Are we really saying farewell to family?  
A response to Edwards and Gillies’  
‘Farewell to family?’

Vanessa May

I am delighted to have been asked to respond to Rosalind Edwards and Val Gillies’ contribution to the first issue of this journal. Their article, entitled ‘Farewell to family? Notes on an argument for retaining the concept’, which the authors admit to being to a degree polemical, is in reaction to the recent developments within the field that is perhaps best known as ‘family sociology’ or ‘family studies’. As a result of the increasing demographic diversity of different family forms as well as of household formation (these do not always coincide), and the ensuing debates over whether this should be interpreted as ‘family decline’ or ‘family diversity’, several theorists have argued that sociologists should move away from a sole focus on ‘families’ to allow for a broader scope. Where, for example, Jamieson (1998, 1999) has argued for a shift towards studying ‘intimacy’, Smart (2007) has more recently launched the concept of ‘personal life’. In their article, Edwards and Gillies warn that while these approaches do bring something new to the table, they also mean that something crucial is missed, namely the specifics of the institution known as ‘family’ and the way it is implicated in for example policy frameworks and political debates.

While I agree with the central point presented by Edwards and Gillies, namely that it remains important that sociologists continue to study ‘family’ as an institution, in the spirit of healthy debate I would like to raise a few points in relation to how they make this argument, particularly their premise that family sociology has to be juxtaposed with the newer fields focusing on ‘intimacies’ and ‘personal life’. Drawing such contrasts, although a useful rhetorical device, nevertheless exposes their argument to some key critiques. In my discussion, I will mainly be focusing on the newly emergent field of ‘sociology of personal life’, first developed by Smart (2007), which has attracted much attention, both positive and critical. I begin by explaining what I see the main contributions of this new approach to be, before exploring Edwards and Gillies’ arguments for retaining a focus on family as an institution.

What personal life brings to the table

Smart’s (2007) original contribution to the field of sociology of personal life stemmed from a dissatisfaction with family sociology’s somewhat narrow focus on the (heteronormative) institution of ‘family’. Her work can also be read as an attempt to move debate forward, debate that had for some time been stuck in the quagmire that is the individualisation thesis. Since Giddens’ (1992), Beck’s (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (1995) original statements on the increasing individualisation of family life, which they saw as heralding a ‘transformation of intimacy’, much of the empirical research that has been conducted has demonstrated that these sweeping generalisations can in no way capture the complex, nuanced and indeed contradictory developments in how people conduct their closest relationships (eg Smart and Neale, 2007).
Nevertheless, family sociologists have seemed unable to move on from debating the benefits or otherwise of the individualisation thesis. Perhaps this is because no alternative ‘grand theory’ has been presented since, or at least not one that has managed to capture the essence of a zeitgeist as well as the individualisation thesis did. Rather than trying to present a ‘grand theory’, however, Smart’s contribution was conceptual, aiming to shift the focus from the question of how we should interpret changes in ‘family form’ (eg rise in divorce rates, rise in cohabitation, later childbearing) to one of asking which questions sociologists pose and what the starting point for investigation is. Mason (2008) has made a similar point in relation to kinship, arguing that sociologists’ preoccupation with family form has led to their inability to engage with questions such as the real-life fascination that people have with kinship, and the significance that kin relations hold in people’s lives. Smart (2007) points to the importance of five core concepts that make up this new sociology of personal life, namely ‘biography’, ‘relatedness’, ‘relationality’, ‘the imaginary’ and ‘memory’, as ways in which sociologists can begin to capture also the ‘interiorities’ of people’s personal lives.

Smart (2007) urges any study of personal life to begin from a relational point of view, which means seeing people not as isolated individuals, but as inherently connected and embedded, within both socio-cultural-historical contexts and webs of relationships. In doing so, I do not believe that she meant that sociologists should cease to examine family as an institution, but rather that this does not necessarily have to be the starting point. I would therefore argue that Smart does not ‘devalue’ family – indeed most of her book is about family relationships – but is instead encouraging sociologists to engage their sociological imagination in novel ways. Adopting different lenses might help to broaden the scope of investigation and capture aspects of relationships that have hitherto remained outside the range of family sociology. Perhaps most importantly, with regards to the argument presented by Edwards and Gillies, which I will discuss in more detail below, the sociology of personal life by no means entails leaving ‘family’ unobserved. On the contrary, family remains a central institution, only one that is examined using a slightly different lens and as part of the broader concept of personal life.

Has ‘family sociology’ done a better job?

