

Focus: Families and Relationships across Crises

Sara de Jong and Jacqui Gabb

<http://discoversociety.org/2017/05/02/focus-families-and-relationships-across-crises/>

David Cameron's plans to fix a "broken society", by putting families first, gave prominence to the notion that the 'wrong' types of families were the cause of societal breakdown. By inference what this suggested was the need for more of the 'right' types of families, those whose legitimacy and social-fit would contribute – financially, morally, and practicably – to the growth of British society. This 'reasoning' has been used by successive UK governments to drive and underpin 'family friendly' policy making that revolves around the dyadic adult couple whose relationship is oriented around parental responsibilities which prioritise 'work, economic self-sufficiency, education and good behaviour' (Williams 2004: 244). UK cross-party interest remains focused on parenting and families with children from New Labour government (1997–2010) initiatives such as *Every Parent Matters* and *Support for All: Families and Relationships* through to Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition government (2010–2015) reforms, including the **Children and Families Act (2014)**.

In popular discourse 'hard working families' are the priority and dual-headed (read dual income) households are characterised as best placed to meet children's emotional and practical needs. Conservative Government '**Marriage Allowance**' tax allowances reward couples who are willing to work at their relationships. In the context of the '**gloomy forecast**' for GDP and debts incurred through the '**government bailout**' of the banks, resources are being channelled towards certain 'types' of families and relationships and as a result support is being siphoned away from those deemed less deserving. In the wake of **Article 50** being triggered and the Brexit policies being hastily developed, by Theresa May and the UK Conservative government, to replace EU regulations divisive policy trends are likely to further entrench familial ideologies. Research has robustly and correctly drawn attention to the impact of the ensuing cuts to services and welfare support for those who fall outside this family agenda, and on the ways that it both makes and breaks relationships. What has received less attention, however, are the ways in which families and other relationships have been created, reconfigured, and sustained against the backdrop of 'austerity' and the displacement of people from their homes of origin. In this special issue on 'Families and Relationships across Crises' we explore how families, personal relationships and social networks are responding to state austerity and migration regimes by creating structures of support for those who are falling between the cracks.

The focus on the ways that national policies are pushing relationships to the point of crisis has taken on an arguably urgent vigour as the **consequences of Brexit on personal life** begin to emerge. Here we turn on its head the idea that the nuclear heterosexual family is *in crisis*, and instead show how relationships are being shaped *across* multiple crises. This takes us into different territory and brings into sharp relief the intersections of power, politics and personal life; how the macro and micro dimensions of citizenship and governance are profoundly political, at every level. The range of policies, rights and prohibitions which frame

contemporary families and relationships, directly impinge on bodies and intimate life. Embedded in welfare regulations are norms about 'proper' relationships and corporality, such as recognised versus unsanctioned partnerships, health versus ill-health and/or risky lifestyles. Migration laws not only adversely impact partnerships they also infringe on bodily integrity – as evidenced by the widely criticised Conservative proposal for **dental checks to verify the age of asylum seekers**.

Power is not only central to understanding consent, sexual violence, sexual harassment, human trafficking and sexual exploitation, but also to wider struggles linked to intimacy and relationships. For instance, the ways in which the cultural norms, moral values, social policies and laws which govern bodies and intimate practices are challenged by individuals and social networks through direct and indirect action. How families cope when they are separated while fleeing from war. Whose sexuality is legitimate and which relationships count. How the relationships of intercultural couples go through destruction and healing in a xenophobic world. It sheds light on how people are maintaining transnational support structures in the post-Brexit referendum era; how the so-called 'squeezed middle' can only manage to get by with the solidarity of their loved ones. Each of these examples underlines the contemporary relevance of the second wave feminist credo that the personal is political. Whilst boundaries are being broken down by social and personal acts of solidarity, in other ways 'the political' is entering into the intimate sphere of private lives, with laws and policy-making informing who we are and the geo-political spaces we may occupy.

