

BRINGING CHILDREN BACK INTO THE FAMILY

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BRINGING CHILDREN BACK INTO THE FAMILY: RELATIONALITY, CONNECTEDNESS AND HOME

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To our children: Kate, David, Laura, Ruari, Rosie, Maria and Elsie.

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We initiated this project because we felt there was a real gap in the literature. We have been pleased but also a little surprised at the reaction to the proposal that we shared. Scholars from around the world felt drawn to sharing their views on this issue with us – and we are so grateful to everyone who got in touch. This project could have turned into multiple volumes and although we have managed to keep it at one (for now) there are many who could have contributed but for varying reasons were not able to. We, therefore, thank those who took part, we encourage those who thought about it and we hope that this collection inspires others to enter into a dialogue about ‘bringing children back into the family’.

As with any project like this, we are very grateful to the team at Emerald for their support, guidance and patience. An additional thank you to all the contributors for their flexibility and for meeting those ‘deadlines’.

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I (Sam) wish to add a personal acknowledgement to Sally. This is her last publication before retiring and I feel very fortunate to have had her as a collaborator. Working on projects together has been a lot of fun. I am so grateful for her attention to detail, her wisdom and her willingness to engage with my many and varied ideas. I will really miss working together!

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INTRODUCTION

Sam Frankel and Sally McNamee

This collection seeks to further an argument about ‘knowledge’ in relation to the family. It seeks to highlight that without ‘bringing children back into the family’ our understanding of this key site, within which children experience so much of their everyday lives, is at best partial. Our ambition with this project therefore was to offer a platform through which scholars could present their thoughts on the unique and particular nature of the family, through a lens that acknowledged the place, purpose and value of children’s agentic competence. What has emerged is an inter-disciplinary and international set of writings (with contributions from China, Nigeria, Kashmir, Chile, Palestine, Austria, Ireland, Brazil and the United States) that reflect on both a breadth of contexts for furthering our understanding of children in the family and the dominant social discourses that inform children’s experiences of it. Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, ‘bringing children back into the family’ presents a dialogue that is imbued with themes of constructionism and power, competence and relationality, all prefaced by the dynamic duality of structure and agency.

Although childhood studies present a number of different faces for how we make sense of this complex relationship between structure and agency, we commonly recognise a process that sees the individual child as capable of forming meanings as they respond to the wider structural forces that surround them. In the case of children and their place in the family, past understandings have cast children in a very different light where their capacity to make meanings was dismissed, leaving children’s experiences de-valued and rejected. Indeed, a brief glance back through history reflects a range of roles within or associated with the family that were defined by an ambition to ‘manage’ the child, in which the child was seen as nothing more than a commodity for the future.

The original concept of the city state, for example, provided rich, powerful and morally superior men a model that allowed for the management of women, children and others within society. Driven by a Socratic belief that only these few members of society had a heightened capacity of thought, society needed to ensure a means through which moral regulation could be applied in order to protect against man’s natural compulsions. As such it marks the start of an enduring

relationship between the state and the 'family', in which one offers protection on the understanding that the other ensures effective regulation and in the case of children, adequate preparation for their future role in the adult world. This approach has been marked by dominant discourses about the value of adult supremacy, where the role is defined in terms of their effectiveness in controlling and constraining the child. This constructed notion of family and associated roles (note there were many ancillary roles beyond that of the parent to support this) created an effective tool for the transmission of social norms and rules and provided a means through which children (and women) were controlled through ensuring they were in a constant stage of dependency (Rose, 1989). Notably, today discussions around parenting models (see Chua, 2011, and programmes like *Supernanny* (Hobbin, 2010) and *Nanny 911* (Wells, 2009)) continue to highlight children's state of dependency requiring the more powerful adult to enact practices that control and constrain the child within the family as a means to manage children's 'development'.