Edwards and Gillies refer to Gilding’s (2010) paper while arguing that a focus on personal life risks leaving some important areas of family life to the sole purview of economists and evolutionary biologists. To an extent, I feel that this is a slight misreading of Gilding’s argument, which in turn is partly based on an interpretation of Smart and Neale’s (1999) as well as Smart’s (2007) work that I disagree with. While Edwards and Gillies seem to be hinting that like them, Gilding was also concerned with the shift from ‘family’ to ‘personal life’, I take his paper to be about the shift from structural accounts of family life to ones that emphasise ‘reflexivity’ and choice as free from external constraints. Gilding proposes that the pendulum has swung too far towards a new orthodoxy of reflexivity over institution. While I take Gilding’s point that it is important to understand both choice and constraint when it comes
to family life, I would argue that Smart and Neale (1999) cannot be lumped together with Giddens (1992) in the way that he does. Indeed, their work acted as an important corrective to the extended reflexivity thesis by pointing out how people do not make choices about their family relationships without regard to others or to social norms, but rather frame these as moral choices with implications for their ‘moral career’ as it were (cf Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2003).

Be that as it may, Gilding (2010) uses the example of inheritance to demonstrate that rather than being taken over by reflexivity, many areas of family life are still regulated by norms and structures. This is evident in the fact that the majority of people still stipulate in their wills that their closest family members such as spouses and children should inherit the bulk of their estate, while legislation in many countries continues to place family relationships in a privileged position when it comes to inheritance. Gilding maintains that had the shift to an era of reflexivity and ‘families of choice’ been as pronounced as some argue, this would be reflected in a visible shift in whom people leave their effects to upon death. In essence, says Gilding, if people had become as reflexive about their relationships as the individualisation thesis suggests, we should see an increasing number of bequests being made to non-family. But because this has not happened, Gilding proposes that family remains a key normative institution that acts as an organising principle in people’s lives.

Coming back to Edwards and Gillies’ reading of Gilding’s paper, I take his point to be precisely that not even family sociology has paid enough attention to areas such as paternity and inheritance. His critique is in other words not directed at sociology of personal life as opposed to family sociology, but to the field as a whole (with personal life being one aspect of contemporary family sociology in his view).

Straw persons

Edwards and Gillies themselves note that their article is polemical in style. But in presenting their argument they set up a ‘straw person’ that must subsequently be pulled down, and in doing so perhaps overstate the differences between ‘family sociology’ and a ‘sociology of personal life’. In juxtaposing the two fields in this way, Edwards and Gillies are opening themselves up for the criticism that in fact, on closer inspection, these are not so different after all.

Although the sociology of personal life does take family sociology as its point of departure, and argues for the need to conceptualise relational life in novel ways, I am not wholly convinced that such stark distinctions must be drawn. Although Edwards and Gillies do make it clear that they are in no way arguing that new approaches such as the sociology of personal life have nothing valuable to offer, they are nevertheless indicating that the focus of these approaches is to some degree inadequate (because they do not focus exclusively on family). There is a bit of circular logic going on here. The fields of ‘intimacies’ and ‘personal life’ have aimed to carve out their own specific areas of study alongside family sociology, and hence their focus does not cover exactly what family sociology does. To criticise them for not doing so is like saying that apples are not as good as pears because they are not pears. Edwards and Gillies propose that the language of personal life entails ‘a retreat from and
The evacuation of the public political the very moment when, it seems to us, engagement is all the more important. I would agree with their point that family as an institution requires specific analysis because of the way in which the boundary between the public and the private becomes blurred within it. However, I do not agree with Edwards and Gillies’ line of argument that whereas the public and the private intersect within families they do not do so, to the same extent, in other areas of personal life, and that therefore the sociology of personal life approach means abandoning a focus on the structural or political aspects of life. On the contrary, one of the cornerstones of a sociology of personal life is an examination of the interconnectedness of the ‘official’ and ‘public’ spheres with the ‘private’ spheres (May, 2011).

This holds for just about any aspect of personal life – take for example the ways in which consumption and the markets help to shape the way that we live our lives (e.g., in terms of lifestyle or how we spend our time). We can examine the impact that changes in the economic organisation of society have had on personal life or how political organising can transform areas of personal life (which, as noted above, includes families). Thus, we can see how a shift to a service economy, the increase in women’s labour market participation and the heightened importance of consumer culture have on people’s sense of self and their understanding and use of time, and how these are negotiated in and impact on family relationships (Southerton, 2011a, 2011b). For example, people’s labour market participation, sense of self and family lives are often mutually implicated, as exemplified by the shifts that took place in British women’s identities from ‘carer’ to ‘carer-worker’ during the latter half of the 20th century. Furthermore, how people make sense of time and how they allot their time between different activities often centres around their family relationships. For example, for parents, time spent in work requires corresponding childcare arrangements, while the recent focus on ‘quality time’ is essentially about time to be spent with family. Similarly, many of the causes championed by recent ‘new social movements’, such as the feminist movement and the gay liberation movement, have centred around family issues such as the gendered division of labour in the home and the right to marry (Edwards, 2011).

The difference between a family sociology approach and that of the sociology of personal life is that whereas the former focuses mainly on family (or at least takes its starting point from family), a sociology of personal life can start, for example, from social movements, in order to explore the interrelated impacts these have had on both personal life and the public sphere (e.g., legislation and policy), including their impact on family life. In sum, a focus on personal life does not by definition exclude a focus on families, nor does it occlude the political or the structural. As feminists long ago pointed out, all of personal life is inherently political, not just family life (Edwards, 2011).

