 recognised 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). This research demonstrates the ways in which people are embedded in relationships with others, networks and communities. For

example, Carol Smart's scholarship about 'personal life', in which she emphasises 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', she 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 individualisation, whose scholars ague 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 (1995), 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, which 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 is now needed 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) externalised 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 lifetimes, 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: 177, emphasis in original). 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 conceptualised 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 our 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 and 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 of how we can challenge environmentally detrimental behaviour, which are embedded in how families relate with one another. Several of the articles in this special issue examine couples' negotiations regarding 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 rooted 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 Morgan, 2011; Doucet, 2015; 2016; Mauthner, 2018; Mauthner and Kazimierczak, 2018; 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 articles

Drawing on feminist, sociological and cross-disciplinary scholarship that emphasises the relationality of persons, the relational negotiation of decisions and practices, and relationalities in knowledge-making practices, the articles in this special issue explore how families navigate various practices and relations, including decisions about 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 articles 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 socioeconomic 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, the other by Natasha Mauthner. Although these authors have collaborated extensively, especially on developing a relational narrative analysis approach to data analysis (for example, 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 articles in turn frame the later substantive articles, which draw primarily on the analysis of empirical data. The issue starts with Doucet's article – '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 work through a large challenge that she is facing in her research programme, which combines mixed methods, team-based and collaborative research, and research aimed at policy change. Doucet 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 (about her own 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's article – 'Karen Barad's posthumanist relational ontology: an intra-active approach to theorising and studying family practices' – 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 programme, 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.

Drawing on Roseneil and Ketokivi's delineation of 'weak' and 'strong' approaches (which we apply as a descriptor, rather than as an assessment), we find varying levels of 'strength' across the submitted articles. Esmée Hanna and Brendan Gough'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 and is 'weak' in its approach to relationality. 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 important 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 articles use a variety of methods to examine couples' negotiations regarding 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 new 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 Närvi, Johanna Terävä and Katja Repo ('Negotiating parenting practices: the arguments and justifications of Finnish couples') performed one-off couple interviews with Finnish parents of babies; and Katherine Twamley ('"She has mellowed me into the idea of SPL": unpacking relational resources in couples' discussions of Shared Parental Leave take-up') interviewed couples in the UK before and after the births 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 articles, which are arguably 'stronger' in their relational approach, with Eerola, Närvi, Terävä 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 article draws on Orly Benjamin and Oriel Sullivan's (1999) concept of 'relational resources' to analyse the actual interactions observed during couple interviews, comparing them with 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 articles 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 internal and externalised negotiations.

Daniela Grunow and Maria Evertsson's article, 'Relationality and linked lives during transitions to parenthood in Europe: an analysis of institutionally framed work-care divisions', brings together key findings from a 12-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: lifecourse 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 organise 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 article, '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, which 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 ongoing 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*', Andrea Doucet interviews Armstrong, a renowned exert on elder care 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 'Decolonising research with black communities: developing equitable and ethical relationships between academic and community stakeholders' on the relational processes of conducting a team project about young black mothers with an Afrocentric community-based organisation in Canada. Working with peer researchers from that organisation 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. Meanwhile 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 contribution has a legal focus. Andy Hayward's article, '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 article 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 articles and reviewing the relevant literature has highlighted a number of areas we believe would be fruitful for further development in family and intimacy research. As outline, 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 lifecourse perspectives (see Grunow and Evertsson, this issue), negotiations in practice (see Twamley, this issue), multi-perspective interviews (Vogl et al, 2019), relational team research (Goddard-Durant et al, this issue; see also Armstrong and Lowndes, 2018), and research which draws on and integrates such approaches with intersectional perspectives (see Hamilton, this issue). Furthermore, while the bulk of scholarship presented here has taken a qualitative approach, a relational approach need not be limited to such methods and there is certainly room for more innovation in mixed and quantitative research (see Doucet, 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, this issue). Taken together, these articles suggest an exciting future for relationality in family and intimacy research.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the support of the FRS editorial team, especially Allison Koslowski, Esther Dermott and Tina Miller, for all their work in bringing this special issue to fruition and we thank Jennifer Turner for administrative assistance. We would also like to thank all the contributing authors for their enthusiasm and hard work, particularly during this difficult time.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

References

Armstrong, P. and Lowndes, R. (2018) *Creative Teamwork: Developing Rapid, Site-Switching Ethnography*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Bauman, Z. (2003) *Liquid Love*, Cambridge: Polity.

