

15 Feminism and the family¹

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Feminists have always connected individual lives and experiences with social and cultural (hence political) issues. Following in the footsteps of earlier failures to connect the psychic with the social (Reich in the 1920s and Laing in the 1960s providing perhaps the best-known examples), we should not, however, be surprised to learn that it has never proved easy to draw the links between the two. Both sides of the equation shift, and the connections fall apart, with the pressures of changing times, leaving the study of personal life and politics once again in their separate spheres. We can see this in the shifts which have occurred in feminist thinking about family life, and the differing critiques they have offered of familial ideology and relationships.

At first glance, the feminist perception of the family over the last two decades seems to have moved full circle – from fierce criticism of the family to a celebration of women’s role within it. The strident and joyful rebirth of feminism in the western women’s liberation movements at the close of the 1960s took off from a fundamental critique of ‘the family’, and women’s dependent, undervalued, frequently isolated and miserable existence within it – especially when engaged in full-time motherhood. A decade later, feminist perception had shifted decisively towards observing, indeed applauding, the importance and significance of motherhood, and women’s maternal role. Historical shifts, however, are never quite so linear or so simple. Disruption came from many sources.

One of these was the flowering of black feminism in the early 1980s. It brought its own perspectives on the family, most of them critical of those of white feminists. Another was deconstructive feminism, with its accusations of a western cultural framework and projection in feminist accounts of women’s lives and experience. This form of academic feminist thinking, becoming fashionable in the 1980s, was increasingly sceptical of *any* generalisations about ‘women’ or women’s ‘distinctive perspectives’. Some feminist theoreticians were now questioning all types of fixed categories, identities

and relationships, stressing what they saw as the complex, shifting and plural nature of the social meanings which construct, and allow us to speak of, our own experiences of gender, sexuality, parenting or any other aspect of our existence.

Outside feminist debate, however, the popularity and appeal of 'the family' remains pervasive. The disparagement, often condemnation, of those who live outside its traditional ideal – married couple, with male breadwinner and female care-giver – also persists. Meanwhile, feminists continue to debate and dispute, if more wearily, those early passionate debates around women and family life.

CRITIQUE AND DECONSTRUCTION OF THE FAMILY

To begin at the beginning of the re-emergence of feminism is to hear a fierce critique of the institution and ideology of the family as the major site of women's subordination. It would quickly make its mark across the social sciences generally. The 1950s is rightly seen as a time when, following the disruptions of war, the western world saw unprecedented attempts to reconstruct the family – and women's place at its centre. Ideologically and materially, the idea of the happy, healthy family was promoted by whatever means possible. Social scientists wrote of the universality of the institution of the family, blaming any type of social or individual discontent on the 'problem' family, while Hollywood also focused in on family life. When youth rebelled 'without a cause', that cause was soon tracked down to the weak, permissive father, the self-centred, harsh and domineering mother. It was against such monolithic concern with domesticity, described so well in the writings of Elizabeth Wilson (1980) or Denise Riley (1983a), that the first stirrings of the feminist critique of family life appeared.

The 1960s, with its upsurge of youthful protest movements and 'counter-culture', had spawned its own fierce rejection of the stifling, acquisitive, post-war suburban family. Those social scientists and psychiatrists who responded with attempts to understand the causes of the 'youth revolt' tended to blame status-seeking, over-demanding parents, but especially that 1950s housebound mother – attempting to live her life through her children. There was certainly nothing new about 'mother-blaming' (so prominent in the history of clinical and welfare work), but radical writers of the 1960s, like David Cooper, were to achieve new levels of maternal denunciation: 'A young man has only to look a little cross with his manipulative, incestuously demanding mother to end up on a detention order as "dangerous to others"' (1964:71). There would soon, however, be something quite new to hear about that very old domestic tyrant, once women themselves began, at last, to speak.

The ground was prepared in the United States in 1963 by Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), where she described that 'underlying feeling of emptiness' many housewives experienced without any stake in the world outside their homes. Three years later in Britain Juliet Mitchell would be declaring that the 'true' woman and the 'true' family 'may both be sites of violence and despair' (1966:19), while the sociologist Hannah Gavron documented the isolation and frustration of many full-time housewives (1966). But it was the early articles and books accompanying the appearance of women's liberation as a social movement at the close of the 1960s which first broadcast the analysis of women as an oppressed sex, with that oppression attributed, primarily, to their economic dependence within the family.

