

Situating children's family troubles: Resources, relationality and social context

Ann Phoenix

Thomas Coram research Unit

www.ioe.ac.uk



In association with the
University of Sussex



Paper discusses



Leading education
and social research
Institute of Education
University of London

- 1) Briefly: psychosocial; intersectionality; narrative (re)constructions of 'liveable lives'.**
- 2) Short(er)-lived social troubles played out in families**
- 3) Troubles with the families children 'live with' (Gillis, 2002).**

Social is also psychic



Leading education
and social research
Institute of Education
University of London

- **Frantz Fanon (1952)--the colonizer/colonized relationship is normalized in the psyche. Speaking the colonizer's language leads many black men to don a 'white mask' because the collective consciousness of the colonizer becomes part of their psychology.**
- **Relational racialization.**
- **Fits with later theorization of the subject as a product of power, of apparatuses of normalization and of subjection that does not arise only from their agency (Althusser, 1971; Foucault, 1977; Butler, 1997).**
- **Parallels Judith Butler's notion that 'the subjects regulated by such structures [juridical systems of power] are, by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures' (1990, 2).**

Psychosocial research



Leading education
and social research
Institute of Education
University of London

- **Uses interpretive methodology**
 - to understand social life you also need to understand language and how shared meanings are constructed.
- **Requires epistemology that takes seriously the social and societal.**
- **Borrows from psychoanalysis the notion that people are not able to be completely consciously aware of what motivates them or the meanings of what they say and do.**
- **People have unique biographies and identities that are made up of psychic defences and developed from the social context.**
 - Intersubjective, locally situated and macrosocial.
- **Aims to get a holistic picture of the person situated in their social contexts. (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013; Frosh, 2002).**
- **‘Unthought known’ (Bollas, 1987)**

Intersectionality: Knowledge production as counter-hegemonic



Framing Intersectionality
Debates on a Multi-Faceted Concept in Gender Studies
Edited by Helma Lutz,
Maria Teresa Herrera Vivar and Linda Supik

Conceptual language for recognising simultaneous positioning in social categories—e.g. gender, class, sexuality and ethnicity (Crenshaw, 1989; 1994).

Imbued with power relations

Non-additive & non-essentialist



IIRP
INSTITUTE FOR
INTERSECTIONALITY
RESEARCH AND POLICY

Contemporary narratives of hindsight (MarkFreeman, 2010)

- **Adult narratives of childhood memories transform non-normative experiences.**
- **Narrative practices produce resilience -- 'redemptive narratives' (McAdams, 2005).**
- **Autobiographical narratives claim 'liveable lives' (Butler, 2004).**
- **Riessman (2007) often constructed to account for contradictions: 'ideal vs real'.**
- **Well worn/new canonical & personal narratives (Bruner 1986)**

- Children's family troubles produced societally in relation to the place of consumption in society.
- Intimately linked with constructions of parenthood/motherhood.
- Historically, generationally and geographically located.
- Neoliberal context that individualises problems, structural inequalities as choice and ambition.

SHORT(ER)-LIVED SOCIAL TROUBLES PLAYED OUT IN FAMILIES

Commonplace that consumption is important to identities

- ❑ Possessions comprise a representation of the self & are often constitutive of the self & inseparable from relationships (Miller, 2008).
- ❑ Material objects communicate who one is (or would like to be) to others and oneself--material symbols of identity (Dittmar, 2007).
- ❑ People define themselves, at least partly, by the messages they give to others through the goods and practices they possess and display (Warde, 2001)
- ❑ Consumption occurs as items are appropriated in the course of engaging in particular practices – often routine, collective and conventional (Warde, 2005).

Childhood & consumption [& parenting] deeply enmeshed (Dan Cook, 2005, 2008)

‘Economy of dignity’:
Access to consumer culture is a key means of establishing status and acceptance and demonstrating that parents care (Pugh, 2009)

Bauman (1998) parents and children recognise that consumer goods can play an important role in facilitating participation in a ‘normal’ life (c.f. Ridge).

❑ Consumption of pregnancy and child-related products = part of identity work.

❑ Mothers positioned as mediators between the micro-economy of families & what the market says children need.

