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Journal of Family Issues: Special issue on Family Troubles and Troubling Families

'Family troubles' and 'troubling families': opening up fertile ground.

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The twin themes of 'family troubles', and 'troubling families', explored through this special issue, are closely linked, but they are also each distinct in themselves, and nuanced in particular ways, which we consider in this introductory discussion. We will also argue that these themes offer fertile ground for opening up new dialogue between contrasting bodies of work concerned with family lives and relationships. We are thus particularly delighted for the Journal of Family Issues to be hosting this special issue, since our twin themes are intended to cross (and indeed to question) such boundaries, and to encourage fresh perspectives as a result.

The history and institutionalisation of family studies

In what follows, we offer an account of family studies as siloed between a binary of 'the mainstream' - focused on what may be implicitly understood as 'ordinary' family lives - and 'the problematic' - focused on aspects of family lives that may be of interest to social policy experts, professionals and practitioners, and geared towards interventions of some sort. At the same time, we are conscious that these distinctions and contrasts are also perhaps understood in variable ways in different countries even within the affluent Minority worlds of Anglophone and Western European societies, let alone in Majority world countries. The account we offer here is primarily rooted in our UK based experience of family sociology on the one hand, and social policy and social work on the other. It has thus been our experience over many years that these are inclined to constitute distinct bodies of work, with limited dialogue between them either in publications or in conference venues, and, consequently, that this binary between the study of 'ordinary' and 'problematic' families is to some extent structurally embedded and institutionalised.

While Family Studies in other countries may have a rather different history and organisation, particularly where the field is more formally recognised and developed, this in itself may create lacunae. US Family Studies, for example, has been argued to have multiple (gendered) roots, including home economics, and a more political concern with social problems (Allen et al, 2009), and thus to be often deeply embedded in quite practical and often therapeutic concerns about families that are 'healthy or unhealthy', 'functional or dysfunctional'. Nevertheless, a more distinctly sociological approach is also apparent in the US, for example in the significant earlier influence of the functionalist sociology of Parsons and Bales (1956) and more recent work building on the writing of Gubrium and Holstein (1990) to develop more social constructionist and interactionist perspectives, alongside the critical perspectives of feminist family studies (eg Thorne and Yalom, 1992; Lloyd et al, 2009).

Much mainstream social research on families, particularly sociological work in the UK, has tended to focus over many decades on aspects of how families and relationships have been changing in Minority world contexts, albeit the questions and the conclusions have often carried implications for broad political and policy concerns such as divorce legislation or personal taxation policies. At one time the narrative was one of family 'breakdown', positing that a 'traditional' family pattern that had been dominant, providing a stable environment for childrearing and adult relationships, was giving way in the face of rising divorce rates, women's increasing involvement in the paid work force, and the emergence of diverse family forms such as 'step-families' and 'families of choice'. Sociological responses to such a narrative were sometimes to argue that such a 'traditional' pattern had only ever been a very temporary and brief phenomenon amongst particular social classes in affluent mid-twentieth century Anglophone and Western European societies. A further response to this dominant narrative of breakdown was sometimes to investigate such changes through empirical qualitative research into people's everyday lives, exploring the ways in which people actually experienced, for example, divorce and single parenthood (e.g. Smart, 1984; Burghes and Brown, 1995; Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Reynolds, 2005) or money management in households (Pahl, 1989; Burgoyne, 1990). Such research has then argued that, rather than (or alongside) a narrative of 'breakdown', a narrative of 'change' might also be appropriate, with both positive and negative aspects. Furthermore, in terms of

overall generalised trends and patterns, some have argued that enduring continuities of family forms and themes could be discerned alongside a perennial story of change (Gillies, 2003; Ribbens McCarthy, 2008).