One of the very first and always the most controversial of these books, coming from the United States, was Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970). It would later serve to exemplify what has been described as the 'demon texts' of women's liberation, for which feminists came to apologise as they faced endless accusations that feminism was indifferent to the problems of mothers and children, and the importance of family life. What Firestone *had* stressed was the enormous pressure on women to fulfil themselves through, and only through, motherhood, and the dangers of mothering in familial contexts which made them financially dependent on a man, placing them, in her view, at the tyranny of their reproductive biology. In fact, Firestone's particular type of 'radical feminism' was from the beginning rejected by many (and in Britain by most) other feminists in the 1970s, who often called themselves 'socialist feminists'. Moreover, Firestone's own uniquely fanciful, utopian suggestion that feminism must 'free women from their biology' through technologies of artificial reproduction was, even more decisively, dismissed early on by most feminists as 'illogical' and 'inadequate' (Wandor 1973).

Yet, no matter how many times it would be countered, and no matter how persistent the feminist campaigns and activities of the early 1970s around the needs and welfare of mothers and children (whether setting up and staffing community nurseries, campaigning for increased child benefit, more responsive pregnancy care, or childbirth conditions under women's control), the accusation that feminists ignored or rejected motherhood would persist. It was one of the most fundamental and successful ways in which men (and women) have attempted to divide women against each other. Even feminists themselves have at times used this accusation to dismiss women's early liberation critiques of the family (Hart 1991).

What was happening in these years was indeed the exposure of many women's silent sorrow, at home, alone. But feminists were not inventing the complaints they recorded. As Sheila Rowbotham documents, in their news-sheets and publications, women in Britain and elsewhere began to provide their own experiential accounts of

their dissatisfaction with housework and its effects on consciousness: 'Waves of boredom, apathy and aimlessness descended, together with overwhelming guilt about the feelings' (1990:7). Quickly influencing the type of research feminists undertook inside academic institutions, Ann Oakley (herself a victim of motherhood blues or 'post-natal depression'), for example, interviewed forty London housewives in 1971, reporting that 70 per cent of her sample were dissatisfied with housework as work, and complaining of loneliness and low self-esteem (1974). Soon other sociological studies, like that of Brown and Harris (1978), would duplicate her findings, uncovering high levels of depression in full-time housewives, particularly amongst urban working-class populations. Similar studies suggesting the psychological costs for wives in marriage were being reported by Jessie Bernard (1973), Pauline Bart (1971), and other feminist researchers in the US.

The discipline of psychology itself (with its emphasis on the abstract 'individual') has proved rather unresponsive to feminism (with its emphasis on the social hierarchy of gender, and the specificities of women's lives). Nevertheless, at the first British Women's Liberation Conference in Oxford in 1970, the North American child psychologist, Rochelle Wortis, strongly criticised the influence of John Bowlby's 'maternal deprivation' thesis in clinical and applied psychology. She rejected his overriding emphasis on the mother-child attachment to the exclusion of all other social relations and environmental factors, stressed that what a child needs is a stable, sensitive, stimulating environment and summed up the early feminist critique of the family:

If the undervaluation of women in society is to end, we must begin at the beginning, by a more equitable distribution of labour around the child-rearing function and the home. . . . Men can and should take a more active part than they have done until now.

(In Nava 1983:70)

This pioneering feminist research on family life set the stage for future methodological and conceptual battles within the academy, as feminists struggled to expose the androcentrism of existing social scientific thinking. Like many in her wake, Oakley (1974) emphasised the male-oriented nature of sociological concepts, which had never, for instance, registered the existence of housework as *work*; and of a male-biased 'objectivity' which was never sufficiently woman-focused to perceive women's discontent in the home. Feminist methodology was therefore seen as one which would begin with the centring of *women's* experience, necessary to overcome her former invisibility.

What a feminist social scientist saw when she looked at the family in the early 1970s, therefore, was a radical questioning of a woman's place within it. Further disclosures of men's domestic violence against women, of their sexual coercion and abuse of children in the home, and general control over resources and decision making, all continued both to feed feminist calls for a women-centred orientation in the social sciences and to fan feminist fears of the potential dangers of family life for women (and children) throughout the 1970s, so firmly hidden in the all-pervasive familial ideology of the satisfactions of hearth and home.