Beck, U. and Beck-Gernsheim, E. (1995) *The Normal Chaos of Love*, Cambridge: Blackwell.[AQ: not cited; please cite or delete here]

Benjamin, O. and Sullivan, O. (1999) Relational resources, gender consciousness and possibilities of change in marital relationships, *The Sociological Review*, 47(4): 794–820. doi: 10.1111/1467-954X.00196

Connidis, I.A. and McMullin, J.A. (2002) Sociological ambivalence and family ties: a critical perspective, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 64(3): 558–67. doi: 10.1111/j.1741-3737.2002.00558.x

Doucet, A. (2015) Parental responsibilities: dilemmas of measurement and gender equality, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 77(1): 224–42. doi: 10.1111/jomf.12148

Doucet, A. (2016) Is the stay-at-home dad (SAHD) a feminist concept? A genealogical, relational, and feminist critique, *Sex Roles*, 75: 4–14. doi: 10.1007/s11199-016-0582-5

Doucet, A. and Mauthner, N. (2008) What can be known and how? Narrated subjects and the listening guide, *Qualitative Research*, 8(3): 399–409. doi: 10.1177/1468794106093636

Gornick, J. and Meyers, M. (2009) *Gender Equality: Transforming Family Divisions of Labor*, New York: Verso.

Holland, D., Lachiotte, W., Skinner, D. and Cain, C. (2001) *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Jamieson, L. (2016) Families, relationships and 'environment': (un)sustainability, climate change and biodiversity loss, *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 5(3): 335–55. doi: 10.1332/204674316X14758387773007

Mason, J. (2004) Personal narratives, relational selves: residential histories in the living and telling, *The Sociological Review*, 52(2): 162–79, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-954X.2004.00463.x

Mauthner, N.S. (2018) A posthumanist ethics of mattering: new materialisms and the ethical practice of inquiry, in R. Iphofen and M. Tolich (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research Ethics*, London: Sage Publications, pp 51–72.

Mauthner, N.S. (2019) Toward a posthumanist ethics of qualitative research in a big data era, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 63(6): 669–98, doi: 10.1177/0002764218792701

Mauthner, N.S. and Doucet, A. (2003) Reflexive accounts and accounts of reflexivity in qualitative data analysis, *Sociology*, 37(3): 413–31. doi: 10.1177/00380385030373002

Mauthner, N.S. and Kazimierczak, K.A. (2018) Theoretical perspectives on technology and society: implications for understanding the relationship between ICTs and family life, in B. Neves and C. Casimiro (eds) *Connecting Families? Information & Communications Technologies, Generations and the Life Course*, Bristol: Policy Press.

Morgan, D.H.J. (2011) *Rethinking Family Practices*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Roseneil, S. and Ketokivi, K. (2016) Relational persons and relational processes: developing the notion of relationality for the sociology of personal life, *Sociology*, 50(1): 143–59, doi: 10.1177/0038038514561295.

Schadler, C. (2019) Enactments of a new materialist ethnography: methodological framework and research processes, *Qualitative Research*, 19(2): 215–30. doi: 10.1177/1468794117748877

Smart, C. (2007) *Personal Life: New Directions in Sociological Thinking*, Cambridge: Polity.

Vogl, S., Schmidt, E.M. and Zartler, U. (2019) Triangulating perspectives: ontology and epistemology in the analysis of qualitative multiple perspective interviews, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, doi: 10.1080/13645579.2019.1630901.