(Thomson et al., 2011 *Making Modern Mothers*); c.f. Carol Vincent (2012) *Parenting: Responsibilities, risks & respect*

'Family practices' linked with materiality

- **Practices, habits, routines central (Dwyer, 2009; Ward, 2005; Shove et al., 2005; Halkier et al., 2011).**
- Produced through the mundane—intimate relationships constructed through everyday relations, societal positioning and objects.
- **Narratively produced & productive of narratives.**
- **Relational.**
- **Negotiated in context & dynamic.**
- **Psychosocial: Emotions & semiotic codes inextricably linked; desire & agency (Eva Illouz, 2009)**

Consumption marks exclusion, inclusion & intersectional differences

Girl: If some people dress scraggy and stuff you think oh they haven't got a lot of money or whatever. Tramps! (Year 12)

...you don't have a mobile and they're like talking to each other about stuff you don't know about (12-13-year old girls)

Girl: If you're not wearing like the decent clothes and stuff (.) even though they're like wearing uniform (Int – yeah) (.) but then they still get picked on (Year 12)

Consumption can widen social divisions

- **Less affluent children in the UK bullied and ridiculed for wearing the ‘wrong’ brands; sometimes buy to prevent this (Elliott and Leonard, 2004).**
- **Croghan et al. (2006) ‘style failure’ led to discrimination and exclusion in schools. Poverty was often derided.**
- **No evidence that the existence of branded goods *causes* greater conflict within the peer group :**
 - Media and consumer products may serve as a vehicle for undesirable aspects of peer group interaction, without creating them (Buckingham, 2011).

Children constructed as causing family troubles: 'Pester Power'

- Evans (2006) 45, 7-11 year olds, 19 parents--affluent & impoverished.
- Parents generally take account of value for money, educational qualities, and the longer-term potential for enjoyment and use of particular products, as well as

Sarah: My sister is more demanding than I am (.) and like if (.) she wants something she'll keep going on and on about it, so mum's finally gives in and

'It's quite hard for young people to become accepted by their peer group. Consumption is part of that – part of their acceptance. By buying the same things – clothes and music – hopefully they're showing that they're part of a group and will be accepted by it... Now I think about it, it's happening at a younger age. She's 15, but the 12 year old now says 'If you don't buy this for me, then they won't be friends with me.' The 15-year old is now becoming more confident about being a little different... Strangely enough, they feel that school uniforms remove some of those pressures. It's 12-14 that is the hardest age for conformity I think. They remind me of something I saw on television, one young person wearing a tee shirt saying 'I'm an individual', then the camera pans back and everybody is wearing the same tee shirt. That's the contradiction they face – how to be an individual and be accepted as part of the group.' [Mother of three daughters: 9, 12 and 15 years (Consumption study)]

Allison Pugh (2009) *Longing and Belonging* (3-year US ethnography)

- **‘Economy of dignity’**: Access to consumer culture is a key means of establishing status and acceptance and demonstration that they are sufficiently cared-for by parents
- Affluent parents tried to restrain their children’s consumer desires.
- Those who are upwardly mobile seek to give their children ‘the things they never had’.
- Low-income parents tried to protect children from stigma and social exclusion by providing them with high-status clothing and branded goods.

Parent-child negotiations of scarce resources: Psychosocial family troubles

- **Tessa Ridge (2007) qualitative, longitudinal study of low-income working family life**
- **Ridge (2002, 2007) found that children in poor families understood the financial constraints on their parents.**
- **Parents attempted to protect their children from the stigma of poverty (c.f. Middleton et al., 1998).**
- **Some children (especially girls) attempt to protect their parents (c.f. Chin, 2001, US black children living in poverty).**
- **Children who ‘pester’ frequently know that their parents can afford to buy them things or find it difficult to deal with their position in their peer group (Croghan et al., 2006; Phoenix, 2005).**

- **Societal constructions of how parenthood and childhood should be ‘done’ produce contradictory desires (families we live by) and practices (families we live with).**
- **‘Interpellations of impossibility’ (Tracey Jensen and Imogen Tyler, 2012)**

TROUBLES WITH THE FAMILIES CHILDREN ‘LIVE WITH’ (GILLIS, 2002)

ESRC Professorial Fellowship

Transforming Experiences: Re-conceptualising identities and 'non-normative' childhoods

Research Fellows: Elaine Bauer and Stephanie Gill-Davis

- Retrospective narratives from adults from varied ethnicised groupings who grew up in 'non-normative' contexts.
- 40+ in-depth interviews with adults from each of three strands: serial migration (53); visibly different households (41); language brokers (40).