What this meant within feminist theory was that the family could no longer be analysed as a homogeneous unit. Its internal structures and functions, and its wider economic, political and ideological significance, all needed to be untangled to reveal the power relations of men over women, and the patterns of individual costs or benefits operating along gender and generational lines. Feminist solutions to the inequalities they exposed between men and women in the family in the early 1970s, whether coming from the grass roots or from theoretical debates, always involved extensive social as well as personal struggle and transformation. The always diverse strands of feminist thought and action shared in common a critique of the existing sexual division of labour, arguing for men's involvement in childcare and housework, while promoting ideas of women's economic independence, reproductive control and cultural and political activity through involvement in the world *beyond*, as well as *within*, the family (Coote and Campbell 1982). As Pauline Bart argued optimistically in those days: 'The women's liberation movement, by pointing out alternative life styles, [and] by providing the emotional support necessary for deviating from the ascribed sex roles . . . can help in the development of personhood for both men and women' (1971:186).

In the second half of the 1970s, however, the goal of seeking ways of creating gender equality was gradually superseded by the goal of exploring and giving value to women's distinctive lives and experience for their own sake – above all describing and celebrating women's distinctive biological, maternal and sexual existence. Once again, however, this trend seemed to occur first, and most distinctively, in the USA (Segal 1987).

RECONSTRUCTION AND THE CELEBRATION OF MOTHERHOOD

Half a decade before Betty Friedan would make her public recantation in *The Second Stage* (1981) – accusing feminism, and her own early work, of having been anti-family and mistaken in stressing women's need for autonomy while highlighting their

dissatisfactions with full-time motherhood – several important feminist texts on mothering were published which emphasised the overriding importance of women's maternalism. The turning point was Adrienne Rich's *Of Women Born* (1976), in which she clearly differentiated *mothering*, and women's maternal bodies, from *motherhood*, as a repressive, patriarchal institution. Rich wrote of the revolutionary and transformative potential of women's bodies and the mothering experience, concluding: 'The repossession by women of our bodies will bring far more essential change to human society than the seizing of the means of production by workers' (1976:285).

Two years later Nancy Chodorow in the *Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), examined the psychic and social effects of the fact that it is women who mother in creating polarised and unequal gender identities: boys who are fearful of intimacy and girls who define themselves only in relation to others. Two years later again Sara Ruddick (1980) brought together these new mothering themes of Rich and Chodorow with her notions of 'maternal thinking' and 'maternal practices': describing women's deep commitment to the mothering experience, often despite constraining and oppressive conditions. Some features of the mothering experience, she argued, are invariant and nearly unchangeable, like maternal concern with preservation, growth and the acceptability of the child. In the interests of preserving fragile life, fostering growth and welcoming change, maternal practices tend towards humility, humour, realism, respect for persons and responsiveness to growth (Ruddick 1980:83). Jane Flax, also from the US, would argue in criticism of this work that the mother's sexuality, aggression and need and desire for an autonomous life are all ignored by Ruddick: 'Important things like rage, frustration, aggression, sexuality, irrational intense love and hate, re-experiencing one's own childhood, blurring of body boundaries, conflicts of demands of a child, one's mate, other children and other work are missing' (1984:13). Nevertheless, what Ruddick's writing presented, as Ann Snitow would aptly summarise over a decade later, was a 'song to motherhood' (1992:39).

By the close of the 1980s this affirmation of women's maternalistic subjectivity had led to the psychological research of Carol Gilligan (1982), widely acclaimed for its emphasis on women's separate styles of moral reasoning, and other work stressing the basic cognitive differences between women and men, alongside emphasis on women's separate 'ways of knowing' (Belenky *et al.* 1989). This trend had gone about as far as it could go with Phyllis Chesler's *Sacred Bond* (1990), in which she stressed the 'sacred' nature of the biological bond between mother and baby – a notion which would have filled feminists with dread just over a decade earlier. Chesler's goal, in this book, had been to defend the rights of the 'surrogate' mother in the famous 'Baby M' case. But whatever the real dangers of exploitation of working-class and poor women involved in 'surrogate' motherhood, Chesler uses this particular case to assert a general

return to naturalism. She thereby implicitly rejects the significance of the former feminist argument that 'motherhood' should be seen as a social construction, to present it as a 'natural' or biological category. Meanwhile, in counterpoint to this new pronatalist trend *within* feminism, books have appeared from women calling themselves 'feminist', overtly hostile to every aspect of that earlier feminist search for women's social and political equality with men and scornful of all the former activities of the women's liberation movement, including their campaign in the US for the Equal Rights Amendment, derailed by Reagan (Hewlett 1986).

