

## FAMILY BOUNDARIES

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# FAMILY BOUNDARIES



THE INVENTION *of* NORMALITY  
& DANGEROUSNESS

*Caroline Knowles*



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*To David, Jessica, William and Sophie.*

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Is it possible to teach the Sociology of the Family without boring students to death? This question comes from many years of teaching family, gender, and social stratification courses in various British and Canadian universities. The family is potentially the most engaging area of sociology. Its students bring with them a wealth of experience and insight gained as members of families. They already understand the delicate complexity of the family: its internal dynamics, its power relations, its subtle forms of regulation, its negotiations, its structural complexity, and its ceremonies are intimately familiar. Yet when we teach the family we ignore this implicit knowledge which students bring with them. Indeed, we require them to “unlearn” it and see the family instead in “sociological” terms. In teaching the family we stress sociological theories of how the family operates, theories of family structure, change, and diversity. In turning the family into an “area of sociology” we insist on certain formalistic and structural preoccupations which transform the family from one of the most interesting parts of sociology into one of the most boring. We simultaneously de-skill our students, silencing them as expert witnesses on how the modern family *actually* works from the inside. This book is a modest attempt to insert insider accounts of the family into its sociological study and to recast sociological enterprise so that it is enlivened by biography, autobiography, and individual testimony.

In the context of what we might broadly think of as a liberal individualism — in which we see the family as a private concern and as an expression of individual choices and preferences — it is easy to give the impression that the “family” can be any arrangement we want it to be. This impression is to some extent supported by contemporary sociology, which stresses the “social constructedness” of the family. This is the idea that there is nothing essential about the family, but that it is simply the result or outcome of the broader social processes which build it. This kind of dynamic approach which sees the family as flexible and in a constant state of change is helpful, but in the context of liberal indi-

vidualism it can give the misleading (voluntarist) impression that we have more control over the family than, in fact, we have.

The family is to some extent a voluntary arrangement. It is contracted and organized in an infinite number of ways, but it is also highly scrutinized by networks of social agencies supervising health, social welfare, and education. These agencies place limitations on what forms the family may take. They administer the family in ways which place some strategic boundaries around what its members may and may not do, and which sanction some ways of behaving and discourage or even punish others. This idea that the family was an “administrative invention” of some sort became apparent in a piece of research I did in London, in the 1980s. I was interviewing social workers about their child protection work and how they made assessments about the extent to which a child was in danger in a family. The potential for dangerousness was then and is still one of the most pressing reasons for family scrutiny intervention and reform. But I discovered that social workers had great difficulty predicting the risk of dangerousness in family life. My fantasy that all children “at risk” were removed from their families turned out to be false, not just because risk was so difficult to predict, but because there were no viable alternatives once children were removed: group homes are notoriously difficult to live in, and foster care has high breakdown rates. As a sociologist, I was struck by the gap between popular cultural images of the family of the 1950s American television variety and some of the bizarre and precarious arrangements called “family” which child protection agencies sanctioned and tolerated. The family is not just highly diversified; it is the product of various forms of regulation and administration. These family forms are not about individual choice and preference, but they are about circumstances, human biographies, and notions of child rights — especially the right not to be beaten and molested.

The focus of my 1980s London study was black families, the ways in which they were “administered” by social workers, and the kinds of assumptions which were being made about blackness (Knowles 1990). In my eagerness to comment on race I neglected to follow up on what were equally evident social divisions in the ways in which families were perceived and treated: class and gender. The poor—and especially

those living on welfare — are the most likely to have their family conduct scrutinized for failure. Nor does scrutiny fall equally on all family members: mothers and not fathers are seen as key players in family life and are co-opted in their attempts to reform families whose conduct oversteps certain boundaries.

