

# Family sociology's paradoxes

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## Abstract

Sociological arguments are frequently developed around the identification and resolution of paradoxes. This paper explores the use of this technique of engaging an audience's attention in the field of family sociology, broadly defined. It examines both classic and contemporary arguments about family life that have been developed using paradoxes, such as the argument that lone mothers are 'better off poorer', or the argument that rising divorce rates are an indicator of the strength of the institution of marriage. These arguments are considered in terms of whether they are made more persuasive by the use of paradoxical formulations, and whether this is more the case for certain audiences. The paper concludes by reflecting on the implications of using paradoxes to present arguments about family relationships, in comparison with other modes of engaging an audience.

## Introduction

Sociological arguments are frequently developed around the identification and resolution of paradoxes. This has proved to be an effective technique with which diverse arguments are presented to a variety of audiences. It has been employed by sociologists and other social scientists from a range of theoretical perspectives and methodological affiliations (Crow 2005). Family sociology is no exception to these observations, and paradoxes can be identified in both classic and contemporary contributions to the field. It has been pointed out, for example, that Talcott Parsons went against mid-twentieth century common sense by arguing that 'higher divorce rates do not necessarily indicate a flight from the institution of marriage but may, paradoxically, reflect the high expectations that individuals have of marital relations' (Morgan 1975: 27), and Brigitte and Peter Berger (1984: 181) and Ceridwen Roberts (1995: 12) suggest that such reasoning applies also to later decades. More recently Arlie Hochschild has written about the 'curious outcome' whereby a gap has emerged between the high status accorded to care in political rhetoric and the less attractive situation in which carers find themselves: 'Ideologically, "care" went to heaven. Practically, it's gone to hell' (2003: 2). The paradoxical character of care is at the heart of many of family sociology's paradoxes (Tao 2004), and care also provides a good example of the way in which the resolution of these paradoxes often has policy-related implications.

Paradoxes are used not only to puzzle an audience but also to engage and to instruct (Lieber 1993: 9). They can be considered to have contributed to the revitalisation of family sociology that Morgan (2001) has identified, as paradoxical discrepancies between popular beliefs about families and actual family practices have attracted much attention. Such discrepancies require analysis and explanation, and this has been an important spur to the re-engagement of family sociologists with theoretical concerns. It has also helped to prompt the re-engagement of family sociologists with policy-related concerns, such as those linked to the distribution of resources within families. In addition, these are issues in which wider audiences have an interest, and it is instructive that several of the sociologists who can be considered public intellectuals have engaged with paradoxical aspects of family issues.<sup>1</sup> Paradoxes are powerful tools and, as Castells (2001: 63) has observed in another context, there is no shortage of them in the contemporary world.

### Seven paradoxes of family sociology

The main body of this paper is devoted to consideration of examples from across the range of family sociology's paradoxes. The first emerges from Hilary Graham's study of lone mothers and poverty. One of her respondents expressed the view that 'even though I have less money I think actually I feel better off but I think that is because I'm in control of the money'. The women in her study 'were poor and economically dependent yet at the same time had a degree of control over their poverty and dependency denied to many married women'. In consequence, 'single parenthood can represent not only a different but a preferable kind of poverty for lone mothers'. This account of lone mothers being 'better off poorer' (1987: 65, 73, 59) is a classic example of paradoxes that take the form *less is more*. The household may have less money coming in to it, but the exposure of the fallacy of assuming that households pool resources explains how women in poorer households may be better off financially and in terms of being in control of their finances than their married counterparts.