The feminist mothering literature was always more popular in the USA than in Britain, but greater attention was also paid to the details of maternal experience and behaviour in Britain from the late 1970s. (Feminist psychotherapists Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach (1982), for example, also used Chodorow's object relation perspectives in their popular writing on mother-daughter themes.) There is no doubt, either, that the feminist focus on the significance – rather than simply the burdens – of mothering did serve to inspire and strengthen many women. Those active in political struggles in the 1980s, especially in the women's peace movement, often invoked motherhood to combine and celebrate women's pacific and nurturing goals, as in the group 'Families and Babies Against the Bomb'.

At the same time, however, continuing economic recession was to lead to a political downturn for any reformist policies of welfare expansion in the interests of dependent people or those caring for others in the home. The victories of the monetarist right-wing governments of Thatcher and Reagan would make feminist struggles for nursery provision or adequate child support not only increasingly hard to win, but seemingly impossibly utopian even to conceive. Some feminists like Denise Riley in Britain, who felt it necessary to reassert in the early 1980s that for most women 'the truth is that to both work and have children is, as well as a pleasure, a bitterly exhausting fight' (1983b:155) now worried about the declining stress on the importance of *social* provision for parenting. Certainly, surveys of women with pre-school children continue to find that most mothers, although welcoming motherhood, find childcare a predominantly frustrating experience, the majority still feeling isolated, guilty, overburdened and anxious (Boulton 1983). More difficult again, often desperately so, are the lives of those people, mostly women, caring for elderly, disabled or handicapped people at home, and so often unassisted by any state provision. The one in six women currently caring for the elderly, for example, have been found to suffer from both physical and mental stress, a stress which is often shared, of course, by those being cared for (see Finch and Groves 1983). The problems women may face in mothering are thus compounded in caring for the elderly, a type of caring often far removed from the joys of participating in the life of the growing child.

However, if the popularity of feminist texts celebrating the joys and passions of women's mothering experience was beginning to overshadow the significance of earlier work on women's ambivalent and conflictual attitudes towards mothering, it tended to remove from view altogether the former feminist critique that women's lives should *not* be defined primarily in terms of motherhood. For women who may choose to forgo the pleasures and pains of motherhood, or for women unable to conceive or adopt children, feminism seemed to offer increasingly little support in their choice or circumstance of non-motherhood (see Snitow 1992).

THE NEW EMPHASIS ON FATHERHOOD

The implications of feminist celebration of motherhood for analyses of family life within and outside scholarly work was diverse, and at times ambiguous. Stressing as she did the radical potential of the female body, Adrienne Rich said little about the nurturing father, suggesting that the 'tokenly' involved father offers not even an individual solution to the problems of a patriarchal world (1976:211). Other feminists have written of the possibilities of a world without fathers, a world which, as in the feminist utopia, *Herland*, women alone will rule, and all of life will therefore be imbued with the 'feminine principle' of caring and spirituality (Gilman 1979). Ruddick, however, stressed that maternal ways arise from actual childcare practices: men may 'mother'. Indeed, like Chodorow, she stressed the social, psychological and political importance of assimilating men into childcare, and, most importantly, argued that transformed maternal thought must be brought into, and hence change, the public realm (Ruddick 1980:90). Other writers, and in particular some men, began to use such feminist thinking to stress the importance of *men's* active engagement in fathering (see also Kraemer, Chapter 12 this volume). So, in a sense, not only was mothering reclaimed in new ways by feminists in the second half of the 1970s, but so too was 'fathering' being reclaimed and celebrated by men influenced by feminism.

Before the 1970s there was very little attention paid to fatherhood by anyone, although some social scientists had worried about the effects of complete 'father-absence' on boys' sex-role socialization. From the late 1970s, however, fathers' participation in infant care became a popular research topic. Ross Parke (1981), for example, wrote of the 'unique role of the father in fostering the infant's cognitive development', while many other studies stressed the benefits for children of active fathering. Moreover, despite assumptions that men and women interact differently with babies and infants, psychological and sociological studies conducted within the last ten years or so have suggested that when both parents participate in active

parenting, there are more similarities than differences in how they do it. As Graeme Russell's study of fathering suggests, fathers who are full-time care-givers display the same type of enhanced sensitivity to their infants as full-time mothers, while a mother's more typically greater sensitivity to her baby's needs does not generalise to a greater responsiveness to other people's children. Indeed, Russell concludes from his overview of a wide range of research on reverse-role parenting that it is remarkable how little difference it seems to make to children, female or male, *which* parent parents (1983:167).