What was missing here, though, in this preoccupation with these alternative narratives, was any sociological attention to the pervasiveness of change and challenges as core for *all* family lives over time (Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2013a), with such changes sometimes experienced as troubling by family members themselves, and/or seen to be troubling by others such as professionals who saw them as ‘dysfunctional’, or policy makers who saw them as ‘social problems’. On the one hand, then, qualitative research has been oriented sociologically to theorising and exploring ‘ordinary’ family lives on their own terms, while, on the other hand, more practice and policy-oriented research has sought to develop interventions to ‘make things better’, or to achieve ‘reforms’, for families that are considered to be ‘problematic’. Families who were seen to be the source of such concerns thus came to be seen as the academic province of social policy and social work researchers, while the ‘normal troubles’ of family lives have been largely neglected by researchers from either point of view – a state of affairs which has inadvertently risked an implicit idealisation of ‘ordinary’ families. These differing bodies of work have become largely siloed into separate bodies of knowledge, asking differing questions, and seeking different sorts of answers, while the pervasiveness of ‘family troubles’ has become lost in between. Consequently, dialogue between these various literatures and debates has been largely noticeable by its absence, whereas we would argue that there is much potential for learning through such dialogue, gaining different perspectives and insights and opening up taken-for-granted assumptions underpinning these different bodies of work (see Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2013a). For example – as the papers in this special issue demonstrate - it is apparent how much issues of gender and generation may be at stake, whether we’re considering mainstream, ‘ordinary’ family troubles, or families that are considered to be troubling. At the same time, we would also argue there is value in keeping open some space to consider the distinctiveness of these different bodies of work – mainstream family sociology and problem-oriented family research - with a delicate balance to maintain between them and contribute to the dialogue (a point we return to below). So, in seeking to bridge between

the siloes, why exactly have we found it useful to focus on these two themes, of ‘family troubles’ and ‘troubling families’, and what does each theme bring into view?

Family troubles

‘Family troubles’ was our original theme, as the basis for an international symposium organised in London in 2010, leading into an edited collection (Ribbens McCarthy, Hooper and Gillies, 2013b). This theme, most fundamentally, was intended to recognise the ‘normality’ and ‘ordinariness’ of changes and challenges in the family lives of children and young people, which might sometimes be welcome but might often be experienced as (remarkable or unremarkable) ‘family troubles’. Our aim for this initial event was thus to create a space for dialogue between those working in the field of family sociology and those in the fields of family social policy and practice.

This then enabled contributions that both sought to ‘normalise troubles’ and ‘trouble the normal’¹, thus teasing open what might otherwise be seen as problematic (early parenthood for example) as well as querying what might otherwise be seen as unremarkable (gendered divisions of labour, for example). In these ways, contributors were invited to explore how ‘troubles’ might be accommodated in everyday family lives, as well as the ways in which the apparently ordinary and mundane might sometimes usefully be opened up to scrutiny as potentially constituting ‘troubles’.

In seeking a way into the meaning of ‘trouble’ in these contexts, we found the work of the anthropologist Michael Carrithers (2009) to be particularly useful, when he writes about ‘vicissitudes’ as occasioned by the disruption of expectations, thus putting ‘expectations’ centre stage. In a similar vein, Janoff-Bulman refers to trauma as ‘massive expectancy disconfirmation’ (2004: 32)². And while we find the term ‘expectations’ particularly useful, it points to similar perspectives that cross disciplinary boundaries. There are thus resonances

¹ Both the approaches of interactionist sociological work and feminist family studies may be said to be aiming crucially to ‘trouble the normal’ when it comes to what constitutes ‘family’ and (to differing degrees) its intersections with gender and generation.

² Janoff-Bulman’s theorising of trauma is concerned with adults, however further considerations – e.g. issues of capacity - come into play when theorising trauma in children’s lives. Nevertheless, children do of course also implicitly bring particular expectations into play in their family lives, expectations which may shape what they experience to be troubling (and in this regard see Phoenix’s paper in this issue), albeit the sources of such expectations raise generational issues of power dynamics.

with Schutz's (1954) notion of 'typifications', Kelly's (1955) theory of 'personal constructs', and Janoff-Bulman's (1992) approach to 'assumptive worlds'. And each of these frameworks may be of service in the search for 'ontological security', in which people experience some sense of a meaningful world of reliable, predictable reality (Giddens, 1991).

