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# Key Concepts in Family Studies

## Jane Ribbens McCarthy and Rosalind Edwards

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### Introduction

#### INTRODUCING FAMILY STUDIES – WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT

Family studies is a broad and fascinating area. In this book, we set out to offer what we hope is a thoughtful overview of the key concepts through which family lives may be explored, and to provide clear and even-handed signposts to the main debates at stake in many of these concepts, and associated readings. As an area of academic interest, however, family studies is not easy to define, not least because the core term ‘family’ has become a matter of considerable controversy and dispute.

Although the word itself continues to be widely evident and generally unquestioned in everyday lives as well as in political debates and professional practices, researchers may ponder how to use it, or whether to use it at all. Many academics have grown wary of using the signifier ‘*the family*’ as this draws on stereotypes that fail to take account of, and marginalize, the realities of diverse family lives that do not fit the implicit model in ‘the family’, of a heterosexual two-parent nuclear family with breadwinning husband and father and home-making wife and mother. There are a variety of responses to these dilemmas within family studies.

- Some researchers continue to use the term ‘the family’ unproblematically, often in practice referring to interrelated issues of residence, close ties based on blood or marriage, and the care of children. Talk about ‘the family’, in this way, is most likely to occur in discussions of broad patterns and structures, perhaps looking across different societies or examining how ‘the family’ as an institution relates to other major social institutions such as economic, employment or

educational systems. There are many questions about social life that seem to require the concept of 'the family' as an object that exists and can be studied. Similarly, policy makers may feel the need for a clear model or benchmark of what 'the family' is, in order to develop legislation and general procedures.

- A different solution is to use the term in the plural and refer to 'families'. This acknowledges the diversity of lifestyles and relationships that might be referred to as 'family', offering a way forward which is widely accepted in family studies.
- Other solutions have been to use the word 'family' as an adjective, as in 'family lives', or even as a verb, as in 'doing family' (Morgan, D.H.J., 2003). This takes us away from the idea that 'family' is a noun – an object that can be named as such – suggesting rather that it is a descriptive term which is applied to a wide variety of experiences and interactions and to different aspects of living.
- Yet another approach is to turn the difficulty into a source of new questions, interrogating the word and asking how the term 'family' is used, in what contexts, and with what consequences? Various empirical studies have sought to do this (for an overview, see Ribbens McCarthy, 2008). This way of thinking also opens up the possibility that 'family' may be found in all kinds of social setting, not just domestic sites.
- Some writers find the concept of family so limiting and politically charged that they prefer to use other ideas altogether, such as 'intimacy', or broader terms within which 'family' is seen as one form of living alongside other relationships and experiences, and which may be captured by a notion such as 'personal life' (Smart, 2007).

As an area of scholarship, family studies is more fully recognized and academically organized in the USA than many other countries, and major overview textbooks are often authored from there (such as Boss et al., 2009; Coleman and Ganong, 2004; Collins and Coltrane, 2001; Lloyd et al., 2009). This is not to say that the field of family studies is not recognized as a discipline in its own right in other countries. While this recognition may be more or less explicit, academics in societies around the world produce important work relevant to the field, although there may be some associated differences of emphasis.

Besides theorizing the term 'family' itself, and how it may be used, family studies generally covers an interconnected set of topics, including:

- partnering and childbearing
- household formations and demographic trends

- daily living arrangements and decision making, including resources and provisioning
- parenting and other forms of care
- close relationships and their dynamics, in the context of various dimensions of age, generation, gender and sexuality
- kinship and community relationships
- domestic lives and their interrelationships with other areas of social life, such as education, health and employment
- aspects of social policy, the law and professional practices related to these topics
- diversity, inequality and cross-cultural and global issues.

The last theme raises a further question, about how far any of these topics can be studied by applying the same concepts across all global, social and historical contexts? This points to the need for comparative, anthropological and historical perspectives. Other key disciplines that contribute to family studies are sociology, psychology, demography, social geography, legal studies and economics, while political science and religious studies may also be stakeholders here (Karraker and Grochowski, 2006). But each discipline has its own sets of concepts, and even where they appear to be using the same terms, these may not always carry the same meanings. To engage in true interdisciplinarity is not always straightforward, and, indeed, may not always be desirable. Furthermore, different disciplines may have different approaches to what is meant by 'family' and how it is theorized. In psychology, for example, the focus may commonly be directed towards dyads (such as mother and child, or siblings) rather than more extensive networks of relationships that might be considered to be 'family'.

Indeed, it is important to explain, as authors of this book, that our own primary disciplines are sociology and social policy, and our theoretical and empirical orientation has been to explore how 'family' is understood by people in their everyday lives, such as to consider how parents understand their routine practices of living and relating around the care of children. Our work has also drawn extensively on feminist perspectives over the years. We see the links between feminist approaches on the one hand, and family studies as a field on the other hand, as crucially important in reinvigorating the subject and opening up new questions that had previously been seen as lying outside the scope of social science. Indeed, feminist family scholars have recently hailed progress in 'the ongoing transition from feminism *and* family studies *to* feminist family studies, where we cannot imagine a family studies not shaped by feminist contributions' (Allen, 2009: 3–4, original emphasis).