The families where men are more likely to share the caring of children and housework, however, are those atypical families where both parents already have highly paid professional careers of equal importance to them, and where there is the additional assistance of (paid) nursery and childcare (see Ehrensaft 1987). Most research, however, has suggested that men's actual sharing of housework and childcare falls far short of equal engagement, even when their partners have full-time jobs. Moreover, men have tended to increase their participation in the pleasanter side of family life, like playing with the children, rather than its more mundane and physical side. Some researchers on fatherhood, like Charlie Lewis (1986), and certainly many feminists, have therefore concluded that the changes which have occurred in paternal behaviour are slight. A more rounded picture would seem to be that fathers today are more likely to have more intimate engagements with their children than they did, for example, a generation earlier, and that, as Lorna McKee (1987) suggests, there is a more 'open-endedness' to fathering nowadays, with many men still doing little in the home and some men taking an equal share. Those men who are sharing more equally are most likely to be the men for whom a combination of individual and social factors work together to make sharing a more acceptable, attractive and rewarding choice. Many men, for example, could not participate significantly in domestic work and childcare, even if their workmates, peer group and partners encouraged it (a situation which is far more likely to occur in relation to professional workers than blue collar workers), because of the high levels of overtime they feel obliged to work – especially with young children in the family. One study in Britain, for example, found that married men under 30 work four times the amount of overtime as childless men of the same age (see Segal 1990:33–37).

In terms of its effects upon women in the family, some studies show that married women with jobs and mothers of very young children are happier when their husbands perform more housework and childcare. Other psychological surveys, however, report that only a minority of women, whether employed or not, seem to desire greater paternal participation in childcare. Women, it seems, fear losing their traditional authority in the home and their exclusive importance to children. This, perhaps, is not

so surprising. For even if men's sharing of domestic work, where it does occur, seems beneficial to both women and children, it does little on its own to undermine men's overall social and cultural dominance. Many women may well feel they do not wish to relinquish what authority they do have, in the one place they are more likely to have it.

Looked at from a broader political perspective, it is also clear that the reassertion of fatherhood can serve to threaten some groups of women. Not coincidentally, it would seem, a growing stress on the importance of fathers in families has occurred at a time when men's actual power and control over women and children is declining. The father of the 1950s was necessary to his family (as Joyce saw it, 'a necessary evil'), but he was needed, it was thought then, for his financial support and the status and legitimacy he conferred on wife and offspring. Today's interest in the importance of fathering occurs at a time when women may feel more able to question any automatic assumption by men of paternal rights. Until the mid-1970s, social stigma and discrimination against divorce, and against unmarried mothers and their children, meant that few women could choose to mother outside marriage. And men characteristically denied the paternity of their illegitimate children.

However, as feminists of the 1970s began to reject and criticise the consolidation of men's rights in marriage over women's sexuality and fertility, some feminists began to see advantages to single parenthood, free from men's control. Economically, whether through jobs or welfare, more women were in a position where they could attempt to raise children on their own (though, for most, not without serious financial penalties). Since the late 1960s, it has also become easier for women to seek to terminate a pregnancy. With more women able to obtain an abortion, more mothers choosing divorce or perhaps even to embark on motherhood alone, more women and men raising children together outside marriage and some women, particularly lesbians, choosing to conceive through artificial donor insemination (AID), men in recent decades have begun to worry about their loss of paternal rights. Just as some women began questioning whether families need fathers, significant men's pressure groups (like Families Need Fathers, formed in 1974) have arisen to assure them that they do.

In response to men's anxieties, by the close of the 1970s, and for the first time ever, the Law Commission on illegitimacy was recommending the need to strengthen the rights of unmarried fathers (Smart 1987). Illustrating the new anxiety over women's capacity to choose to mother independently from men, it proposed giving all biological fathers automatic parental rights (a proposal which was abandoned only because it would confer such rights on any successfully impregnating rapist!). The legal bias against lesbian mothers was also being endorsed and sensationalised in media coverage

at the close of the 1970s, with the *London Evening News*, for example, attacking lesbians seeking motherhood through AID.