A reason why children were and are seen as dependent were dominant discourses that had the effect of removing children's moral capacity, their ability to reason (Frankel, 2017). As such an image of the child emerges within the family that is defined by what they 'lack'. It is in the management of this 'lack' that the complex connection between the family and the State has been particularly visible. It has over the centuries led to questions about what that 'lack' is, how it is best dealt with and by whom. Indeed, it is in answers to these questions that the structural backdrop that informs our contemporary understandings of the family lies. Notably throughout this long and varied journey children's voices have not been included. Rather the State, at times supported by the Church (for children from Western European origins), have used the family as the means through which their programme of social control can be effectively enacted. Parents have been the tools directed to put this thinking into action, as they are encouraged to take these messages and see them as delivering outcomes that are in the 'best interests of the child' (and of course the State). From saving children's souls in the reformation to ensuring that 'every child matters' in, for example, UK policy more recently, parents are seen as both 'the source and the solution to a range of social problems' (James, 2013, p. 257). Dominant discourses have shaped the image of the child that we have come to project on children within the family. Recognising this raises many questions about whether the family today is anything more than a vehicle for the State to manage children's lack and ensure that they are prepared to be profitable members of society in which the family unit is a vassal of the State where parents are under pressure to conform to perceived norms.

These questions are important in the context of the collection of writings that follow. They are important because what emerges is a set of reflections that highlight the depth of particular ways of thinking about the child in the context of the family. It demands that we must be ready to deconstruct both our understandings of the family and of the child and to explore the origins for those strands of thought that have so defined contemporary thinking. Themes that emerge strongly from breaking down these dominant ways of thinking that have constructed the norms by which we have felt obliged to 'be' family are children's participation and the importance of engaging with relationality, connectedness and generation within the family.

A powerful focus in the discussions that follow are how traditional perceptions of family change if we are able to engage with a more relational approach to our understanding of the child. Any reflection on relationality must begin with another nod to the duality between structure and agency. This was demonstrated most effectively in Solberg's ([1990] (1997)) early contribution on the family to work that introduced a new paradigm to our thinking on children. Her discussion around negotiation in the family highlighted the agentic process as children made meanings, leading to actions as they reflected on a sense of identity in the context of their 'own' family' settings. It is that interplay between identity and meaning making that becomes such a strong theme in Smart's (2007) exploration of personal lives. At its heart this work encourages an interest in the mundaneness of everyday life, re-positioning sociological foci as a means for exploring meaning making. It demands an interest in the individual and the personal narrative they carry within the context of the family space. Extricating the child, as an individual, is key to any effort to bring children back into the family, as it is only then that we can start to see the multitude of 'childhoods' (Morgan, 2011) informing the variety of 'families' that are present in communities.

There is a need for us as social scientists to re-see the individual in the context of the setting they find themselves in. In order to 'do' or 'display' family (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 2011), there needs to be an earlier recognition of the individual themselves seeking to make sense of who they are in relation to the others that are around them. Rapport (2003) directly engages with this in his discussion of the dialogue that we hold internally as we seek to position ourselves in different settings. He focuses on the need for us to move away from an acceptance of automatic or conditioned responses that simply emanate from placing an individual in a given setting, a way of thinking that has significant resonance for the child within the family. Rather, he argues that we need to be more interested in a process of reflection and refraction as the individual seeks to make sense of who they are in the space they are in. Drawing from Cohen (1994), he reinforces his findings 'Cohen concludes, social scientists should work towards "giving people back" their individual consciousness, their selfhoods' (Rapport, 2003, p. 253). It is here that the paradigm shift for our thinking on children in the family lies. If we are to understand the family fully, we need to move beyond those discourses that have concentrated on limiting children's competence resulting in practices defined by power and rather begin to see family in terms of the individual's agentic journey.

As noted above and in the opening chapter by Seymour, newer theories of 'the family' offer a starting point that allows us to consider in greater depth the way in which children present themselves within everyday family life. Such work offers the invitation for us to look beyond the restricted understandings that have informed so much of our past thinking and allow us to begin to see the 'self' in action. Notably, through looking at individual performance within the home, one quickly finds that this is shaped by deeper processes of meaning making relating to themes like the body (similarity and difference) and belonging, which result in the individual reaching conclusions that inform their relationships and subsequent actions. It is through looking at these active relationships, recognising the process of meaning making that defines them which offers immense value to our efforts to 'bring

children back into the family'. The chapters that follow demonstrate the extent to which this examination of relationality becomes key to us not only re-seeing children in the family but also in us 'hearing' children within the family. Together this allows us to re-consider the family itself and to explore in alternative ways those dominate themes of 'power' and 'lack' that have defined both our thinking and children's experiences within families for thousands of years.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE TEXT