Consequently, we defined 'family troubles' in terms of 'unexpected disruptions and/or... disruptive changes, and/or... a chronic failure of life to live up to expectations' (2013a: 14), including the recognition that it may be the expectations themselves that might be troubling. One notable feature of the ambivalence of expectations, for example, is the way it raises questions about idealisations of 'childhood' in contemporary Minority world contexts (Zelizer, 1985). While the raising of expectations for children's lives may have many desirable consequences, idealisation may make expectations increasingly unattainable. 'Childhood' thus becomes a special phase of life to which every child has a 'right', with the consequence that anything that disrupts such a childhood may become a significantly alarming source of 'trouble', overlooking other possibilities e.g. the opportunity for developing resilience. It is in such ways that Ian Craib (1994) talked about 'the importance of disappointment'; Craib argued that change always involves loss of some sort, such that 'disappointment' is an inevitable feature of life, and yet affluent societies have developed unrealistic expectations of life, in which people 'hope for too much' (1994: 5). This argument about the avoidance of 'disappointment' may be made more specifically about 'family' lives which are themselves the subject of considerable idealisation, perhaps constituting a 'fantasy' (Mackinnon, 2006) or even an 'overwrought object of desire' (Walkover, 1992) (discussed further below).

Thus, in his article in this journal, David Morgan offers an important additional contribution when he examines what is the significance of 'troubles' from the point of view of their constituting *family* troubles, to which he responds that they're relational, and embedded in particular expectations of dependency, mutuality and obligation. Consequently, they get played out in the details of family practices (Morgan, 2011), as well as through concerns to maintain aspects of 'family display' (Finch, 2007) which may then justify and confirm the claim to be 'family' in the eyes of particular audiences. In this latter regard, then, family troubles raise the issue of public and private boundaries in terms of when 'ordinary' family

troubles become troubling and to whom, thus threatening or undermining the claim that the set of relational practices on display can legitimately be seen as constituting a 'family' (contestations around which can be seen, for example, in the article by Boddy in this issue).

Troubling 'families' and 'troubling' families

This then leads us on to our second theme of 'troubling families', which in itself has a dual meaning: firstly, what happens to 'family troubles' when we trouble the meaning of 'family' itself, and secondly, at what point do 'family troubles' become sufficiently 'troubling' – whether to family members themselves or others – to require some sort of action or 'intervention'? Issues of public and private and the significance of power become prominent at this point, and in particular, how, when, on what basis, and in whose eyes, families with troubles come to be seen as 'troubling families', perhaps recast as 'problem families', or (in recent UK policy) as 'troubled families'. Furthermore, such issues become all the more complex in a globalised world, where issues of migration and cross-cultural power differentials come into play (e.g. Chase and Statham, 2013; Duque-Páramo, 2013; Erel, 2013; Korbin, 2013;; Juozeliūnienė and Budginaitė 2018)

The argument that the notion of 'family' itself can be a significant source of troubles, as mentioned earlier was first raised by feminist scholars in second wave feminism in the 1980s, as seen for example, in the 1992 collection edited by Barrie Thorne and Marilyn Yalom, *Re-Thinking the Family*. Prior to this, functionalist sociology had largely constructed 'the family' as an idealised and monolithic social structure, rooted in 'nature', and fulfilling 'functions' for the stability of society e.g. in terms of the stabilisation of adult personalities, and the socialisation of future generations. An early critique of this approach was written from a feminist Marxist perspective by Michelle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, entitled *The Anti-Social Family* (1982) while Black writers were concerned to point out the limits of 'sisterhood' with implications for the ways in which gender and race may intersect in family lives (Carby, 1982). And from the perspective of interactionist sociology, Jaber Gubrium and Jay Holstein in the US raised the most fundamental question in their book, *What is Family?* (1990), while in the UK Jon Bernardes (1985, 1986, 1999) raised questions about 'family' ideology, family diversity and the dangers of seeking to tie the term down at all in definitional terms. Further, writers such as Barbara Walkover (1992) and later Alison

Mackinnon (2006) drew attention to the powerful ways in which idealised notions of 'family' feature in emotional and psychic lives.