Analytically, this research agenda also brings home the point that if we want to understand Crisis with a capital C, we need to look at how various crises play out and get resisted at the micro level of everyday relationship and kinship practices. As Lynn Jamieson convincingly argues in relation to environmental crises "Emotionally charged personal relationships are not peripheral to issues of 'environment' but multiply implicated in both the problems of unsustainable, environmentally damaging practices and the potential solutions" (2016: 346). At the level of everyday relationships, various crises come together and are intertwined. This special issue focuses in particular on the so-called migration crisis and the financial crisis and their interconnections. This inevitably leaves out many other crises worthy of our analytical attention and it important to note here the absence of any discussion of environmental crisis, indicating that we need to better integrate ecological issues into the mainstream of family sociology, social policy and political science.

This does not, however, diminish the richness of papers gathered together here; nor does it underestimate the value of bringing together research on the financial and migration crises to explore their intersections. For example, the contribution by **Umut Erel, Erene Kaptani, Maggie O'Neill and Tracey Reynolds** shows how anti-immigration and austerity policies meet in the lives and relationships of migrant mothers. It recounts how the requirement to sign into the Immigration Reporting Centre every fortnight can result in increasing vulnerability in the workplace and, for one migrant mother, the loss of her job. She is now unemployed and as a

consequence of the No Recourse to Public Funding policy has no access to many benefits; unable to pay the rent for their own accommodation, she and her family now live in the apartments of different friends. The differential effects of austerity can only be grasped with an intersectional approach that takes into account people's legal status, gender, sexuality, race, and class and the way in which these positions are intertwined and interconnected, as **Leah Bassel and Akwugo Emejulu (2014)** have argued.

Indeed, as many of the contributions to this special issue show, crisis plays out differently for different people. Revamping and minimalism can be cool or romantic for the privileged few, but as **Sarah Hall and Helen Holmes** show the hard labour required for everyday survival is both classed and gendered. The popularised command to 'Keep Calm' and 'Make Do' has different meanings when the artefact is craft or essential sustenance. In another contribution on everyday austerity, **Alison Stenning** argues for the need to think psychosocially about the impacts of and people's responses to the financial crisis. Exploring how austerity feels for low-to-middle income families, she reflects on what it means to 'get on with it' and 'just manage'. She describes how relationships between family, friends, neighbours, acquaintances and wider communities are being invoked, used, challenged, remade and imagined to navigate austerity and the threats of crisis.

As certain areas of the UK become gentrified and the cost of housing escalates, **Iliana Ortega-Alcázar and Eleanor Wilkinson** illustrate the ways in which positionalities are contextual and relational, focussing attention on the experience of what it means to be a low-income single father in the context of cuts in housing welfare. Caught between the state's family-friendly rhetoric and its practice of supporting certain types of family, they show how relationship constellations outside of the normative nuclear family are penalised. Changes to the age threshold of the shared accommodation rate (SAR), prevent many single parents who do not live with their children from realising their desired parenting. Here and in other similar circumstances family rhetoric and policy-making conflict with the materiality of family life, as Sue Bond-Taylor demonstrates in her forthcoming piece in DS45. She examines the experience of those identified and supported as 'troubled families' suggesting that we need to frame 'crisis' as driven by neoliberal social relations and the retrenchment of welfare support rather than a response to troubled and troublesome families.

Whilst 'troubled families' often make the headlines in news media, and feature as stories for reality television and sitcoms, the crises that people experience in the context of their intimate relationships are not ordinarily those that are televised. Proclaiming a crisis, doing crisis politics, can also have the effect of putting people into crisis. As contributions to this issue show, a rhetoric of financial or migration crisis can serve as a justification for measures that create a crisis for family and kinship practices. For instance, when family reunification laws are tightened to prevent 'too many' from entering into the UK, as **Elena Vacchelli** convincingly shows in her contribution on 'the integration crisis' where she questions the norms of a supposedly homogenous 'British culture', 'proper' marriage and motherhood. This demonstrates how crisis narratives need to be questioned as they provide a very narrow lens through which to view a

situation; they blind us to the complex realities that people face and the creative responses that should be and already are being developed.