In the chapter which opens this volume, Julie Seymour provides a useful perspective which both trace the development of the ways in which the child in the family has been addressed in the literature and which signposts more recent developments in the sociology of the family. The aim of this collection was to see how far we have come in bringing children back into the family in terms of our ongoing project to explore children's everyday lives. From a position where in the early days of the 'new' paradigm of the social study of childhood we 'zoomed in' on the child, Seymour and McNamee (2012) argued that what is now needed is to 'zoom out' and see the child in relation to and interaction with the family. This is the starting point for this edited collection.

Seymour highlights several concepts as particularly important moving forward in our explorations of children and family: relationality and generation. While childhood studies have in the past stressed issues of agency, the consideration of context and structure have largely been neglected. What this volume attempts to do, then, is to provide a series of papers which each, in their own ways, deal with structure and context through the lenses of several different approaches to studying children in families. Thus, we are aiming through the contributions in this volume to re-centre childhood within family and generational relations. Chapter authors have taken on much of the more recent literature around children and family and have presented accounts which illustrate children's relationality, competence, agency and, importantly, the ways in which children deal with structure in their everyday lives. As for the concepts which Seymour identifies, the papers presented in this volume variously deal with the notion of family practices and display; relationality; generation and generationing and family configurations and discourse.

In a fascinating exploration of language, McCarthy et al. (Chapter 2) discuss how 'child' and 'family' are framed in Chinese and West African contexts respectively, and how those concepts are enacted through discourse. The authors convincingly show how it is necessary to 'unthink' Eurocentric categorical thinking. In contrast, Chapter 3 focuses on children's participation in families in Ireland. Drawing primarily on Leonard's (2016) concept of generagency and Lundy's (2007) discussion of A12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), they show the ways in which parenting style shapes children's participation in family negotiations, where parents may override children's agency, but where parents are also trying to pay attention to societal shifts in negotiations within the family by becoming more open to children's voices.

Vita Yakovlyeva presents a discussion of childhood, family and collective memory based on her fieldwork in Ukraine which focussed on respondent's memories of events for the years 1986–1996. Thus, Chapter 4 clearly shows the embeddedness of family, childhood and memory and the role of adults in passing on collective memory. Also drawing on notions of generativity as conceptualised by Leonard (2016), the chapter adds to our understanding of the relationality of childhood. In terms of relationality, Mountford in part draws on Finch's notion of 'display' for her chapter about consent, corporal punishment and sexual violence in Chapter 5. Exploring the home as a setting where consent could be practiced in a meaningful way, Mountford examines issues of agency and structure in children's everyday lives. She attempts to consider the ethical aspects of corporal punishment and how parental practices could better facilitate children's learning, moving towards a model which is more considerate of dignity and justice.

Chapter 6 focuses on childhood in the Austrian context, where Mikats takes us inside domestic spaces where the home is also a place of work. Here family practices and spatiality combine to allow us a glimpse into the ways in which children are active in the shaping of everyday family life. Children's perspectives of the home as both a private and a public (work) place provide a fascinating insight into the importance of the ordinariness of daily routines.

China is the setting for Chapter 7, authored by Zhu. Understandings of what makes a 'good child' in children's school relationships are the focus of this chapter. Here, the ways in which context – in this case the embeddedness of Confucian values – are central in the discussions both of children making friends in school, and in presenting themselves as 'good friends' to their parents. So while parents' and social expectations attempt to shape children's school friendship choices, children also resist that by concealing some friendships while relaying others to their parents. Also considering the question of what a 'good child' is, Veraga and co-authors outline in Chapter 8 how their study in Chile shows children as moral agents in the parenting relationship. Linking children's perceptions of parents as 'fragile' to the current social and economic conditions in Chile, the authors portray an image of children as concerned to care for and in some ways promote well-being in their parents. Being a 'good child', then, is in line with the principles held by parents and the existing social context.

Chapter 9, set in Nigeria, discusses children's rights and children's experiences in the context of family and national constraints. Containing a careful analysis of the 1989 UNCRC and the 2003 Child Rights Act (Nigeria), the chapter concludes that children in the Nigerian context are set outside of the family as they are ignored in decision making and are sidelined even in the face of the rights legislation. Thus, this chapter highlights the disconnection of children in this particular context, rather than describing relationality and connectivity.