At a time when men's hold on their traditional familial and paternal authority is becoming less secure than ever before, the new stress on fatherhood can thus serve very old familial rhetoric: the rhetoric which importantly negates feminist insistence upon the actual contemporary diversity of households with children, whether cohabiting single people, lesbian couples, gay men, women on their own, or women living with friends or other relatives. The force of choice or circumstance – perhaps stemming from sexual orientation, perhaps a response to domestic violence, or from a myriad of other possibilities – which may have led people to live outside nuclear families, can thereby once again be pushed aside in favour of unthinking allegiance to the traditional familial ideal. Before embracing the importance of fathers, therefore, we need to pay careful attention to just how easily the abuse of paternal power has been condoned or denied within traditional family life. The pro-father, pro-family rhetoric has begun to merge with a new moral backlash against feminism and gay politics in recent times. It can be used to manipulate people's sexual fears and paranoia and stigmatise all over again non-familial sex and relationships – always a favourite routine in harsh economic times, as scapegoats are sought for people's feeling of vulnerability.

Feminists were right, nevertheless, to suggest the importance of men's participation in childcare and domestic nurturing as one – although definitely only one – aspect of forging new, less polarised and oppressive meanings for 'masculinity' and 'femininity'. However, in a world where men in general still tend to have more financial and social power than women, we need to tread warily, embracing the importance of fatherhood in ways which do not threaten women and undermine recognition of non-traditional household arrangements.

DIFFERENCE AND DIVERSITY

If feminist writing has veered between critique and celebration of women's domestic and maternal roles within families, while at times touching upon the complexities of women's more ambivalent attitudes, it has nevertheless mostly attempted to stress the diversity of family forms. But we may still need to question whether this approach has been diverse enough.

Black feminists have criticised the ethnocentrism of white feminism for privileging sexism as the major source of women's oppression in families, down-playing the significance of racism and ethnic diversity in determining how women are oppressed. Following critiques like those of bell hooks (1984), the blindness of classic texts like

Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) to the fact that her bored and unhappy housewives were white women is now well known. Black women at the time, almost all working long hours in very poorly paid jobs, may well have longed for more time in the home.

More generally, what feminists wrote about the isolation and discontent of women in the home throughout the 1970s was based on the lives of white women, bearing perhaps little connection with other ethnic household groupings. As many, like Parita Trivedi (1984), have since pointed out, Asian women are more likely to have other female relatives inside the household. Moreover, white feminists have often failed to emphasise the crucial role of black and Asian family groupings in providing protection against the surrounding racism of white-dominated societies. For these families, the immigration policies of the state have more often opposed rather than supported their attempts to unite or keep families together by bringing in dependents from outside Britain. In campaigning for welfare benefits or attacking the 'family wage', many white feminists have ignored the situation of black or immigrant women in Britain who, while paying taxes, receive no benefit at all for the children they support abroad. The argument here is that black feminists believe, correctly, that white feminists have often developed perspectives on 'women's' situation in the family which distort the situation of black women. In agreement with this criticism, Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh were to criticise their earlier work, *The Anti-social Family* (1983), suggesting that it 'has spoken from an unacknowledged but ethnically specific position . . . its apparently universal applicability has been specious' (1985:25).

Today, feminists are more aware that if we are to describe the possible strengths and weaknesses of different family forms, then ethnic diversity must be tackled. It is true that in most societies today feminism will involve a struggle against some aspects of family life, whether it is against the material and social deprivation of single mothers in England, the ostracism of unmarried mothers in Ireland, dowry murders in India, or the struggle of Asian feminists in Britain against domestic violence. But the precise forms of critique and struggle will vary from one society, or specific social group, to another.

There has been further conflict as well within contemporary white feminist thinking on family life, with a minority calling for a return to a more conservative approach which rejects any emphasis on alternative family forms. In the US, feminist philosopher and political theorist, Jean Bethke Elstain, for example, has reaffirmed the traditional definition of family as the term 'having its basis in marriage and kinship'. She rejects the insistence on the diversity of families today as 'insulting to family men and women', individualistic and irresponsible (1982:447). Assessing her work, Judith Stacey (1987), also from the US, suggests that there has in fact been a gradual

disappearance of the former feminist critique of the family in the attempt to preserve and celebrate women's motherhood. She attributes this to the pains and difficulties of women – particularly of ageing feminists, in the right-wing climate of the 1980s – constructing the types of intimate relationships they might desire in a world where the possibilities for making choices around parenting and relationships remain more open for men, even as they begin to close down for women. Stacey sees three sorts of personal trauma as particularly widespread among those women who shunned traditional marriage and child-rearing arrangements, strengthening the appeal of a more conservative retreat from any sexual politics critical of the traditional family – lack of sexual relationships, involuntary childlessness and single parenthood.