A second paradox is that identified by Nick Buck and Jacqueline Scott who observe that the evidence does not support the expectation that divorce rates would be lower among couples who cohabit prior to marriage. Thus although 'it might seem that the growth in cohabitation would reduce the divorce rate and that couples who cohabit before they marry would have more stable marriages', the evidence suggests the opposite, that 'marriages preceded by cohabitation are more, rather than less, likely to end in divorce' (1994: 79). This finding has been reproduced by some<sup>2</sup> other studies, and Joanne Paetsch and Nicholas Bala suggest that there are two reasons for this paradoxical correlation: 'that people who choose to cohabit are different from people

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<sup>1</sup> Recent examples of public intellectuals in the UK who have engaged with family issues include Anthony Giddens, whose 1999 Reith Lectures included one on 'family' (Giddens 1999), and Frank Furedi, whose works include *Paranoid Parenting*. Furedi would agree with Giddens's assessment that in contemporary families 'The position of children... is... somewhat paradoxical' (1999: 60). In the USA, Arlie Hochschild's *The Second Shift* (1995) which focused on the unanticipated consequences of the growth of women's employment for family relationships rapidly established itself as a bestseller, with over 100,000 copies sold by 1995 (Gans 1999: 284). The best-selling work of post-1950 British sociology is Michael Young and Peter Willmott's *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957) which sold over half a million copies, and this success can also be attributed to the book's discovery that the extended family had not been made redundant by the coming of the welfare state.

<sup>2</sup> One exception is the analysis of National Child Development Study data by Kathleen Kiernan and Ganka Mueller (1999: 396) which found risks of divorce among the two groups to be similar.

who choose to marry first', and 'that the act of living together itself changes the relationship and encourages instability'. Cohabitors may be more reluctant to marry and may also be 'less likely to engage in the activities that encourage commitment and longevity in the relationship' (2004: 314). The expectation that cohabitation serves as a trial marriage from which only compatible couples go on to marry is not borne out, and the paradox of having experience of living together not translating into more marital stability is explained by the argument that the comparison between married couples who cohabit first and those who do not is not a comparison of two groups who are equivalent in all other respects. In such circumstances *more is less*.

A third paradox relates to the impact of developments in domestic technology. The widely-held assumption that 'domestic technology liberates housewives' is at odds with research findings that indicate that 'housework hours have actually risen with the invention of new household appliances'. As Ann Oakley noted, this presents a paradox that directs attention to 'the standards housewives set for themselves' in the context of 'the "glorification" of women's domestic role' (1982: 171, 172). Jonathan Gershuny's more recent analysis of time budgets for the second half of the twentieth century indicates that hours spent by women on housework have declined as their involvement in paid work has increased, but he notes that his research relating to earlier decades supports the paradoxical contention that 'domestic labour-saving devices may mean more domestic work'. The 'perfectly straightforward explanation' for this outcome is that 'though labour per task declines as new technologies spread to more and more households, more tasks are carried out – clothes are changed more often, standards of cleanliness or cooking are raised' (2000: 54-5). In addition, as Michael Bittman and Jocelyn Pixley observe, 'the aggregate time spent by *full-time* housewives has not significantly altered' (1997: 121, emphasis in original). In short, domestic technology may mean 'more work for mother' (Cowan 1983), or at least not less, and the paradox is that 'the more things change, the more they stay the same' (Bittman and Pixley 1997: ch.5).

A fourth paradox is related to the third in that it concerns perceptions of the continuing inequality in the domestic division of labour that studies consistently report. Ken Dempsey's chapter discussing this issue is entitled 'Perceiving the unfair as fair' (1997: ch.8), and among the reasons discussed as explanations of this phenomenon is the point of comparison with which wives operate. Dempsey's research found that 'wives who declared the division of housework and childcare or leisure arrangements were fair frequently compared their situation with that of other women, such as their mothers, sisters, friends and neighbours, or their husbands with their fathers, friends' husbands and so forth. They said that they were doing as well or better than other women or that their husbands were no worse or in some instances better than the men with whom they compared them. A typical comment was: "Can't complain. Look how hard my mother had it"' (1997: 159). There are echoes here of an earlier generation of researchers' findings about the definition of 'good husbands' emerging out of favourable comparison with the stereotype traditional figure who was 'mean with his money, ... callous in sex, harsh to his children and violent when drunk' (Klein 1965: 167). Wives' sense of injustice can be further tempered if their husbands are apparently generous with gifts that, as Colin Bell and Howard Newby noted, can

be effective as ‘a means of social control’ (1976: 162).<sup>3</sup> Arrangements judged unfair according to the standards of equality can nevertheless be perceived as fair where other points of comparison are brought into play, explaining how worse (than the ideal) can be better (than other known alternatives).

