

## **Introduction to the special section on Troubling Families.**

This special section on Troubling Families builds on a history of dialogue and developing work, originating with a Colloquium held in London in 2010 which centred on the notion of 'Family Troubles?', drawing on themes of changes and challenges in family lives – originally, of children in particular (Ribbens McCarthy, Hooper and Gillies, 2013). The focus on 'troubles' seems to have opened up a welcome and meaningful space in family sociology and family (and childhood) studies more generally, enabling new (sometimes very difficult) questions to be asked, and new theoretical threads to be followed across disparate topics and debates. This ongoing project has thus asked whether, or how far, difficult or painful events constitute a general feature of family lives, how troubled<sup>d</sup> and troubling families perhaps normalise their lives, and when 'changes' and 'troubles' may be considered to become 'harm', and by whom? And how do 'family' discourses and practices, along with idealisations of 'childhood', re/create and feed into such divisions and dilemmas?

From the outset, the work has sought to create a dialogue between researchers addressing mainstream family change and diversity in everyday lives, and those focusing on particular problems which prompt specialist interventions. We thus hoped to encourage sociologists to develop dialogue and debate between sociologists, family practitioners and professionals, as well as social policy scholars. Additionally, in extending these core questions to diverse international contexts, the project raises key issues for those concerned with international social policy, migration and comparative sociological work generally, and with the politics, anthropology, and sociology of contemporary suffering and moralities (e.g. Kleinman and Kleinman 1991; Craibe, 1994; Wilkinson, 2005; Sayer, 2011; Calhoun, 2012; Shweder and Menon, 2014; Ribbens McCarthy and Gillies, this issue).

Since the original Colloquium in 2010, further events have been held in various venues around the world (see <http://www.open.ac.uk/ccig/research/projects/family-troubles>). The current special section for *Sociological Research Online* itself draws directly upon a session at the 3rd ISA Forum in Vienna in July 2016 on the theme of Troubling Families, broadening the focus out beyond the family lives of children. The session approached this theme from two related perspectives: on the one hand, troubling the concept of 'family' and its continuing significance, and on the other hand, focusing on family lives that may be considered by some to be 'troubling'. Several of the articles in this special section span both aspects, raising questions about the interconnections between the two, and drawing on empirical work in a variety of different countries (Heaphy; Gahan; Juozeliūniene

and Budginaitė; Welch), while the articles by Rush and Ibrahim Lazarus, and by Ribbens McCarthy and Gillies, focus more directly on what may be found to be troubling in the family lives of some children, both articles exploring these questions in international contexts.

By troubling the concept of 'families', and asking how to interrogate the evaluative frameworks and everyday assumptions that define some families, and some family practices, as 'troubling', the special section raises challenging debates linking substantive issues with theoretical and conceptual questions of diversity in everyday relationships. Across the articles, these questions are addressed in a variety of local and inter/national contexts – including Britain, Australia, Lithuania, Scotland, Ghana and Ireland - and in relation to a range of substantive issues – including same-sex families, families separated by migration, looked-after-children, the physical chastisement of children, and parent-child relationships more broadly. Related questions, building on the originating issues of the family troubles project, have included:

- How far, in what ways, and with what consequences, is the language of “family” centralised in policy, professional practices, and everyday lives, both internationally and in diverse local contexts, in ways that carry implicit assumptions and evaluations?
- How far is the prevalence of family discourse itself a source of trouble to people in their everyday lives?
- Are troubles a ‘normal’ part of family lives and experiences? Do idealised discourses of ‘family’ and ‘childhood’ obscure such troubles, and in the process, render them more troublesome?
- Can sociology enhance evaluative understandings of what may be ‘normal family troubles’, and what may constitute troubles that entail harm, and may require interventions, across diverse contexts?

It is now well-rehearsed in Anglophone scholarship that the term ‘family’ is highly problematic (e.g. Thorne and Yalom, 1982; Bernardes, 1985/2003; Carby, 1982/1996; Gubrium and Holstein, 1990; Ribbens, 1994; Morgan, 2011; Gillies, 2003; Budgeon and Roseneil, 2004; Smart, 2007; Gabb and Silva, 2011; Heaphy, 2011; Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards, 2011). Yet it continues to have major resonance in people’s everyday lives and wider discourses, including international social policy (Ribbens McCarthy, Doolittle and Sclater, 2008/2012; Gilding, 2010; Edwards and Gillies, 2012; Edwards, Ribbens McCarthy and Gillies, 2012; Ribbens McCarthy, 2012). The term thus persists in powerful and pervasive ways, including through international law, social policies, professional

practices and everyday lives (Morgan, 1985; Bernardes, 1987; Ribbens, 1993; Bourdieu, 1996; Somerville, 2000; Gillies, 2011). It thus continues to be a key – but contested and contestable – concept for sociological analysis. Importantly, its controversy lies in significant ways in its power to attract moral and evaluative overtones (Hooper, 1992; Zvinkliene, 1996; Hooper and Humphreys, 1998; Gillies, 2007; Hooper et al, 2007; Phoenix and Hussain, 2007; Ribbens McCarthy, 2008), e.g. as “functional” or “dysfunctional”, “healthy” and “unhealthy”, “normative” or “troubled” (Somerville, 2000; Vetere, 2013; Crossley, 2016a, 2016b). Such terms obscure their underpinnings in culturally shaped value judgements (Korbin, 2013; Ribbens McCarthy and Gillies, this issue) varying in systematic ways between and within diverse inter/national and local contexts.