Adults looking back on childhood experiences

- **Retrospective evaluation of family, experience & identities.**
- **Condensation of intimate memories.**
 - Iconic memories
 - Memories as containers for pain
- **Experiences always located in the geographical and historical context.**
- **Transnational families as context for negotiating ‘normative’ imagined families (Gillis, 2002).**

Motherhood is focus of different theoretical traditions

- **Discourses of attachment theory as central to identities & mental health.**
- **‘Emotional transnationalism’ (Wolf, 2002)**
- **Mothers particularly disapproved of in transnational motherhood –‘global care chains’ (Foner, 2009; Parrenas, 2005).**
- **Transnational motherhood raises intersectional issues of how parents and children are positioned (Lutz, 2011).**

Negotiating 'strangerhood' for some

- Past important in present and future, but not determinist in narratives dealing with memories of experiences.
- **Separated in reunion –long-lasting effects (e.g. Arnold, 2012; Smith, Lalonde and Johnson, 2004).
Recuperative processes for some (Arnold)**
- **Popular cultural understandings of motherhood central to negotiating new relationships.**
- **Physical affection treated as metonymic of attachment and proper mother-child relations.**

Psychosocially produced family trouble

Angela: I remember sort of landing here... And this lumbering woman, this big woman lumbering towards me cos I can't remember what she looks like, cos she left at 4, I don't know do I? ... So I didn't know this woman, I didn't know this person... I have never called her 'mother'. (Separated 7/8-14 years)

Contradictions between 'mother' as positional and personal

JUNE: And in actual fact I was very resentful towards my mother for *maaany* (.) *many* years (.) I actually refused to call her my mum

R Oh right

JUNE I would not call her mum (.) I did not call my mother mum until I was in my twenties. (3) I would not- I just didn't call her anything (enunciated)

Pain and mutual resentments

Alison: ...I came here and I use to cry so much that my mum use to say, oh my god, she's bloody in that room crying again (laughing). But that's how I use to get through life you know, I use to just sit and cry and then I maybe would cry for an hour ... my mum and dad put it down to I was being selfish. Because they'd worked very hard to accumulate the funding to bring me over here and that was my ungratefulness you know. Shutting myself away from them, writing 100s of letters to home, to the West Indies.

Mothers and daughters positioned in opposition

And how did she react to that, that you were sick after eating?

LIZZIE I don't know whether it's a true memory or not but I don't remember that it was good (laughing). But you see we didn't have, I don't think we had a very good relationship to begin with. Because I don't think that she could understand that I was in trauma. ...I think she was just thinking about what the effect was on her. ..
(Separated 1-7)

- **Many children left loving relationships and remembered their islands nostalgically compared with (metonymic) cold and greyness in the UK.**
- **Parents employed long hours for children as economic and educational projects.**
- **Expected emotions satisfied by reunion.**
- **Financial support as expression of maternal love (Chamberlain, 2006: 67)**
- **Disappointed if children are not grateful (Menjivar & Abrego, 2009).**

Different temporalities and agenda

- **Parents and children don't know each others' routines, practices and memories—lack of shared temporality.**
- **Mutual resentment about children's pain, work and siblings.**
- **Inability/Refusal to say 'mother' is agentic, relational condensation of circumstances; see 'childing' as emotional project.**
- **Children don't consider themselves well mothered (intergenerational gender diffs)**

Disjunction on changing country: learning difference

Question: Okay you were just saying that it was a real challenging experience over the years, can you say what you mean by that?

Lizzie: Well I think erm, the first challenging experience I had really, after the four weeks I was registered in to school. And I think that was the most daunting painful experience that I can ever think of, and I think each time when I reflect back to it I think to myself you know, I just, I think, after a couple of months in school I really hated my parents for bringing me. Cos there I was with my nan in Jamaica, I was loved and there I was at school. I can always remember the children used to follow you and try to lift, pick your dress up to see if you've got a tail. That's the bitter experience of school and I just use to hate school, and then my parents use to force me to school.

Qualified acceptance: Q: Looking back...?



Leading education
and social research
Institute of Education
University of London

Barbara: Yeah, yeah (very long pause) I don't know what to say about it, I don't know what to say about it really. I mean I can't see it being, I can't see migration being positive personally. I suppose it depends on what support systems, you know what support systems you've got. If there are no support systems in place then it can, I can see it being very very destructive. ..– it's difficult to see how it can be positive in that sort of way.

...On the other hand, now that I'm an adult (long pause). I suppose because now that I am an adult and I can understand the reasons why parents leave their kids if you like, but I think for children it can be devastating, if they're left in the dark, if they are not told why something is happening to them and they have to imagine what it is, it can be absolutely devastating.

Children's family troubles are situated relationally and socioeconomically

- **Family troubles produced societally in different ways.**
- **Lnked with constructions of parenthood.**
- **Constituted themselves within the norms of personhood as intelligible subjects.**
- **Subjection (and resistance) to normalizing discourses of what families ought to be like.**
- **'Interpellations of impossibility' – parental responsibility and precarity (Jensen & Tyler, 2012)**