Points of comparison also figure in a fifth paradox relating to the diversification of family and household patterns whereby the past continues to exercise an unexpectedly powerful influence. Judith Stacey has described recent developments in terms of a movement ‘backward toward the postmodern family’ (1996: ch.1), and has elaborated on this theme by highlighting the discrepancies between many people’s backward-looking idealization of family life and the more prosaic character of their life histories: ‘Many who contributed actively to such postmodern family statistics as divorce, remarriage, blended families, single parenthood, joint custody, abortion, domestic partnership, two-career households, and the like still yearned nostalgically for the “Father knows best” world they had lost’ (1999: 189). Jacqueline Burgoyne and David Clark’s study of step-families highlighted the ‘pervasiveness of the nuclear family norm’ (1984: 61) among their respondents. Their desire for ‘ordinariness’ suggests that, to the extent that these step-family members were pioneers at all, they were (to borrow Weingrod’s [1966] term) ‘reluctant pioneers’. Jeffrey Weeks and his colleagues have also noted the appeal of ‘the comforting envelopment of “the family”’ to people in non-heterosexual relationships who live in ‘families of choice’ and among whom ‘friendship circles are spoken about as equivalent to the idealised family (and infinitely preferable to the real one)’ (2001: 1, 10). In a similar fashion, Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim’s notion of ‘post-familial families’ is the product of paradoxical reasoning whereby ‘The answer to the question “What next after the family?” is thus quite simple: the family! Only different, more, better’ (2002: ix; see also Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995: 2)<sup>4</sup>. Another way of expressing this idea is that found in David Cheal’s discussion of Batja Boh’s work which he summarises as ‘*convergence to diversity*’. This ‘*destandardisation of the family*’ (1991: 125, 133, emphases in original) is the predictable outcome of the paradox identified by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s which involves people in contemporary societies being ‘under pressure simultaneously to become individuals and adopt standardized strategies’ (1995: 40). The trajectory may thus be understood as one of a paradoxical movement backwards into the future.

A sixth paradox is that family relationships are characterised by both intimacy and distance, closeness and exclusion. John Gillis has written of how we may find ourselves ‘at home with families of strangers’ (1997: ch.2), and both Gérard Vincent’s (1991) and Leonore Davidoff and her colleagues’ (1999) discussions of ‘family secrets’ highlight that these involve family members withholding knowledge from each other as well as from outsiders. Diane Vaughan’s study of the process of *Uncoupling* begins with a chapter on secrets in which it is noted not only that ‘We all

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<sup>3</sup> This analysis is reminiscent of Annette Weiner’s (1992) ‘paradox of keeping while giving whereby gifts empower the giver, a theme that has also been reported in other contexts such as Diana Leonard’s (1980: ch.3) analysis of parents ‘spoiling’ their children as a way of ‘keeping close’ to them. Ann Oakley’s (1992) discussion of the possibility that mothers will prefer to forego ‘social support’ offered to them because of the strings attached is concerned with the other side of this coin.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Weeks’s description of the ‘moral and political climate which gives powerful obeisance to “the family”, even as social trends and political decisions made or not made contribute to its continual transformation’ (1991: 214) also comes to mind here.

are secret-keepers in our intimate relationships' but also that 'It may be, in fact, that keeping these secrets makes all relationships possible' (1988: 11). Conversely, as Lynn Jamieson notes, a couple may have 'close association and privileged knowledge' without any 'sense of closeness' since 'they may feel trapped together as strangers who know nothing of each other's inner worlds' (1998: 8). The description of the typical mining husband in the classic community study *Coal Is Our Life* as 'a comparative stranger' (1969: 204) to his wife and family is an example of how things used to be in traditional working-class marriages, but more recent studies suggest that *Intimate Strangers* (Rubin 1983) continues to be an apposite term to employ.<sup>5</sup>