Furthermore, perception of some families in particular as troubling raises additional, related, questions, concerning the grounds on which they are seen to be troubling – a question which cuts across many different substantive issues, potentially raising important conceptual and theoretical issues in the process. Key sociological and social policy questions arise concerning who it is who finds particular families troubling, what responses are considered to be appropriate and by whom, and what are the historical processes and power dynamics involved. And from family members’ own perspectives, how does the view of their ‘family’ as ‘troubling’ impact upon them, and do they find ways of resisting or accommodating such processes? Furthermore, the powerful language of ‘family’ may itself be a source of significant trouble, particularly for families at risk of being stigmatised as troubling.

Many of these inter-related questions are pursued and illuminated in various contexts through the articles published in this special section.

Brian Heaphy starts us off with a thoughtful exploration of ‘the ordinary’ in the context of same-sex families that might otherwise be simplistically characterised by some as ‘troubling’; in the process, conventional meanings of family and marriage are troubled in their turn. Drawing on empirical work with same-sex couples, Heaphy explores how ‘the ordinary’ may be used in both implicit everyday, and politically conscious, ways, to challenge ‘tradition, convention and normativity’. Exploring these processes enables Heaphy to illuminate the complexities of developments in contemporary family lives in Anglophone/British contexts. Interviewees thus developed their views in subtle ways to suggest how notions of ‘the ordinary’ might be both ‘troubling’ to their own couple relationships in conventional terms, while also constituting a resource by which to trouble convention. Through this problematizing of ‘the ordinary’, Heaphy’s argument in turn troubles any easy accounts of contemporary family lives through binary characterisations.

Same-sex family lives are also the subject of Luke Gahan's paper, this time in an Anglophone/Australian context. Here the kaleidoscope twists to bring into view variable threads by which notions of 'family' may constitute the ground for both idealising and troubling same sex families with children. This occurs, firstly, in the ways in which the family lives of same-sex couples with children may be idealised as a counter to the troubling narratives which may otherwise contrast same-sex couple families as less acceptable or 'functional' than heterosexual families. By 'succeeding' in providing a 'family life' for their children, same-sex families may be placed on a pedestal of virtue. But when same-sex couples with children split, the kaleidoscope turns to potentially reinstate the original troubling narrative. In the process, further troubles may arise in terms of isolation and invisibility for the individuals involved. But in either case, the original idealisation - of what 'family' is meant to be - endures, whether same sex families are considered to be living up to it, or failing it.

The impact of 'scripts' that narrate certain families as 'troubling', and the ways in which members of those families respond to such scripts, are both also highlighted in the paper by Irena Juozeliūnienė and Irma Budginaitė, this time in the context of transnational families from Lithuania. Drawing on Finch's work on 'family display', along with Goffman's theorisation of 'scripts' that are referenced and transformed in multi-local interactions, Juozeliūnienė and Budginaitė firstly analyse the themes of such scripts in public media outlets and government policies, and then use interviews with women, who are living apart from their children while working abroad, to demonstrate how these normative scripts are experienced. The article discloses the ways in which the power of normative scripts is revealed through the very inevitability of the mothers' engagement with such discourses. At the same time, transnational mothers do not simply 'follow' scripts but also shift them and create new stories of mothering.

Everyday resistances to, and reinventions of, normative scripts are also apparent in a rather different context in the article by Vicki Welch. Like the first three articles, this discussion also draws on empirical work, in the form of interviews with various family members (including young people, parents and other relatives), to explore the experiences of (Anglophone/Scottish) families that have been considered by statutory authorities to be sufficiently 'troubling' for children to have been removed, in the process becoming 'looked-after children'. These families are thus at high risk of being stigmatised, and experiencing stigma, and Welch draws on Juhila's concept of 'talking back' to explore how her interviewees responded to the notions of 'family', 'family troubles', and 'looked-after children', by both engaging with these categories and sometimes disputing or claiming membership of them. The notion of 'family' was itself sometimes reaffirmed by these interviewees,

through an understanding of unbreakable biological ties that persist in the face of 'family troubles'. The stigma of being 'looked-after children' might also be resisted through claims that this term was inappropriate in the face of such 'family' persistence. Consequently, Welch illuminates how one category or discourse may be utilised to 'talk back' to, and subvert, another 'troubling category', thus extending Juhila's theoretical framework in ways that may perhaps be useful to future work on 'troubling families'. Welch concludes by drawing out some policy and practice implications, in terms of the significance of such discourses (and any related practices) of continuing and immutable family ties for young people experiencing considerable disruption and instability in their lives. Welch suggests, then, that authorities might usefully seek to look beyond what they find 'troubling' about the families of 'looked-after children', to build on their potential status as 'family' in ways that may enhance the lives of all concerned.