At the same time, each of us have drawn on, and engaged with, most social science disciplines in our work, and we have drawn on these as far as possible in this book, as part of a project of developing broader dialogues and deeper understanding of family lives.

A vital aspect of family studies is to consider the research methods that underpin its knowledge base. We have not provided research methods as a direct entry in the book, but methods are clearly implicated throughout. Those who want to pursue research methods further may like to refer to *Key Concepts in Social Research* (Payne and Payne, 2004). Texts that specifically consider research methods in family studies include those by Mason (2002), Ribbens and Edwards (1998) and Greenstein (2006), and readers may also like to explore the 'Real Lives' website (<http://www.reallifemethods.ac.uk>), which is part of the UK Economic and Social Research Council's National Centre for Research Methods, and the online resource for quantitative methods in family research (<http://blog.lib.umn.edu/vonko002/research>) based at the University of Minnesota in the USA. Again, there may be differences in traditions about the use of various research methods, as well as differences in theories of causality and explanation between disciplines – for example, randomized controlled trials are considered particularly important in some branches of psychology to verify casual connections. Approaches to research methods have also changed over time in family studies. Quantitative methods – for example, surveys, questionnaires, statistical analyses of large-scale datasets – have been particularly prominent in some contexts, but qualitative methods – for example narrative approaches, life history interviews, ethnographies – are also now recognized as significant and robust research methods relevant to family studies. Both qualitative and quantitative methods may use longitudinal or retrospective designs to explore how family lives change over time. And many family researchers also stress the importance of working reflexively with their own understandings of family lives, and consider how they may be relevant to the research approach and findings (Allen, 2000; Ribbens and Edwards, 1998).

A further aspect of family studies is that the 'level' and context of analysis, as well as the types of conclusion and the extent to which these are generalized, may vary among disciplines. Even within sociology, some family scholars work at the level of broad generalizations, perhaps examining how family as *an institution* is organized within and across different societies, while others may focus more on the detailed minutiae of everyday lived *experiences* and how these are understood by the participants, and perhaps shaped by opportunities and constraints in

their circumstances and localities. Part of the interest of family studies is precisely that it can straddle different forms of analysis, although this then raises questions about whether or how these different levels may be linked. Indeed, sometimes families are seen as a key feature of how individuals and small groups are linked into wider social patterns. Family studies thus covers a range of issues, for example: the intricacies of personal experiences and close relationships, even interior psychic life; the ways in which international economic systems relate to global patterns of migration, employment and caring; relationships between individual parents and children living in particular localities; and how national and international legal systems define citizenship rights by reference to family ties. These, then, are some of the complexities, as well as the fascinations, of studying families.

### EVALUATIONS, AMBIGUITIES AND PRACTICAL INTERVENTIONS

The term 'family' is not only used by academics, but it also features strongly in people's emotions (Ribbens McCarthy, 2010), as well as in political rhetoric. Attachments to the term can evoke deeply held desires and longings, such that some writers describe 'family' as a 'fantasy' (Mackinnon, 2006) or 'an overwrought object of desire' (Walkover, 1992). Nevertheless it can be considered a 'well-founded illusion', since it is strongly institutionalized by the state (Bourdieu, 1996) and the subject of ideological manipulation by politicians (Bernardes, 1985), with family studies as a scholarly pursuit in many societies succumbing to this ideological partisanship (Zvinkliene, 1996).

It is hard for family scholars to deal adequately with the emotional features of family lives and relationships, when these encompass variations from love to hate, and kindness and altruism to violence and abuse. Part of this difficulty is that actual family experiences may be equivocal and shifting, involving deep paradoxes around such issues as power and love, or care and oppression, and the related feelings may hold much ambivalence. The same act, say of cooking a meal, may feel like a practical expression of caring for someone on one occasion (or even at one moment), a form of sociable leisure activity on another occasion and an exploitative form of labour on yet another.

These issues are also crucial for professionals working with families, including social workers, health professionals, public health workers, educationists and also sometimes human resources professionals.

Important questions are raised about how family studies as an academic field relates to professional interventions and policy decisions. Since the 1920s, some have advocated that the social sciences should contribute to the understanding of family relations and therefore to the quality of family lives and society (Karraker and Grochowski, 2006). But views may vary on how close this relationship should be, for example should family scholars and family professionals act as collaborators, or is academic study compromised by too close an association? Much will depend on the purpose of the particular research project. Interwoven with these questions is the issue (raised above) about how professionals as well as researchers may deal with personal experiences and feelings about family lives.