Our focus now moves to the Palestinian context, and the ways in which childhood is depicted as nationalised subjects and resources for the future. In Chapter 10, Akesson and Grinberg describe the realities of everyday life for children in the context of Israeli occupation and intriguingly discuss the ways in which childhood is an absent presence in representations of violence, where 'the child' is seen as home, and home as child.

Following the 10 formal chapters, we have included three case studies which readers may like to reflect on. As a bridge between the two sections, Jannings (Chapter 11) nicely includes reference to some of the research reported on in the previous chapters (e.g. bedrooms; the use of Lego; memory) and ties that in to a discussion of sociology and agency. She shares the ways that her research is foundational to her teaching in encouraging her students to reflect on their lives as children. This is what we hope that the case studies which follow will do – that those of us who teach can use these in our teaching to promote student engagement and reflection on theory and experience.

In the first case study (Chapter 12) we present, the issue of unaccompanied immigrant minors in the United States is addressed. This timely research by Avila questions in what ways, and how, does family reunification work; and how does this contribute to the identity construction of the transnational child? Importantly, the author seeks us to reflect on how can we situate the issues around transnational children in family studies, which is the focus of this text.

Secondly, Carvalho and Nogueira (Chapter 13) discuss spatiality and socialisation through the exploration of children's bedrooms. Carrying out their research in Brazil, the authors note how children's bedrooms are gendered as can be seen through the ways that they are decorated. Taking into account socio-economic status, they explore an under-researched group, that of the more privileged child, who in that economic context is likely to have a bedroom, and often a bathroom, of their own, rather than the shared spaces experienced in families of lower socio-economic status. The authors conclude that by exploring children's bedrooms, we are able to see the interaction of structure and agency in family practices.

Our third and final case study from Shah (Chapter 14) takes us to Kashmir to consider children's involvement in the freedom movement. In this case study (see also Chapter 4), we see clearly how memory is vital in passing on emotion through families over the generations. In the context of violence and feelings of hopelessness, revenge and intimidation, children construct meaning through memory, acts of street violence and familial beliefs.

A STARTING POINT...

Each contribution has highlighted what we can learn from bringing children back into the family and how this changes our understanding of both the family unit and of children. However, we must recognise that to re-position the child in this way is not easy and demands, as much as ever, a paradigm shift in adult thinking. The opening chapter in this work uses the term 'emancipatory'. This should not be ignored, rather it should be engaged with, with all the zeal of the campaigner as we seek to overturn years of oppression in an effort to give children back their selfhoods (Cohen, 1994) and through this allow for a new wave of thinking about children and the family.

We want here to say something on 'boundaries'. So much of our thinking in relation to families has been defined by the setting of boundaries. Boundaries in relation to space (where the family unit is seen to be), on roles and responsibilities, competence and participation, and the acceptability of behaviours and activities (and more). If we are to 'bring children back into the family' and to approach this

from a 'new' perspective we need to recognise past boundaries and be prepared to establish new ones. The concept of the boundary thus offers a focus for reflection as we consider what boundaries remain and how those boundaries need to change if we are to be able to effectively embrace children's voice in research on the family.

In 2013 as a parting gift to the academy Allison James wrote *Socialising Children*. In it she offered a direct challenge to those traditional perspectives about the child, which had, and continue, to inform the way in which we think about the place of home. What James did, very simply, was seek to replace the model of traditional socialisation, illustrated by a unidirectional arrow, in which the child was shaped and defined by the structure they were placed in (notably, such that a normal child in a normal home would turn out to be a normal adult – respecting and reflecting pre-defined social boundaries in the form of rules), and replace it with a bi-directional arrow. What the two way arrow demanded was a shift in our understanding of the competence of the child, such that children, rather than being shaped by structure, were reflecting on it and informing it as part of a process of making their own sense of the space they were in.