In this book, then, I attempt to follow up on some unfinished business as well as to suggest some ways of recasting the family as a sociological project. It suggests that although the family is indeed a diverse and dynamic living arrangement, it is also the product of various administrative interventions by social agencies enforcing certain conceptions of children and child rights. The family is not a matter of individual preference but is shaped by various social and legal sanctions. Understanding the family as a sociological enterprise is about understanding the impact of these agencies as well as understanding the family from insider accounts. In this book I seek to understand the family through a delicate positioning of individual testimony and the antics of external regulatory agencies. The book brings into focus the family as an administrative invention and as a domain of individual experience, and it explores the impact of some of the calculations made by social agencies concerning gender and class.

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Montréal

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THE Sociology of the Family has to contend with what is in effect a deep-seated conviction which is widely held and not amenable to reason. This is the view that the family is some kind of primeval living arrangement rooted in human reproductive biology, and that it has always been and will remain in its current form. Sociology has countered these certainties about the family by arguing that the family as we know it is both historically recent and constantly changing. It has also argued that the family is a key social institution because of the part it plays in reproducing the main structures of societies. The family, it is argued, is responsible for “social reproduction.” The mechanism for this reproduction is socialization — the processes by which we learn and internally absorb our society and its cultural software. Theories of social reproduction and socialization are central to thinking “sociologically” about the family. This kind of analysis raises an important question: if the family simply reproduces what is already in existence, then where do social forms come from in the first place? What are the mechanisms by which the social is generated and sustained?

This book is concerned with addressing this more challenging question. It conceptualizes the family as a social form with some definite conditions of production (rather than a place where the social domain is reproduced): conditions which can be described and discussed. It takes the view that the family is an infinitely varied set of living arrangements. These arrangements are “performed” through simple daily tasks and negotiations — who does what, when, and how — which are invested with meaning by those who perform them.

The family is also crucially generated through its engagement with key social agencies: education, health, and legal and social welfare agencies. The family is not entirely private, but is open to public scrutiny through these key agencies which help to form and transform family life. These social agencies do not directly intervene in all families, though they do have an impact on the ways in which all family life is

conducted. This influence can be implicit and subtle. Agencies develop professional narratives — stories — about what the family is and how family life should be conducted. This kind of professional “expertise” is highly influential and liberally dispensed through counselling and various forms of psychological and psychiatric services. It is possible to trace the influence of these professional narratives in the stories people tell about themselves and their families.

Social agencies also exert a more direct influence on family life. But they need a reason to do this. One of the main reasons why they would intervene in family life today is to manage family dangerousness. Concerns about family dangerousness focus on the safety of children and the need to effect child protection. It is around child protection that boundaries as to what is acceptable family conduct are established and supervised by social agencies. Child protection agencies have a mandate to supervise, manage and ultimately remove children from dangerous family situations: they manage the boundaries of family life.

It is around these boundaries that (professional) narratives on the family are generated. These make explicit questions which otherwise remain implicit: What is the family? And what is it not? What are the boundaries of acceptable conduct in family life? How much physical violence and sexual activity is permissible within the family? At which point should the possibility of family life be removed? These delicate professional judgements are embedded in social agencies’ stories of family life. Boundaries are about membership and exclusion (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992:2): they are the places where actual lives encounter the mythology of lives, where private conduct negotiates the requirements of public policy and the professional gaze of those charged with supervising children. Boundaries are where the family’s narratives about itself encounter the powerful professional narratives of public agencies. Boundaries are about transition and transformation, about contestation and struggles to define and manage.

This book mines the “narrative interface” between the stories of public agencies and the stories of individuals recounting their experiences of family life. An analysis of professional agency narratives is interspersed with individual testimony. The analysis of agency narratives allows us to ask certain questions about the family: How is it con-

ceptualized? What is it thought to consist of? How are the roles of mother, father, and child conceptualized? What are the tension points between these roles? And what counts as unacceptable conduct in these roles? Normally these questions remain unasked. They are not posed in some general sense of sociological description but in specific, boundary contexts, in which public agencies are making decisions about family life. These questions are raised around a particular combination of circumstances: the potential for family dangerousness. It is precisely around notions of “dangerousness” in family conduct that “normality” is staked out. Normality usually remains implicit, and is made so in narratives about dangerousness.