Yet while feminists themselves may have become less vocal in their criticism of the traditional family, more people today do continue to choose to live outside them, and have faced ever-increasing stigmatisation because of it, orchestrated most recently by our incumbent Conservative government. For example, households of single parents with children increased by 75 per cent between 1971 and 1991, and recent surveys suggest that many of these single parents, mostly women, now prefer to remain single (Bradshaw and Miller 1990). Moreover, with the ageing of the population, the single-person household is the largest and fastest growing household unit in Britain. Those who live outside traditional family units, whether because they are lone parents, widowed, gay, lesbian, migrant workers, or simply choose alternative life-styles, are still likely, however, to find themselves isolated or socially impoverished because of the continuing privileging of the heterosexual nuclear family form in welfare spending and ideological affirmation. The support for the idea of the 'natural' family is all the more paradoxical today when the surge in reproductive technology and continuing high rates of divorce ineluctably undermine the logical foundation of any such notion.

Many of the debates now occurring around *in vitro* fertilisation (IVF), surrogate motherhood and artificial insemination by doner (AID) arouse such passion precisely because of the ways in which they undermine any naturalist conceptions of the family. They separate out biological parenthood from social parenthood, and reproduction from either marriage or sexuality. Of course, this is no new phenomenon, when the high levels of remarriage following divorce has often meant that parenting is undertaken as a social rather than a biological responsibility in 'reconstituted families'. But there are many who are still busily trying to demarcate from all these increasingly possible permutations of parenting and family life what is 'natural' or 'normal', and what is not.

Another paradox exists in the fact that accompanying the increasing insistence on the importance of 'the family' during and after the Thatcher years, it was women

caring for children and other dependents in the home who were consistently discriminated against during this period. Over the Thatcher decade all the legislation affecting women, whether around family policy or workplace issues, proved retrogressive for families with dependent persons. Although the number of women entering jobs continued to increase dramatically in the 1980s, Britain has now the lowest nursery care provision in the EEC (excluding Portugal) and the worst maternity leave provision (with two out of three women, because they work 'part time', excluded from maternity leave altogether), while the real value of family allowance or child benefit fell by 18 per cent during this decade (Armstrong 1991). Meanwhile, the burdens of caring for dependent adults in the home (undertaken by one in four middle-aged women without any financial reward) has vastly increased as an effect of the government's devolution of geriatric and mental care on to the 'community', without back-up provision (Institute for Public Policy Research 1990). While affecting all people engaged in caring work in the home, these policies have hit some households far harder than others, with changes in benefits making it difficult for lone parents to avoid poverty. Over the last decade, therefore, the family has become more than ever a site where dramatic social inequalities have deepened and reproduce themselves.

Traditional voices continue (more strongly, the more irrelevant it becomes) to insist upon the importance of the traditional, male-headed nuclear family, and to blame the victims of deepening social inequalities (like single mothers) for causing their own 'immiseration', and 'social decay' generally. Other voices, however, mostly those still inspired by the more materialist feminism of the early women's movement, continue to insist that 'the family' is not a natural but a social construct, and that it is the material circumstances, quality, and commitment of relationships with children which matters, not their form.

CONCLUSION

So many theoretical conflicts have thus emerged in feminist scholarship in the 1980s that it becomes impossible to write of *the* feminist perspective. But whatever shifts and manoeuvres we have seen in feminist positions on the family over the years, I want to conclude by affirming the necessity of holding on to the broadest possible political framework for thinking about family life. For feminists today this means keeping in mind all the earlier criticisms of the oppressive, hypocritical insistence that there is only one type of healthy family grouping, alongside the rethinking which has occurred over the last twenty-five years.

Sadly, however, it is the ability to grasp a complex and conflictual political terrain which is often clouded over once we enter the therapeutic domain and attempt to understand, intervene and pronounce upon, family lives and relations. Within clinical settings, the intricacies of studying or working with personal complexities and interpersonal dynamics so easily expands to take up more and more of the space that might once have been given to political analysis and engagement. This is all the more true in harsh political times like these, so at odds with what were, perhaps, our youthful political struggles for a more caring and egalitarian world. But it is precisely in such times that we need to hold on to politics, as we see general social anxieties displaced into moralising rhetorics of family breakdown and sexual panics. Old scapegoats are sought out, and those people already most vulnerable as they struggle to care for others outside the normative family unit are further stigmatised.