It is a model that Frankel built on further in *Negotiating Childhoods* (Frankel, 2017). As well as looking at the duality between structure and agency, what that publication sought to do was to examine further how a moral dimension to our understanding of agency further informs the process of making meaning, with implications for the setting of social norms and the way we might think about 'boundaries'. Indeed, it seems highly appropriate that we return to this theme of 'morality'; it was mentioned earlier in this introduction and arguably it represents the most influential set of discourses to have shaped understandings of children and their place in the family.

Negotiating Childhoods presented a framework which highlighted the way structure is processed in relation to a range of criteria connected to the personal life of the individual. These are defined as 'elements of agency' and reflect filters for managing information from which personalised meaning can then be made. A key feature of this is the way in which the individual is constantly assessing themselves in the light of those around them. This assessment of self has long been recognised by Mary Douglas (1966) and others, as a feature in defining boundaries and maintaining order, all of which is predicated around power. Douglas highlights that if we are to investigate those layers that surround the context for social life '[such] analysis always ends up by revealing the distribution of power' (Douglas, 1972, cited in Jenks, 2005, p. 59).

Power, as the following chapters show, has been influential in shaping children's place in the family. Lukes provides a definition of power that highlights how it must be seen as deeply integrated within the social/relational web that forms part of everyday life, 'social life can only be properly understood as an interplay of power and structure, a web of possibilities for agents ... to make choices and pursue strategies within given limits' (Lukes, 2005, p. 68). This personalised reflection on power invites consideration of the active and changing nature of power and how this comes to be moulded and re-moulded by an ever moving assessment of, not only how we see ourselves, but also about how we see others. As part of a study reflecting on children's experiences of the home, Frankel (2012) explored six different presentations of power in the context of children's everyday lives; the powerful other,

the powerless other, the mutual other, the powerful self, the powerless self and the mutual self. Each of these iterations saw children reflecting on how an assessment of power impacted on a sense of belonging, with implications for the way they made meanings about the acceptability of their actions within their family.

For example, in relation to forming an understanding of what was right or wrong, the children highlighted how this worked better within the context of a relationship where they felt 'known' and 'understood' – where they saw themselves as the mutual self and their parents as mutual other. Indeed, a key feature of this was that such boundaries were seen as evolving rather than being fixed. This is in contrast to interactions, where there was a perception of a power imbalance with the adult becoming the powerful other, resulting in direct questioning of an acceptability and an openness for it to be challenged. One example was children telling of a Dad who, one Friday night, interrupted the fun the children were having, instructing them to go to bed and shouting at them to brush their teeth. In challenging the Dad's reaction one of the children said 'it wasn't even that late'. Here adult authority marked how children came to reflect on the interaction. Indeed, the children were unanimous that such reactions were less effective in supporting their thinking about what they had done. Rather the children wanted a conversation, an adult to sit down with them and talk about what had happened. Notably the family unit, due to a strong sense of belonging offered the most effective learning space within which these discussions about boundaries might take place.

The notion of 'boundaries' so far has been tied to what is and is not acceptable in the context of maintaining and preserving social order. This has naturally swayed towards a consideration of 'behaviour', 'rules' and 'actions' within the context of relationships. However, is there another way in which we can think about boundary that might be of value as an analytical filter within the context of the family?

Indeed, we do not need to extend our definition at all to realise that homes remain defined by the role adults continue to play as the powerful other, due to the fact that boundaries around 'knowledge' remain largely controlled by adults. Boundaries around what we know, or rather what we are allowed to know, reflect a wider history of the misuse of power as the generally white, rich, male seeks to maintain their position and ensure the status quo.

Slavery was based on a simple assumption that one group had natural superiority over another. [Equiano's \(1789\)](#) reflections on this were, that it was

necessary to keep them [slaves] in a state of ignorance; and yet you assert that they are incapable of learning, that their minds are such a barren soil or moor, that culture would be lost on them; and that they came from a climate where nature has left men alone scant and unfinished, and incapable of enjoying the treasures she has poured out for him. (p. 110)

Women, like slaves, were seen consistently through assumptions about competence. Wollstonecraft writes how

the minds of women are enfeebled by false refinement ... they are treated as a kind of subordinate beings, and not as part of the human species, when improvable reason is allowed to be the dignified distinction which raises men above creation and puts a natural sceptre into a feeble hand. ([Wollstonecraft, \[1792\] 2004](#), p. 2)