Since these early ground-breaking publications, it has become widely accepted in many quarters in sociology that it is necessary to find a new language when seeking to write about 'family', rather than endeavouring to find more adequate ways of defining the term to pin it down. Instead, by problematizing the use of the term at all, it has been possible to find new ways of thinking and theorising, while simultaneously acknowledging its continuing significance in both policy terms and in everyday lives and emotions (Weigel, 2008; Gilding, 2010; Edwards et al, 2012). Some have, for example, explored the implications of using 'family' as an adjective or a verb (Morgan, 2003). Others have built on more discursive approaches to research the meanings that are embedded in the term 'family' in people's own everyday language use and interactions, as well as its powerful ideological resonances when used in political and policy contexts (Ribbens McCarthy, 2012; Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2008/2012). And then others again have sought to avoid the term 'family' altogether, seeking alternatives in the language of 'kinship' (Carsten, 2004), 'personal lives' (Smart, 2007) or 'figurational sociology' (Widmer and Jallinova, 2008), each of which has its particular uses and applications. In terms of troubling 'families' in the present context, however, attention is drawn to the term 'family' itself, and the continual persistence of particular, powerful ideas of what family is, and what is normatively the way it should be, and how these ideas in themselves can constitute 'troubles' in both everyday family lives (e.g. see Gahan, 2018; Heaphy, 2018) and in policy and practice interventions (e.g. see Boddy; Philip et al. this issue; Rush and Ibrahim Lazarus, 2018; Welch, 2018).

In both these senses, then, 'troubling families' also has important potential for enabling dialogue between mainstream and problem-oriented family studies: for example, it is apparent how much issues of gender and generation are found to be troubling in both bodies of work (e.g. see Carter; Philip et al.; Phoenix; and Rosen, this special issue), and also how far notions of 'family' can struggle to accommodate such cross-cutting dimensions e.g. how far and in what ways does the mother-child/ren relationship sit easily alongside the couple relationship within the 'family unit', and in what ways do father-child/ren and sibling relationships find their own place in differing understandings of what it means to be a

‘family’? Indeed, the focus on family troubles and troubling families works actively to destabilise any tendency to write about ‘family’ in conventional terms, while still centralising the importance of the signifier ‘family’.

Interventions, moral dilemmas and evaluations

At the same time, as with many dichotomies, there may also be moments when it may be useful to centralise and examine further what it is that distinguishes the siloes of mainstream and problem-oriented family research, between work that seeks to understand ‘the ordinary’ in family lives and troubles on their own everyday terms, and work that seeks to identify troubles from a more evaluative perspective. While we would never want to argue that a value-free, detached and purely objective family sociology is possible, this is not to say that all family sociology needs to be driven by particular practice or policy issues in the service of interventions of one kind or another. (Although, at the same time, we recognise that research that is not directly problem-focused may also itself have practical consequences, as discussed earlier). Besides the macro sociology that examines how ‘family’ as an institutionalised structure is manifest in society, research that is driven by primarily micro-sociological, interactionist, or anthropological perspectives has scope to consider everyday relational lives ‘on their own terms’, to consider how people themselves ‘make sense’ of both their mundane and their more significant ‘family troubles’, without seeking to put evaluations on these ‘voices’ from everyday lives – challenging though it may be to avoid doing so.

The real and apparent danger, though, is that the dichotomy between mainstream and problem-oriented family studies, besides creating academic siloes, risks constructing unrealistic binaries between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ families, the ‘ordinary’ and the ‘problematic’, often on the basis of taken-for-granted assumptions about what family lives ‘should’ look like, what family practices are entailed, and what meanings are invoked in the attribution and legitimation of the powerful language of ‘family’.