Some family researchers seek to describe family lives and relationships in unambiguous terms, as if it is possible for academics to stand outside such issues. This risks imposing implicit evaluations and value judgements on to the experiences of others – as we illuminate through many of the discussions in this book. Family lives may be (perhaps increasingly) an area in which people feel that their moral identities are at stake, and thus a need to defend any potential threat to their moral standing. Even where family scholars seek to be non-evaluative and to understand the experiences of family members on their own terms, the concepts being deployed may unwittingly convey all kinds of implicit assumptions and judgements. Terms such as ‘dysfunctional’ or ‘healthy’ families, or ‘children’s developmental needs’, can all appear to be objective terms, but are actually underpinned by value judgements that are rooted in particular cultural assumptions. In this book, we have unpicked these assumptions.

This is not to say that family scholars and practitioners have to adopt a relativist position in which all family practices and patterns are treated as equally valid within their cultural contexts (Hollinger, 2007). It is to suggest, though, that researchers and practitioners need to be clear about how and where to take a particular value stance. Professionals deciding on difficult interventions with family members may find this an uncomfortable stance. Nevertheless, this is a respectful and realistic approach to take, made possible by paying careful attention to the concepts used and the theories in which they are embedded. We very much hope that this book will contribute to such an endeavour.

## SELECTION AND ORGANIZATION OF CONCEPTS

This book lays out the ways in which key concepts in family studies are understood and the primary debates to which they relate. One difficulty

encountered in studying families is that the topics are so 'familiar' that the terms and the underlying issues are taken as unremarkable and unproblematic in general social conversation. Throughout the book we have sought to make these familiar terms strange, unpicking assumptions to make it clear how much variability there can be in their meanings. Much of this may be difficult to see, not only because family relationships may be understood as 'natural', but because they may also be regarded as part of the ways in which things have 'always been'. Indeed, the history of family studies has been shaped by feminist arguments that family lives are not 'natural', and thus somehow outside of 'society', but are deeply social and linked to political concerns.

Deciding which concepts to prioritize in this book has been a difficult task, particularly when so many of the issues are closely related. We have dealt with this by identifying clusters of linked terms or sub-concepts and addressing them under one major key concept. Such terms are then identified in **bold** in the discussion within that heading. These **bolded sub-concepts** can also be traced across the various entries by using the index at the end of the book. At the same time, there are many cross-cutting links among the main key concept entries themselves, and the most significant of these are listed as cross-references at the end of each entry.

Besides the difficulties of selecting which concepts are key for family studies, we have also been aware that there are some important ideas, or themes, which are not included among our main key concepts entries. There are a number of reasons for this:

- We simply could not include all the concepts that we would have wished within this particular volume (but readers may like to consult publications such as Crompton et al. (2010), Kamerman and Moss (2009) and S. Lewis et al. (2009) on families and work-life balance; Crozier and Reay (2005) and Lareau (2003) for families and education; and Bianchi et al. (2005) and Broome et al. (1998) for families and health).
- Some terms have not been included as key concepts because they represent recurring themes across many aspects of family lives. **Time**, for example, is a core feature of family experiences in all sorts of ways, and is an area of academic study in itself, as are **work**, **consumerism**, **food** and **money** (see Morgan, D.H.J., 1996). Instead, these are raised in relevant entries in this book, which the reader can locate through the index.



- Some terms stand at the margins between family studies and related areas of study, for example concepts that are central to the study of personal experience in social contexts, such as the **self**, **subjectivity**, **identity**, **emotions** or the **psycho-social**. Again, the reader can find reference to these terms as sub-concepts.

As we noted earlier, different national and cultural contexts are important in understanding the significance and meaning of families and family life. We use the phrase 'European and New World' (drawing on Therborn, 2004) as our primary way of referring to countries in continental Europe along with English-speaking developed societies around the world, that is, including the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Occasionally we also refer to 'Western' or 'Westernized' as alternative, familiar terms to avoid repetition.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

As a general guide to how you can make the best use of this book, the most obvious place to start is the contents list. Depending on your purposes, you may find that a particular key concept entry may provide all that you need.

If you cannot see what you want in the main contents list, go to the index to see whether your term of interest is there, and then follow it up where it appears in the key concept entries.

If you want to trace connections between a term and others across other key concepts, you can follow up the cross-references that are listed at the end of each entry and/or you can look up the bolded sub-concepts in the index to see where they appear in other entries.

Sub-concepts may not always be explicitly defined, and may be used in somewhat different ways in various entries – but the meaning should be understandable from the context of the discussion, or you can follow it up in the further reading given at the end of the main entry in which it appears.

At the end of each main entry you will find some recommendations for further reading. These will provide you with more in-depth discussions. Family studies is a very dynamic field so to study particular topics and issues in-depth you may well want to look at recent journal and book publications.

We hope you will enjoy your explorations of family studies.



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