This book, then, reviews conceptions of family embedded in professional narratives organized by a concern about dangerousness. The main agencies involved in this kind of concern are child protection agencies, which draw upon the expertise of psychologists, psychiatrists, doctors, lawyers and so on. It is with such expert narratives that this book is concerned, for it is here that notions of the family are established. Although each nation state has its own ways of organizing child protection there is a good deal of sharing of expertise. Child protection in Canada, for example, draws routinely on American psychologists, doctors, and so on. Britain looks to what is happening on the other side of the Atlantic in dealing with child protection and dangerousness. Spectacular cases of child abuse — Mount Cashel, the cover-ups of the Irish Catholic Church, the concentration of sexual abuse cases in Cleveland in the northeast of England in 1987 — reverberate throughout the English-speaking world. Because of this interconnectedness this book will draw upon material from Britain, Canada, and the United States in making its analysis, with the understanding that these represent quite different political and social policy contexts.

This book conceptualizes the family as a nodal point in a web of professional and individual narratives concerning child safety. The family is a narrative sociological enterprise. Families’ lives are lived and performed, but family lives are also regulated and bound by professional conceptions of childhood and child safety. The family is socially produced through the plethora of narratives which speculate about what it is, and what it should be. It is pointless to draw a distinction between

lived families and narrated families; we can only know about the family from the many different kinds of stories which are told about it. This is an epistemological point: there is no “reality,” only the representation of reality in stories. As sociologists get back to studying stories, there arises the possibility of an enlivened and engaged analysis of the family which speaks about both lives and the administration of lives, an analysis which is contextualized by the different kinds of power relations — interpersonal and agency — which constitute the family.



THINKING THEORETICALLY  
ABOUT THE FAMILY

IN this chapter I intend to discuss the key points making up the theoretical (conceptual) approach of this book. In doing this we will encounter other approaches to understanding the family around which I will develop a critique. In this way I hope both to establish the intellectual context for the book as a whole, and to give the reader an idea of how this approach to the family relates to others. It is thus possible to avoid the conventional text book “tour” through the available theories explaining the family — Functionalism, Marxism, Feminism, and so on — as these theoretical tours can be both tedious and abstract. I say that these theories are abstract because they are not usually linked with a particular field of study or its methodologies. Linking a theory with a definite piece of investigation, as this book does, makes it possible to get a clearer idea of how a particular theoretical approach is used to understand the family. Theory in sociology should be about ways of understanding what we see and study, and not a separate discipline as it is presented in “theory courses.” This chapter does not have the apparent impartiality of a textbook theory tour either. It is an open attempt to convince the reader that seeing the family in a particular way has some definite advantages over other approaches.

This book approaches the family from the opposite direction to that taken by conventional family sociology textbooks. The sociological enterprise of understanding the family generally makes an appeal to a “norm” or a “general case” in discussing the family and its relationship to broader societal structures. For example, it is quite common for Marxists to think about the family in terms of its relationship to the

overall working of a capitalist economy. Issues like family dangerousness are not part of a mainstream analysis of the family, but are usually tacked on as an aberrant or pathological (sick) manifestation of family — the family “gone wrong.” Dangerousness only gets in to sociological accounts of the family in order to demonstrate a new flexibility in viewing the family as a diverse institution. But dangerousness is neither evidence of pathology nor is it one of a range of new family forms to be considered. To suggest either of these possibilities is to absorb dangerousness into the existing frameworks of family sociology. In this context dangerousness needs neither explaining or framing. It is a tool with which to excavate some of the boundaries erected around the family in the professional narratives through which it is managed.