To a large extent, the tensions and divisions between these siloes itself resonates with a further dichotomy, between ‘pure’ academic work and those engaged in professional

practice and interventions in 'actual' family lives. And it is here that the tension perhaps sometimes needs to be held and managed, rather than overcome. As in other substantive areas of academic work, it is thus crucial that there is a body of work, and associated scholars, who are interested in family lives on their own terms without any agenda for intervention or evaluation. To a large extent, the idea of 'value-free' knowledge has rightly been debunked as a myth, not least through feminist writing on epistemology and methodology (e.g. Harding, 1991), even when 'social science' seeks to present itself as providing 'objective' standards against which to measure family lives (Ribbens McCarthy and Gillies, 2018). But it does not thereby follow that all family research can or should be unequivocally committed to particular evaluations of how people's relational lives are lived, even though this is exactly what professionals and practitioners may be seeking to find. And we would suggest that some disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology and geography, offer scope to build on theoretical perspectives that hold open the space to minimise any (spuriously objective) evaluative judgements in family research.

Since the 1920s, some have argued that Family Studies should indeed be explicitly aiming to improve the quality of family lives and society (Karracker and Grochowski, 2006), but this arguably overlooks the values involved in determining how to judge 'quality' in such personal areas, imbued as these always also are with matters of personal, social, and political power. These issues are particularly fraught also, when people's moral identities are so closely bound up with aspects of their family and personal lives (Finch and Mason, 1993; Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2000; Lomax, 2013), and when academics' own emotions and judgements may also be evoked by the study of others' family lives. Arguably, what is required instead, therefore, is to explicate the values on which particular judgements are made and applied in professional practice, paying close attention to the concepts being invoked and the theories and perspectives in which they are embedded, and indeed, their underlying world views (Ribbens McCarthy and Gillies, 2018). Nevertheless, we fully recognise that this may well leave practitioners struggling with complex moral dilemmas in the public/private territories of troubling families (Forsberg, 2013).

Indeed, it is fundamental to our own work on this project that the three of us have been working as a (UK-based) inter-disciplinary team that crosses institutional boundaries. Whilst

there is much common ground between us there are also differences of emphasis influenced by discipline and professional interest, and there have been disagreements between us along the way, some persistent. This is complex and sensitive territory to which everyone also has a personal (and changeable) relationship, and trust takes time to build and maintain. It has taken sustained commitment to stay with the process. It is therefore a source of significant pleasure to find that we have been able to maintain our joint dialogue over a decade of collaboration, and that others have found this terrain sufficiently worthwhile to join us from time to time in these endeavours.

Since the original Colloquium in 2010, and the publication of the associated edited collection, there have been a number of other events and publications (including Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2018; Evans et al, 2019) framed around these related themes of family troubles and troubling families (see <http://www.open.ac.uk/ccig/research/projects/family-troubles> and also <http://socresonline.blogspot.co.uk/2018/03/troubling-families.html> and <http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/deathinthefamilyinsenegal/family-troubles-symposium-care-and-change-in-diverse-contexts/>). We hope the collection here may perhaps inspire others to engage, both to consider the distinctiveness of the different bodies of family research, but also value the importance of dialogue, and the ways in which ‘family troubles’ may help overcome the binary, as the articles here do.

Introducing the articles

Such themes, tensions and related dialogues are pursued in various productive and illuminating ways in the articles included in this special issue, with each author interrogating aspects of family troubles of varying degrees. We thus find Julia Carter discussing how women deal with the transition to marriage, and how this is shaped by their expectations of what it means to be a family unit, through Ann Phoenix’s focus on the differing implications for children’s experiences of ‘family’ in situations of poverty and of serial migration, to other forms of trouble that have been clearly defined by others as ‘problematic’ and the consequences for ‘family’ lives e.g. children in care (Janet Boddy). Each in various ways thus raises issues about troubling families, both in terms of the public audience that has defined them as troubling in the first place, but also the ways in which understandings of ‘family’ are troubling in these contexts (e.g. the ‘family unit’ versus ‘the individual’, Ribbens, 1994;

Ribbens McCarthy, 2012), entailing complicated interactions across ‘public/private’ boundaries (Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards, 2002). Such complexities may often play out in relation to those tricky dimensions of gender and generation in ‘family’ lives (Carter; Philip et al.; Phoenix; Rosen, this issue) , as well as family members’ own attempts to sort out whether they are ‘family’ and in what ways (Boddy; Phoenix, this issue).