What Chiara Saraceno refers to as the 'paradoxes of privacy' include the observation that private life may under certain circumstances be 'more possible outside the family' despite its designation as the private sphere par excellence. In addition, the role of the state in 'the social construction of the family as the space of relationships at once private, intimate and regulated' leads on to a seventh paradox, that policy-makers have a long history of intervention in a sphere constructed as 'natural' (1991: 477, 489). In her recent survey of family policy in the European Union, Linda Hantrais notes that 'Governments in EU15 member states and candidate countries have long intervened with repressive, coercive, permissive and proactive policies to stem the decline in the birth rate and encourage family formation' but that such interventions have at best a mixed record. The pattern of policies prompting unexpected reactions can be explained (in part at least) by pointing out 'that family events are not always the result of rational choices, reached after careful reflection and negotiation'; put another way, there exists 'a paradox between objective situations and subjective perceptions' (2004: 151, 174, 192). Simon Duncan and Rosalind Edwards's (1999) analysis of lone mothers not taking up job opportunities made available to them because of their 'gendered moral rationalities' is just one of many examples that could be cited to illustrate the point that people's behaviour that appears paradoxical to policy-makers can make perfect sense to those people themselves, while the policy-preferred course of action is perceived by them as anything but natural. Family sociology has its own parallels to well-intentioned policy interventions in other fields that have been shown to be *Fatal Remedies* (Sieber 1981).

### Conclusions

This is by no means an exhaustive list of paradoxes that are to be found in the field of family sociology. Several studies of family relationships, for example those in the field of migration which demonstrate the value of distant kin relations for migrants (e.g. Grieco 1987; Ballard 1994; Hareven 2000), confirm the veracity of Mark Granovetter's (1973) classic paradoxical argument concerning 'the strength of weak ties'. Mention could be made in addition of the argument advanced by Bill Jordan and his colleagues (1994) that 'putting the family first' may involve altruism between relatives but can have quite the opposite effect in terms of damaging wider sets of social relationships through excessive and ultimately self-defeating competition between families for positional goods. This is a theme in family sociology that finds

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<sup>5</sup> A further dimension of family secrets relates to parent-child relationships in which children are presented by parents with an idealised understanding of life that is at odds with parents' actual situations. As Julia Brannen and her colleagues note, 'mothers, as regulators of their children, create the illusion in their children that they are free, self-determining individuals, although mothers themselves have not achieved such a status. This paradox is most acute for working-class women' (1994: 6).

many echoes. Put bluntly, the family can be considered an institution geared to socialization that is nevertheless 'anti-social' (Barrett and McIntosh 1982) in its effects, an inversion of the classic 18<sup>th</sup>-century paradox (found in the writings of Bernard Mandeville and Adam Smith) of private vices being public virtues (Dumont 1977). Another paradox of family sociology is Michael Young and Jean Stogdon's (2000) reference to growing involvement of grandparents in bringing up children as 'the new old age', one effect of which is to 'keep them young'. There are further paradoxes where roles typically understood as parental are taken on by children, as in Tim and Wendy Booth's (1998) study of children whose parents have learning difficulties, or Carol Smart and her colleagues' exploration of families and divorce in which children engage in 'monitoring and managing the relationship between parents' (2001: 76), or Julia Brannen and her colleagues' analysis of children 'taking responsibility' (2000: 163) within families. Nor is the theme of paradox restricted to analyses of recent family relationships, as is indicated by Elizabeth Roberts's conclusion to her oral history research that 'many of the changes in the lives of women and their families are full of paradox and ambiguities' (1995: 238), with many of the gains qualified by accompanying losses.