In contrast to these attempts to explain or frame dangerousness, this book begins with what is admittedly a minority whose lives help define the boundaries of family life: families who come to the attention of health and social welfare agencies because of concerns about child safety. It is precisely this encounter at the boundaries of acceptability in family life which generates a narrative on normality and pathology. In establishing what the family cannot be allowed to be, agencies concerned with health, social welfare, and so on, articulate conceptions of what the family is and can be. These are not just idealized or abstract definitions of family; they have definite social consequences. They have a force in practice and legal sanction in the area of child protection, an issue which has become highly significant over the last thirty years. By examining the boundaries of the family we can understand some of the conditions which produce the family as it is today, rather than trying to establish a general relationship (because one does not exist) between the family and society as a whole.

### **The Significance of the Family**

The family is a much discussed arrangement with a significance which extends well beyond sociology to social policy and moral philosophy, and to the very fabric of social life itself. The family is a focus for analysis, intervention, and commentary. Many different kinds of narratives

— psychological, social policy, legal, medical, moral, and popular — converge upon it and shape it into its present form. Each of these narratives has its own social, political and professional agendas, but the overarching result is to make the family one of the most highly pressured arrangements in contemporary society. Allow me to explain this a little further.

The family has long been seen as an index of the general health and well-being of society in a eugenic sense.<sup>1</sup> Eugenics was an early twentieth-century concern with the “racial stock” of the nation. It aimed at encouraging the breeding of the “fit” and discouraging the breeding of the “unfit,” with attempts to limit fertility running from birth control to sterilization. The fit were the socially and economically successful; the unfit were an underclass of the feeble-minded, the criminal, the sick, and the poor. The creation of the Eugenics Society of Canada in 1930 was an attempt to see the nation’s social problems in biological terms which stressed the importance of heredity in the creation of a healthy stock of people (McLaren 1990:17, 107). Indeed, eugenics was very much linked with the “social purity movement” in Canada, which was concerned with temperance, social reform, and moral and social hygiene (Valverde 1991:17-18). In more recent history the family was also linked with the production of social deviance, especially juvenile crime, as shown in Bowlby’s *Forty-Four Juvenile Thieves: Their Characters and Home Life* (Riley 1983:97). Since the beginning of this century then, the family has become the focus for various attempts at population control and social engineering. A “fit” family (it was reasoned) produced “fit” citizens of a healthy nation able to compete with other nations. The health of the family was hence the key to collective prosperity.

Echoes of this way of thinking about the family are evident today. Moralistic right-wing crusades — of which there are many examples in Canadian, American and British politics — see divorce, illegitimacy, single parenthood, and abortion not as signs that the family is changing, but as signs of family (and hence social) decay. Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation, an organization working behind the scenes with the American Congress reforming welfare policy, says:

Illegitimacy is the primary factor driving most other social problems, from school failure to unemployment to crime to emotional problems . . . if the illegitimacy problem is not solved, this society will collapse. (*Vancouver Sun*, 11 March 1995, p. A16)

In this kind of narrative single mothers are seen as the unworthy recipients of welfare cheques paid for by the hard-working and hence worthy taxpayer. Single mothers have become an icon of social and family failure, and the implicit narrative is a eugenic one: in financially supporting single mothers societies sustain the breeding of their less fit members, the producers of pathological and problematic family forms. Social justice at the end of the century is clearly about defending the rights of the (better off) tax payer against the (undeserving) poor. Certainly the mythic “mother on welfare” was one of the Ontario Conservative government’s key targets in the 1995 welfare cuts. Lampooning this popular stereotype, a columnist in the *Toronto Star* (12 August 1995) writes:

She’s the young woman who got pregnant in high school and just kept having babies to keep the welfare money rolling in. By now she has at least four children by different fathers. She lives in subsidized housing, gets subsidized day care and spend her days watching soap operas...

President Bill Clinton’s efforts in the United States to cut welfare benefits from young mothers unless they stay at home and remain in school are a clear attempt to discipline young mothers by keeping them at home under parental authority:

We have to make it clear that a baby doesn’t give you a right and won’t give you the money to leave home and drop out of school. (*Guardian Weekly*, 12 May 1996, p. 16).