It isn't easy to present a positive note in a special issue on crisis, but in between the lines of the contributions to this special issue, we see the glimpses of alternative, viable kinships and relationships. As Lauren Berlant has argued, maintaining a sense of optimism while living within crisis is operating as a cruel form of attachment to a world **“that can no longer sustain one’s organizing fantasies of the good life”** (2012). If we want to develop alternative visions, according to Berlant, we are moving into much more uncertain terrain; but crisis put us there already anyways. Exploring and constructing different relationships is part of this ambiguous territory, where we need **“to have patience with failure, [...] to try new forms of life that also might not work—which doesn’t make them worse than what’s there now. It is a time for using the impasse that we’re in to learn something about how to imagine better economies of intimacy.”** (Berlant 2012)

Some contributions to this special issue present such ‘cruel optimism’. **Agata Lisiak**, in her contribution on migrant Polish mothers, addresses the apparent contradiction of how these women express their sense of freedom in the UK, despite their precarious livelihoods. Such freedoms are not only rooted in the small degree of economic security afforded in the UK when compared to Poland, but also in the self-sufficiency that is fostered and which liberates them from certain oppressive family dependencies. While the outcome of the Brexit referendum has threatened this fragile sense of security, she found notable signs of resilience and defiance. Whilst childhood is renowned as a carefree time that remains unencumbered by the pressures of adulthood, **Sevasti-Melissa Nolas, Christos Varvantakis and Vinnarasan Aruldoss** explore ‘children of the financial crisis’. With research sites in London and Athens they examine the ways that crisis permeates children’s play and life worlds. Comparing data from these two cities in the global North with data from Hyderabad, the capital of the southern Indian state of Telangana, they suggest that the ‘global’ financial crisis cannot be assumed to have equal reach, as children in Hyderabad did not draw on tropes of crisis. They also suggest that alongside the pain of disruption and financial insecurity, new experiences and connections may emerge.

These stories about families and practices of care resonate with other contributions on migration and relationships in a divided world where the focus of the analytical lens is on what happens when families and other networks of support are severed by forced migration, immigration laws and bordering practices. For example, **Vicki Squire** examines the experiences of families living across national divides. Drawing on interviews with people who recently arrived into Europe (Kos, Malta, Sicily, Athens, Berlin, Istanbul and Rome) she shows that migratory experiences are indeed commonly marked by family separation. Here family reunification policies are particularly punitive as they do not apply beyond a certain age; as a consequence young adults are being separated from their families of origin. Alongside this pain of loss, however, there are also new relationships of care being established *en route* which reconfigure kin connections and extend networks of intimacy. In a similar vein, in her study of befriending services in Immigration Removal Centres (IRC), **Joanne Vincett** explores new

relationships of support that are being forged. Working as a researcher and volunteer befriender in Yarl's Wood IRC, she witnessed how the women detainees who may be often separated from their loved ones, develop trusting kin-like relationships with their befrienders, sometimes using familial terms to address them. As she puts it, through regular visits, listening and talking, befrienders offer "a new kinship and demonstrate they care irrespective of how much they know about detainees".

Many contributions in this special issue therefore aim to unpick traditional understandings of different types of relationships and the boundaries invoked to keep them separate. In her article on LGBT asylum seekers **Nina Held** discusses how individuals and queer couples are being placed in the nigh impossible position where they have to prove the genuine nature of their relationship. Such asylum claims based on sexual orientation and gender identity are rarely believed and frequently dismissed as judges draw boundaries around who belongs and who does not belong to ideas of LGBT community. Citing the case of a lesbian couple seeking British citizenship, she shows how recognition of sexuality is dependent on the Home Office's assessment of the credibility of your love story. Here there are painful echoes of previous feminist debates on the invisibility of lesbian sex and sexuality.