Policy issues are central in the article by Michael Rush and Suleman Ibrahim Lazarus, when they use a comparative, historical, cultural and policy analysis in the contexts of contemporary Ireland and Ghana, to consider how far physical chastisement of children may have shifted from being seen as 'reasonable' to be considered to be 'troubling' – whether by policy makers, religious leaders or family members themselves. In their analysis, they argue for a link between this shift and legal changes dismantling the power of fathers. However, the routes by which such shifts have occurred in each country are found to be historically specific, not least in the context of differing religious histories and contemporary cultures. While these shifts away from physical chastisement and patriarchal power may thus have somewhat divergent religious and cultural support in each country, Rush and Ibrahim Lazarus argue the potential for a coherent moral model that moves away from neo-liberal binaries of 'good/intact' families versus 'troubled/broken' families, towards a framework in which children's wellbeing is understood to be embedded in 'everyday societal responsibilities rather than privatised or patriarchal familial obligations'.

Such cross-cultural comparative debates in relation to children's family lives and wellbeing are at the centre of the concluding paper by Ribbens McCarthy and Gillies, where they seek to confront a core dilemma and question that arises from the framework of 'troubling families'. While the general framework of 'family troubles' can very usefully serve to highlight continuities across diversities, at the same time, where might any boundary lie between 'normal' family troubles, and troubles that are troubling - potentially 'harmful' particularly to children - in ways that might be seen to require intervention? Their focus is on the development of an inter-cultural dialogue to address this intensely difficult question, asking whether any objective frameworks – empirical or moral - are

available to answer this question in ways that may be relevant regardless of cultural contexts?

Exploring potential answers to this question, Ribbens McCarthy and Gillies argue that there are no 'universal' frameworks available that avoid neo-colonial power relationships, drawing on empirical examples from both the UK and China to illustrate their arguments, as well as work on the anthropology of moralities. At the same time, however, they explore the relevance of the work of the philosopher Francois Julliene in particular, to consider how to develop an inter-cultural dialogue that may go beyond 'facile universalism' and 'lazy relativism', in ways that may be useful even in the face of neo-colonial power dynamics and inequalities. In furthering such a dialogue, Ribbens McCarthy and Gillies briefly consider frameworks rooted in divergent cultural traditions, including: children's Rights; Awaïta; Ubuntu; and feminist ethics of care. Core issues in the exploration of any such dialogue include underlying values, assumptions about personhood, the self, and very basis of 'being' in the world, in relationships with others. In raising such difficult and sensitive issues, in the face of the immense challenges to mutual understanding across diverse cultural and linguistic perspectives, Ribbens McCarthy and Gillies suggest the necessity of patient dialogue, humility, and the capacity to live with uncertainties.

Taken together, these articles point to the continuing power of idealised, and normalised, 'family' discourses and scripts. At the same time, the empirical studies show how members of families that are seen to be 'troubling' within the terms of these discourses, may adopt, apply, subvert and resist such scripts, sometimes transforming them along the way and sometimes reinstating them. We hope the overall impact of this special section demonstrates the potential of 'troubling' understandings of 'family', and illuminating what may be at stake, in multiple ways, for families that may sometimes be viewed as 'troubling'. What emerges may challenge binary characterisations and illuminate continuities, revealing levels of complexity and uncertainties that may be found challenging by many, not least by policy makers, and these challenges cannot be evaded. But at the same time, 'troubling families' may more faithfully and usefully illuminate contemporary family lives – whether 'conventional' or otherwise - in diverse contexts, and this may in turn help to avoid creating further 'troubles' to family members themselves. Sociology has an important part to play in this, by attending closely to the everyday meanings and practices through which people experience their family lives together and make sense of their relationships, in circumstances shaped by power dynamics, material inequalities and colonial and cultural histories. As we have argued previously (Ribbens McCarthy, Hooper and Gillies, 2013), such an approach, along with policy analyses, may usefully both trouble the normal and normalise troubles in relation to contemporary family lives.

Such debates, we suggest, are necessary and difficult, but urgent and potentially fruitful in diverse contexts and a globalising world.

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<sup>i</sup> Since we began the work on 'family troubles', the term 'troubled families' has become a crucial feature of UK social policy on families that are defined in quite categorical ways to be 'troubled'. For non-UK readers, this may be a source of some confusion, since our use of 'family troubles' is intended to work in quite opposite ways from the social policy discourses of 'troubled families'. The latter thus seeks to define specific families as falling within the category of 'troubled families', setting up a binary characterisation, whereas the focus on 'family troubles' is intended precisely to challenge binary characterisations and to highlight continuities and themes that may occur across family lives in very general terms.

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