At face value these initiatives are about the need to cut welfare payments, but seen in their broader social and political context they are about the pivotal role of the family in sustaining a healthy and prosperous society.

The family in popular and social policy narratives still features as an investment in the future social fabric and hence our collective prosperity, just as it did at the beginning of the century in the context of eugenic thought. Because of its central social significance the family is constantly scrutinized for signs of decay and decline. In this sense it operates as a barometer of a more general social malaise. An entire spectrum of social failure and pathology (prostitution, crime, drug abuse, teen pregnancies, and so on) is laid at the family's door, making it one of the most highly socially invested arrangements of our time. As the reader will see in the chapters which follow, the kinds of family failure associated with child abuse are routinely linked with this same list of pathologies in professional narratives.

### The Family in Sociology

The social significance of the family as the place where many narratives converge in the ways I have just described makes it not just "another topic in sociology" but a central focus for sociological analysis. The centrality of the family in sociology is doubly underlined by its popularity as a "menu item" in North American university undergraduate courses. With the popularity of the family as an item of intellectual consumption for undergraduates comes an extensive textbook production, a lucrative business which, of course, greatly adds to the existing narratives about the family. Both of these factors make it important to understand what textbook Family Sociology consists of. Before reviewing the sociology of the family through some of its textbooks, some contextualizing comments on contemporary sociology are in order.

First, sociology is a *discourse*.<sup>2</sup> It is a set of statements which comment on society in the sense in which de Certeau (1988:61) uses the term discourse to describe a set of narratives or stories which have a fixity as knowledge. *Meta-narrative* is an alternative term which could be used to describe sociology. A meta-narrative<sup>3</sup> is a discourse commenting on other discourses. But it is important to note that, in general, sociology does not present itself as a narrative, meta-narrative or discourse, rather it presents itself as authentic "knowledge" and not as opinion or as a story. However, sociology is *not* authentic knowledge

with a privileged relationship to “reality”; it is a story of other stories — a meta-narrative or discourse. Moreover, it is a rhetorical and moralistic discourse with no privileged relationship to reality at all (Atkinson 1990). Sociology is concerned with the production of plausible accounts of what society is and how it works (Atkinson 1990:15-16).<sup>4</sup> In the production of plausible accounts sociology employs certain textual practices: the presentation of “evidence” in a particular way, especially the use of tables and statistics, and leading the reader to an “inevitable” conclusion. These are simply ways of managing the narrative, and are techniques which sociology shares with fiction. These textual practices are used in order to convince readers that sociology offers a kind of truth (Atkinson 1990:40). As Atkinson notes, sociology “needs to reproduce a recognizable world of concrete detail, but not appear to be a mere recapitulation of it” (Atkinson 1991:15). The way sociology achieves this is by establishing a distance between researcher and researched so that the sociologist becomes the impartial observer of “sociological reality.”

If we see sociology as a discourse, any concern with scientificity, objectivity, and truth becomes redundant. The idea of the neutral observer recording social reality, and the distancing of the observer from the observed so as to eliminate bias, can be seen as **textual devices** used to persuade, rather than as a methodology producing scientific “facts.” One of the advantages of seeing sociology as a discourse or meta-narrative is that we can ask critical questions about how it is organized or constructed. Another advantage is that the social investigator takes on a new relationship to her subject. Could it be that the impartial observer has a connection to what she is investigating? Do the choice of research fields and the approach to the subject have a resonance in the investigator’s biography? Instead of protesting their impartiality, researchers now acknowledge and discuss their relationship to their research. Establishing the nature of this connection, and hence what the researcher brings to the investigation, has become an important dimension in the production of sociological texts. Whereas empirical sociology was concerned with establishing the authority of the text, today sociologists are more concerned with explaining how