David Morgan’s opening article, mentioned earlier, helps to set the scene when he asks what it is that sets some troubles apart as being ‘family’ troubles, and how the issues are enlarged when seen in this context. In this he draws on Ara Francis’ (2015) particular discussion of ‘problems’ as understood to be sited in individuals (in her work, individual children), and the ways in which such problems ripple out to disrupt family order and expectations in ways that may come to constitute ‘family trouble’. Using the fictionalised example of Terence Rattigan’s play, *The Winslow Boy*, and drawing on his own established theoretical framework of ‘family practices’, Morgan traces the complexities and nuances that emanate from a disruptive event in the life of one individual to become a ‘family trouble’. The family practices through which such troubles develop are exemplified through issues of money, gender, power, alliances, political values, obligations and family identity and status. Through such processes, further troubles may ensue, but ‘family’ as a socially legitimated production is itself asserted, constituted and reconstituted through these very endeavours, through both individual and collective practices, as both plural and singular. In such processes, the question of ‘boundaries’ is ever present and played out through family practices, both in terms of who is considered to fall within the scope of the ‘family’ troubles at stake, and how the perspectives and perhaps interventions of others who are ‘not-family’ may become pertinent, whether these others are part of the wider ‘configurational network’ (Widmer and Jallinova, 2008) or perhaps part of public bureaucracies. In the latter regard, troubles may become ‘amplified’ to constitute ‘troubling families’, interwoven with such issues as class, gender and scientific discourses.

Janet Boddy’s article draws on two cross-national studies conducted in Europe focusing on children and young people who are and/or have been in care – *Beyond Contact*, which studied policy approaches in England, France, Denmark and the Netherlands, and *Against All Odds?* which takes a qualitative longitudinal approach (ongoing) to the experiences of young adults who have been ‘in care’ in Norway, Denmark and England. Considering both studies

together enables her to trouble meanings of 'family' as the concept is used both in everyday life and in policy by considering how policy framings of 'family' for children in care relate to young people's narratives of their own lived experience. The language of family pervades both discourses, and attention to the dynamic and multidimensional complexity of its uses allows consideration of what forms of connectedness are supported by policy and practice and of how belonging and connectedness are experienced over time by young people themselves. Policy and practice vary between countries in their approaches: to permanence in placement (e.g. the use of adoption); to continuity of birth family involvement; and to the way placements and birth families are brought together. Such issues shape the everyday experience of 'family' of children and young people who encounter care systems, in ways that are spatially and temporally contingent. Qualitative interviews show also however the ways children and young people construct their relational identities in multifaceted, dynamic and changing ways through memories of significant relationships, everyday moments of contact with both birth and foster family members, and imagined futures. There is much that is ordinary as well as that which is distinctive in these experiences and relationships, such that the latter may be experienced simultaneously as positive and negative, and may feel more or less like family over time. Boddy's analysis demonstrates clearly how inadequate and unhelpful are binary constructions of families or family members as wholly good or wholly bad.

Julia Carter explores whether and how far a sample of young British women trouble gendered 'family' ideology and the traditional customs and practices associated with it. This paper contributes important insights in context of an apparent hardening of social attitudes towards infidelity within couple relationships in Britain. Carter's paper reveals a strong foundational attachment to a notion of 'family' but shows how this is a subjective ideal assembled from meanings, norms, conventions and personal beliefs through a process of 'bricolage'. Past is blended with the present through a drawing in of traditional morals and practices alongside feminist ideals of gender justice. As Carter demonstrates, the effect is to re-traditionalise in the context of de-traditionalisation. This process is framed by a broader cultural ethic of choice and post-feminist narratives of individual empowerment. Young women can trouble inequities within family lives and identify as a feminist while simultaneously 'choosing' to uphold traditional moralities and practices, such as applying double standards around sexuality, valorising marriage and taking their husbands'

surnames. Carter reveals how ‘troubles’ may be less related to a fluid concept of family and more defined by the socio-political structures shaping and containing personal meanings and relations.