One of the remarkable things about the pervasiveness of references to paradoxes in family sociology is that they are to be found in diverse analyses that draw on a variety of different methodological and theoretical traditions and that consider a range of facets of family relationships. One aspect of paradoxes that helps to explain their popularity is their attention-grabbing character, most obviously when the paradox can be captured in a title such as Viviana Zelizer's (1994) *Pricing the Priceless Child* or Peggy Levitt's (2001) *The Transnational Villagers*<sup>6</sup>. David Riesman's (2001) best-selling *The Lonely Crowd* could also be mentioned in this context, bearing in mind the importance it attaches to parents in promoting the shift from 'tradition-direction' to 'inner-direction', as could Lillian Rubin's (1983) *Intimate Strangers*<sup>7</sup>. Paradoxes clearly have the capacity to puzzle an audience, but this is only a part of their function since (as was noted earlier) they also serve to engage and to instruct. It is one thing to present to people the idea that less is more, or that more is less, that worse is better, that irrational behaviour is rational, that unfair is fair, that the more things change, the more they stay the same, that intimacy is compatible with secrecy, and that the death of the family will result in its survival, but things cannot satisfactorily be left there. Only by showing how these paradoxes are resolved can their potential to engage an audience be fully exploited. Irving Horowitz has commented that sociological writing in this vein works best when it reveals 'the forces at work in moving a specific paradox to resolution or dissolution', not least because of the engagement with ordinary people's everyday lives that this allows. His view that 'everyday life is the location of the social-scientific vocation' (1993: 185, 184) suggests the intriguing notion that family sociology's resurgence from its 'marginalization' (Morgan 1996: 3) may have some connection to the engagement by family sociologists with paradoxes, because these paradoxes frequently involve the inversion of everyday common sense.

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<sup>6</sup> The 'transnational families' discussed by Arlie Hochschild could be mentioned here too, not least because of the paradox that she notes relating to internationally migrant nannies who disapprove of the fact that 'many American families rely on out-of-home care for their elderly' (2001: 134, 140).

<sup>7</sup> Both *The Lonely Crowd* and *Intimate Strangers* figure in Herbert Gans's (1999: ch.13) list of best-selling works by US sociologists.

Mark Granovetter's observation (made in the context of his analysis of people searching for jobs) that 'paradoxes are an antidote to theories which explain everything all too neatly' (1973: 1378) certainly applies very nicely to family sociology. Paradoxes embody the sort of challenges to conventional theoretical understandings that were necessary to make family sociology 'interesting again'; the resolution of paradoxes frequently calls upon approaches that 'provide members of families/ relationships with agency and identify "the family" as a site of change without assuming that "the family" merely responds to important changes elsewhere' (Smart and Neale 1999: 4, 6). The conventional idea of relationships between family members as a dependent variable to be explained by reference to some external factor such as industrialization failed because of its inability 'to provide any way of analysing the variety of family types empirically found in industrial society' (Harris 1983: 70). Other general approaches that anticipated a broad movement towards the death of the family, of which there have been many, also fall down because of the discrepancy between their neatness and the 'patterned mess' (to borrow Michael Mann's [1993: 4] useful expression) that characterises contemporary family arrangements. As Cheal rightly notes, 'diversity of family composition.... does not mean that the cultural ideal of family has disappeared, or even that the family has declined' (Cheal 2002: 20). Rather, the resolution of the paradox of family robustness at the same time as family types proliferate lies in the recognition that it is less useful to think about 'the family' as a uniform entity than it is to think about 'family practices' (Morgan 1996), and that family practices can take many forms. Put another way, 'families "are" what families "do"' (Silva and Smart 1999:11). A parallel can be drawn between family sociology and community sociology, about which Philip Abrams observed a quarter of a century ago: 'the paradox of community is the coexistence of a body of theory which constantly predicts a the collapse of community and a body of empirical studies which finds community alive and well' (1978: 12). Community sociology was revitalised by recognition that community relationships can take many forms, and family and community sociology frequently go hand-in-hand.