So it is more important than ever now to convey the message that we do not all live in families that are good for us, and we certainly were not all born into families that were good for us. And it may well be the nature of 'the family' itself which is to blame. Instead of endorsing hypocritical pronouncements from the Right, which present the mythical 'good' family as the solution to our ills, we need to see that it is sometimes a source of many of our woes. Few things are more certain or, in this current political climate, more repudiated, than the knowledge that families reflect nothing so much as the world around them. Welfare cuts, shrinking benefits, mounting consumer taxation, and continuing unemployment, all mean that it is families with dependents which are suffering most today. The resources, possibilities, hopes and aspirations which a truly 'welfare' orientated state could, and at times has, nurtured (and I do mean *state*, not empty gestures at 'community'), in contrast with the contemporary shrinkage of such benefits, help determine the type of parenting, and wider caring, children receive. Refusing this truth is as dangerous and damaging as ideologies which tell us that there is only one way of living as a 'family', with mum, dad and the kids, even when domination and resentment, conflict and depression, dwell within.

The therapeutic world, however, has often provided powerful ideological support for normative family moralising, by working with developmental narratives of progress towards a sexually polarised, heterosexual maturity. Accounts of the success or failure of such narratives of development are located firmly within the gender stereotyped familial framework of paternal authority and female servicing, helping to foreclose rather than open up alternative domestic and sexual options. In general clinicians have supported acceptance of existing conventions which they felt could – or should – not be changed. The challenge of imaginative therapy, however, as some voices are now beginning to proclaim – especially with feminist input into family therapy – is its

potential to move beyond normative frameworks and enable us to make changes, both personal and political.

What other narratives can tell us – and all clinicians need to pay careful attention to them – is that, as Angela Carter described so well, so movingly, in her tragically last novel, *Wise Children*, ‘families’ can be put together from whatever comes to hand, and absent fathers, just for example, may be good, bad or irrelevant, for the love and security that dwell within (Carter 1991). Indeed, as Andrew Samuels illustrates in his new thinking on ‘fathering’, they may be irrelevant even for carrying and implanting creative ways of taking in the significance of all those metaphors and messages about that supposed, but always permeable, binary: ‘femininity/ masculinity’ (Samuels 1993). Boys living with biological fathers may sometimes make the very worst of identifications with what is supposed to symbolise an authoritative source of strength – with ‘masculinity’; girls may be in urgent need of other narratives of ‘femininity’ besides those implanted by their mothers.

Notwithstanding feminist anxieties (or, sometimes now, the lack of them) about the way appeals to the ‘family’ have often served to deny legitimacy and support to those living outside its traditional frontiers, all feminists have always wanted to combine love and commitment, caring and freedom, in ways which might prove less oppressive to women than they have in the past. Most feminists, as well, have recognised the extent of social, economic and political change which would be needed for there to be any profound change in the existing problems which the majority of women face juggling family lives and employment. The real immorality of the money-pinching pro-family ‘morality’ of those currently so quick to condemn non-traditional parental life-styles is that they are responsible for most of their problems.

State priorities cannot dictate the language of love. But they could try to ensure that all parenting and caring is done by those who wish to undertake it. They could help to establish that those who do the caring work for society have enough money and enough access to flexible social provision to lessen its burdens. They could remove all economic compulsion to remain in violent or dangerous circumstances. This would cost more money, but have incalculable benefits for society as a whole (while creating more jobs for women, and for anti-sexist men with different models of masculinity to offer boys and girls). What state priorities cannot tell us, and about which governments should remain silent, is the specific type of living arrangements which best suit our needs. These will be the types of ‘families’ or ‘communities’ which enable us to try to create, even in adulthood, the ‘happy childhoods’ we may never have had – for ourselves, for children, for other loved ones.

NOTE

- 1 This chapter is a reworking of an essay which first appeared in *Interactions and Identities* (1993), eds M. Wetherell, R. Dallos and D. Miell, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

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Gender, power and relationships

The publication of *Gender and Power in Families* (Routledge 1990) marked a milestone in the application of feminist thinking to therapeutic work with families and brought important new ideas into the thinking and practice of students, trainers and professionals. This second volume of contributions from leading practitioners shows how these ideas have been taken up by those working with different approaches in a variety of settings, and reflects the move away from a model of therapists as experts to one of therapists as collaborators who put their knowledge at the disposal of the client.

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