Georgia Philip, John Clifton and Marian Brandon address the ‘trouble with fathers’ who become involved with the child protection system (CPS), drawing on a qualitative longitudinal study of men’s experiences of the CPS in England. The difficulty of engaging men in families has been a long-standing issue for social workers, and is given renewed significance by recent policy emphasis on ‘whole family’ and strengths-based approaches. The complexity of the challenges reflect continuity and change in contemporary expectations of fatherhood, the impacts of economic inequality and material deprivation on families who come into contact with the CPS, and of austerity on services. These challenges are heightened by a tendency towards dichotomous thinking amongst professionals where fathers are often positioned as *either* risk to *or* resource for children, either way losing sight of the common mix of positive and negative aspects in their parenting. The study included interviews with men (a combination of resident and non-resident fathers, birth and stepfathers) and focus group discussions with social workers and managers in each participating authority, allowing for the investigation of the encounter between men and the CPS as a process unfolding over time from both sides. Both men and women commonly feel threatened by child protection intervention but the accounts of the participating men highlighted the need to consider the ways that gendered thinking and practices may affect engagement. ‘Getting a fair hearing’ was perceived as a particular struggle for men, with concerns relating to certain practices such as split conferences (where fathers may be asked to attend separately to prevent conflict but often only after mothers have had their say) and the perception that their actions and accounts of them were often interpreted differently from those of mothers. The authors argue for a ‘gender sensitive’ rather than a ‘gender neutral’ approach to practice and for the importance of social workers understanding men’s wider lives as fathers, of making time to hear their stories. By widening attention beyond their ‘troublingness’, relationships are more likely to be built that enable both social workers to reach decisions fairly and men to become less troubling and more effective fathers.

In her exploratory piece, **Ann Phoenix** considers two distinctive, important, and potentially troubling topics in children’s family lives, of living with poverty on the one hand, and

experiencing serial migration on the other, both of which also point to key dimensions of access to power and resources. The first is considered through published literature, as well as drawing on children's voices themselves as they talk directly about their experiences of family poverty in two related television programmes. The second draws on Phoenix's own interview-based research, with adults talking retrospectively about their childhood experiences of their parents' migration from the Caribbean to the UK, leaving them behind with relatives, to follow on and re-join them – sometimes many years later – when they themselves migrated to the UK. While these provide quite different sources of data (and Phoenix discusses interesting issues about these differences, including the power dynamics of these different forms of contemporaneous or retrospective insight into children's perspectives on their family lives) their analysis points heuristically to some potentially key sources of difference in children's experiences of family troubles. A distinction is thus apparent between troubles that may help to unite 'family' and troubles that may divide and trouble 'family' itself, both geographically and emotionally, leaving major tensions that may never be fully resolved. In considering the methodological implications of the different sources of data, this article also raises further important issues about what may be distinctive about children's own perspectives on family troubles, and whether, and how, these may be voiced and recognised. While drawing theoretically on a psychosocial approach as well as narrative theory, Phoenix argues that the complexity of the issues involved in the analyses particularly highlights the importance of an inter-sectional approach for exploring the variability in these experiences of family troubles and troubling families.

Rachel Rosen's paper starts with the late capitalist rendering of poverty, inequality and deprivation as 'family troubles', solvable through a responsabilisation of impoverished parents and more specifically mothers. Contemporary anti-poverty initiatives target poor families as part of a social investment approach that positions children as human capital whose growth can be optimised to secure a positive future and break intergenerational chains of poverty. This has led to a policy prioritisation of the health, development and wellbeing of children and increasing surveillance and regulation of motherhood. Rosen's paper highlights the extensive feminist critiques of such a child centric approach but points to their reliance on a problematic construction of the child as a demanding empty vessel

produced through home care and schooling. Moreover, she shows how such critiques assume social investment approaches benefit the child at the expense of the mother. This paper challenges both these premises through a sophisticated engagement with critical childhood studies. Rosen draws out the reciprocities and affinities characterising mother child relations and seeks to transcend simple binaries between beneficiaries and facilitators. She concludes by outlining how the trope of the developing child naturalises neoliberal subjecthood, justifying the free market opportunism, austerity and welfare retrenchment proliferating family troubles. She calls for a more critical attention to be paid to the global political and structural conditions which produce, and also locate such troubles within families.

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