An illustration of the potential of paradoxes to lead to productive re-thinking of theoretical positions can be found in the work of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim. Their starting point was to argue that the logic of the process of individualization is to produce a society 'without families and children', made up of single individuals 'unhindered by a relationship, marriage or family' (Beck 1992: 116, emphasis in original). Their acknowledgement of the existence of 'post-marital marriage' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995: 145) and the 'post-familial family' (Beck-Gernsheim 2002: ix) highlights the unsustainability of the initial position when confronted by phenomena that from that standpoint appear paradoxical. The resolution lies in recognition that the experience of individualized lifestyles prompts 'a longing for the opposite world of intimacy, security and closeness' (Beck-Gernsheim 1998: 67). What appears from the point of individualization theory to be puzzling becomes much less so when people's broader agendas are considered.<sup>8</sup>

Analyses framed in terms of the resolution of paradoxes do not have to be complex. Indeed, part of their attraction lies in their simplicity. For example, Ann Oakley's

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<sup>8</sup> Similar points can be made about Anthony Giddens's analysis of the democratization of family relationships (Crow 2002).

exposition of women's economic disadvantage is remarkably straightforward: 'The paradox of working more and earning less than men derives from the double meaning of work for women: working inside the home for love and outside it for money; maintaining the health of families through housework and by earning a wage' (1993: 9). Thus women work more and earn less than men because not all work is paid, and because their performance of unpaid work has adverse effects on women's involvement in paid work. Another simple yet effective resolution of a paradox is Arlie Hochschild's analysis of how an employer may introduce family-friendly policies that lead to more not less time being spent at work: 'In this new model of family and work life, a tired parent flees a world of unresolved quarrels and unwashed laundry for the reliable orderliness, harmony and managed cheer of work.... Some people find in work a respite from the emotional tangles at home' (1997: 44). Likewise, Brigitte and Peter Berger's explanation of divorce statistics is readily graspable, even though it is 'the opposite of what conventional wisdom holds: People divorce in such numbers *not* because they are turned off marriage but, rather, because their expectations of marriage are so high that they will not settle for unsatisfactory approximations' (1984: 181, emphasis in original). And the same could be said about the other paradoxes outlined above, that they are puzzles that have solutions: the explanation of how lone mothers are 'better off poorer', the reasons why cohabitation prior to marriage is associated with higher not lower divorce rates, the way in which developments in domestic technology may not reduce time spent on housework, the perceived fairness of unequal domestic workloads, the way that family continues to be a reference point in an age of growing household diversity, the notion of family secrets and the public influences on the private sphere. All of these involve some challenge to common sense yet are accessible to popular and policy-making audiences as well as to professional sociologists.

This is not to argue that sociological analyses are always best presented as paradoxes. There are many other presentational devices available with which to engage an audience, including metaphor and analogy, shock, irony, and autobiography. Talcott Parsons and Robert Bales were tentative in their suggestion that an analogy be drawn between 'the family in a highly differentiated society and the germ plasm of the higher organisms' (1956: 398-9) but it is an idea that was influential. Accounts of certain aspects of family relationships such as domestic violence and abuse are necessarily shocking, and it is instructive that Sara Scott's (2001) study of ritual abuse is subtitled 'beyond disbelief'. There is also something shocking about Arlie Hochschild's stark presentation of the situation of women 'forced to choose between equality and marriage' (1990: 57). There is irony in the title of Christine Delphy and Diana Leonard's (1992) *Familiar Exploitation*, while autobiography is drawn upon in the analysis of domestic and personal relationships developed by Ann Oakley, whose acknowledgements in *Housewife* include thanks to her family 'for the experience of my own oppression as a housewife' (1976: x) that prompted her to write the book.

The purpose of this paper has been to explore the pervasiveness of paradoxes alongside these other techniques for persuading audiences in family sociology of the veracity of an argument. Family sociology might be considered particularly suited to the exposure of paradox. Leonore Davidoff and her colleagues' description of the sphere of family relationships as a 'dense tangle of love, hate, pity, care, duty, loyalty, calculation, self-interest, patronage, power, [and] dependency' comes in a section headed 'Family Paradoxes' (1999: 7), and it would be surprising indeed to find that

the relations between these diverse elements were not paradoxical. This theme has been drawn upon extensively, and the receptiveness of academic, popular and policy-related audiences to arguments presented in this way suggests that it continues to have a contribution to make to the revitalization of family sociology.

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