Moreover, Edwards and Gillies note that the ‘double-edged politics of everyday living’ that encompass inequalities, exploitation, hierarchies and discrimination are ‘part and parcel of the concept of family that is not easily accessed through “intimacy”, “kinship” and “personal life”’. Once again I am not so convinced that a focus on personal life means abandoning any sense of power and inequalities. Personal life, just as much as family life, is situated within broader social power structures and therefore

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shaped by and implicated within them, as discussed above. Although I take Edwards and Gillies’ point that it is important to maintain a focus on family as a social institution and the ways in which it is, for example, regulated by the state, this does not mean that it is merely families that are ‘invoked in the public political’.

Second, I found Edwards and Gillies’ point that focusing on the ‘personal’ leads to a focus on the individual, whereas a focus on ‘family’ allows us to keep the focus on more collective forms of being, and to keep an institutional focus as well, quite interesting, but one I am not fully convinced by. Smart (2007:28) points out that her choice of the concept of ‘personal’ instead of ‘individual’ is a conscious one. Her main disaffection with the term ‘individual’ is because it presupposes an individual disconnected from their relational and sociocultural surroundings. In contrast, the term ‘person’ is one that depicts people as inherently connected and embedded. Perhaps a further reason for Edwards and Gillies’ interpretation is their understanding of sociology of personal life as a sociology of personal relationships. If we take personal life to only be about relationships, then yes, it makes sense to argue that the focus inevitably shifts to the individual. If, however, we take a sociology of personal life to encompass more than relationships, this is not automatically the case. If we take the examples I gave above (the intersection of the labour market and personal life, and the impact that social movements have had on personal life), it becomes clear that the focus of a sociology of personal life can also be on groups, collectives, institutions and policy.

What’s in a name?

In this last section I would like to raise an issue that Edwards and Gillies do not discuss in detail, namely the important role that sociologists play in constructing and deconstructing normative categories. This is something that I know that both authors have written about previously in relation to family (eg Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Gillies, 2007), and would, I feel, add to the current debate. One of the key contributions of the sociology of personal life is, in my mind, the fact that it forces sociologists to examine critically the concept of ‘family’, and how this social institution connects with other institutions.

Inspired by Duncan and Edwards’ (1999) point that lone motherhood is a ‘taxonomic category’ that does not necessarily reflect the substance of lone mothers’ lives, I have argued elsewhere that it is crucial that sociologists be aware of their role in reproducing social categories that have real effects on people’s lives (May, 2010). This is because, although many of these categories such as ‘lone mother’ may seem straightforward enough (a mother parents alone and is therefore a lone mother), on closer inspection things become immediately complicated. Because of the stigma attached to lone motherhood, many lone mothers may wish to distance themselves from the category, highlighting how they are ‘different’ from the stereotypical ‘reckless’ or ‘immoral’ lone mother (Bock, 2000; May, 2004). It is therefore important to distinguish between ‘categories of practice’ and ‘categories of analysis’. Merely because something is a ‘category of practice’ – such as ‘family’ and ‘lone motherhood’ are in that they are part of everyday terminology and an organising principle in people’s lives – does not mean that they should be used as analytical tools (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000).
Instead, the analytical purpose should be exploring how the category is constructed, by whom and to what ends.

In addition, it is important that sociologists who study such ‘categories of practice’ examine critically how they themselves use these as ‘categories of analysis’ and the inequalities that they may thus, inadvertently, help to reproduce. This is something that any field of study must in my mind take seriously, so in that respect family sociology and the sociology of personal life are no different. The concepts of both ‘family’ and ‘personal’ are implicated in broader gendered, classed and ‘raced’ discourses that help to construct distinctions between ‘proper’ families and persons. It is therefore important for sociologists to be mindful of the impact that these discourses have on how they approach the study of ‘family’ or ‘personal life’: the questions they ask and where they go looking for answers to these.

Conclusion

I feel that debates such as the one that now seems to be brewing over the usefulness of a sociology of personal life reflect the nature of theorising: when a new approach comes along, this leads to a realigning of the field, with established approaches perhaps feeling to an extent threatened, overshadowed or outshined by the new kid on the block that seems to get the invites to the best parties and is name-dropped by everyone as the exciting novel thing. This slightly flippant comparison is not to diminish the importance of such debates, because it does help to propel the field forward by identifying the strengths and weaknesses of both old and new approaches. Perhaps in a less polemical mode, Edwards and Gillies might agree with me that both family sociology and the sociology of personal life can co-exist, acknowledging each other’s contribution to our understanding of the complexities of social and individual life. It is very probable that we need both a family sociology and a sociology of personal life to capture the nuances of human life.

References


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**Vanessa May**

Morgan Centre for the Study of Relationships and Personal Life, University of Manchester, UK
vanessa.may@manchester.ac.uk