Tackling the intersections of sex and gender from a different perspective, **Erin Sanders-McDonagh and Lucy Neville** focus on the politics of domestic violence. In their Policy and Politics contribution for this special issue, they show how public condemnation of domestic violence (DV) by UK Prime Minister Theresa May contrasts with successive government cuts to public services. Tracing policies and investment since the 1970s, they provide a situated account of DV policy-making that demonstrates how cutbacks jeopardise both the lives of women and safeguarding assurances for children. They show that while political pronouncements make good media headlines, policy initiatives are not forthcoming. Indeed, without corresponding financial resources to support policing, social care, and public health recommendations such good intentions are worthless.

This contradiction between the self-presentation of Britain as a liberal, tolerant country respecting human rights and the high refusal of asylum claims based on sexual orientation and gender identity is mirrored in the everyday lives of intercultural couples who grapple with multiple combined stressors encountered in their long-term relationships. In their Frontline contribution **Reenee Singh and Mehboob Dada** provide insight from their psychotherapeutic practice into the ways in which intercultural couples try to nurture their relationships in politically divisive times. They argue for a psychotherapy that recognises rather than flattens diversity; practice that is attentive to the intersectionality of identities and intimate lives. In contrast, **Irene Messinger** shows how certain types of state-sanctioned relationships can be strategically deployed. In her Viewpoint article on marriages of convenience, she presents an historical account that exposes inconsistencies in the moral assessments of such political strategies. Comparing the experience of women from the Third Reich who used such marriages to escape the Nazi regime with the ways in which asylum seekers from outside Europe are viewed today when they use such marriages to enter Fortress Europe, she demonstrates the inequity of moral reasoning afforded to these two groups. Marriages of convenience are shown

to have the potential to simultaneously subvert traditional concepts of marriage and undermine immigration regimes.

The contributions to this special issue address the topic of 'Relationships and Families across Crises' from a variety of different relational, geo-political, and disciplinary perspectives. Combined they explore the ways in which intimate and kin relationships are created, sustained, challenged, and disrupted in the context of social and political crises. In so doing they shift away from approaches that consider certain kinds of people, relationships and families as being 'in crisis' and instead concentrate on crisis as the backdrop for personal life. In other words, it collects contributions to the question of how changing material and ideological conditions inaugurated by the different crises impact on families and relationships in Europe and how families and intimate relationships have responded to crises.

References:

- Berlant, L. (2012) 'Lauren Berlant: On her book Cruel Optimism', Rorotoko, June 05, 2012.
Jamieson, L. (2016) 'Families, relationships and 'environment': (Un)sustainability, climate change and biodiversity loss', *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 5(3): 335-355.
Williams, F. (2004). *Rethinking Families. Moral Tales of Parenting and Step-Parenting*. London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

*Jacqui Gabb is Professor of Sociology and Intimacy at The Open University. Her research centres on gender and sexuality, personal relationships and family lives. Findings from her award winning recent study on long-term couple relationships www.EnduringLove.co.uk have received national and international media attention and have been published in a self-help handbook [The Secrets of Enduring Love](#) (Penguin, Random House, 2016) as well as 'translated' into **online resources for young people and teachers**. Academic publications include [Couple Relationships in the 21st Century](#) (Palgrave, 2015) and [Researching Intimacy in Families](#) (Palgrave, 2008). **Sara de Jong** is Research Fellow in the Citizenship and Governance priority area at The Open University. Her research focusses on the politics of civil society in relation to migration, gender and development, drawing on postcolonial and intersectional perspectives, and has been published in *Complicit Sisters: Gender and Women's Issues across North-South Divides* (Oxford University Press, 2017) and various journal articles. She previously held an EU FP7 Marie Curie Fellowship with her project 'Employing the Cultural Broker in the Governance of Migration and Integration', University of Vienna.*