

Women (not) troubling 'the family': exploring women's narratives of gendered family practices

Abstract

This paper is concerned with examining the ways in which young women make choices about their family lives and in so doing reproduce traditional unequal gender norms and family practices. In a time when it is (supposedly) increasingly easy to live alternative lives (living apart together, for example) a significant number of young people continue to marry and live together in heteronormative family units. By exploring the narratives produced in interviews with 22 young, heterosexual British women, this paper aims to understand why unequal gender norms continue to guide behaviour regarding sexuality in relationships, name-changing on marriage and household divisions of labour. Exploring how decisions are made in a bricolage of reflexive, habitual and taken-for-granted ways, this paper concludes that by piecing together ideas from past and present, constraint is reconfigured as choice in order to provide legitimacy and power over life decisions bounded by gendered expectations and inequalities.

Key words: bricolage, choice, family, gender, marriage, women

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Introduction

The study of ‘the family’ in sociology has gradually been shifting to account for new approaches which trouble the notion of a monolithic ‘family’ acting as an object of social scientific study. Accordingly, ‘the family’ became ‘family practices’ (Morgan, 1996), ‘personal life’ (Smart, 2007) or ‘intimacy’ (Jamieson, 1998). Others redirect focus to family and friends (Budgeon and Roseneil, 2004; Spencer and Pahl, 2006; Pahl and Spencer, 2004), ‘relationality’ (Mason, 2004) or ‘kinship’ (Finch, 2008). Rather than ‘the family’, understood as a unit, institution or object, it became processes of family life, family practices, ‘doing’ or ‘displaying’ family (Finch, 2007). While crucially not losing sight of the importance of the term ‘family’ for public life and policy (Edwards et al. 2012), these approaches allow closer examination of relationships within the family and to understand the construction of these independently from social structure. It enables us to examine how intimate connections are made (or not), how meanings about personal life are communicated (or not) and how ‘family’ is practiced and displayed (or not). A core aspect of this process turn is the conceptualisation of choice and the ways in which it operates within and about ‘family’ discussions.

The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to understand how choices about ‘family’ continue to support heteronormative gendered life-worlds, despite the increased availability of ‘choices’ in ‘late modern’ British society. In particular, I explore the ways in which traditional gender norms are being reframed as choices, often in response to perceived risks, and as an option requiring limited cognitive effort, in situations where alternative courses of action are undesirable or inaccessible. For despite, or perhaps because of, advances in gender equality, traditional and oppressive gender norms continue to restrict and act upon decision-making,

for both men and women but in different ways. This is evident nowhere more so than in the area of family life. The gendering of family practices troubles both late modern interpretations of the 'democratic family', and individualised notions of 'free choice' and reflexive agency (Giddens 1992). Choice emerges in women's discussions in this paper in particular ways to reclaim and reframe oppressive norms. Thus 'choices' can be reflexive but are also bounded, bonded and constrained.

Illouz (2012) notes widespread changes in the structure and ecology of choice in the West, where an increase in the volume of choices and the ability to choose (through reflexive thought) has led to greater romantic suffering. This suffering emerges from a lack of ontological security brought about by the transference of the moral organisation of love and romance from a community to the individual. Choice has therefore, become an individualised process where a decision is reached based on a complex cognitive and emotional evaluation (Illouz 2012: 50). This process has led to a cooling of intimacy where romantic decisions are now based on rational and economic forms of bargaining and reasoning.

Due in part to this individualisation of choice, the term has entered the modern lexicon as a catch-all for legitimising and making politically acceptable any decision a woman makes (Thwaites 2017). In this way, 'choice feminism' allows any conscious decision made by a woman to be a feminist act because she has made that 'choice'. The problem with this is, of course, that while at first appearing empowering, 'choice feminism' prevents critical discussion or dissent of certain practices (such as name-changing on marriage) because it appears as criticising or disagreeing with someone's *choice*, and by extension calling into question their agency, rather than critiquing a practice or set of practices more generally (Thwaites 2017). The veil of choice is also an important part of McRobbie's (2009) vision of 'postfeminist' society which adopts and incorporates elements of the feminist movement into

political and institutional life, then sells restricted agency back to women as empowered choice. In such 'postfeminist' societies, 'feminism' is no longer needed because women are 'free' to consume and purchase their individuality. Thus (post)feminism, gender and social change operate 'within an illusion of positivity and progress while locking young women into 'new-old' dependencies and anxieties' (2009: 10), Thus women (and men) are 'sold' the notion of choice and yet are unable to actualise this fully, instead being steered into re-traditionalised forms of family life.

There are, therefore, two problems with these conceptions of choice. The first is that, despite clear movements towards an individualisation of decision-making, an over-emphasis on choice and reflexivity, as demonstrated in Illouz's account, leaves little space for consideration of the remaining structural constraints involved in decision-making processes. The second is the prioritising of choice above such additional external considerations. Thus while certain choices are made under conditions of 'oppression and exploitation', which actually limit choices available and shape access to resources, choice still becomes reinvented and resignified (Budgeon 2015: 308, 312). A rhetoric of choice in fact allows 'unthinkingness' as Thwaites (2017) puts it and 'choice' becomes a way of perpetuating tradition or societal norms since 'we are all embedded within our society and have desires to follow, and we often find satisfaction in the norms which make people understandable and acceptable within that society' (2017: 62). Therefore an over-emphasis on choice and linking choice to female empowerment overlooks the strength of tradition and norms that lead to the desire to be 'ordinary' (Carter 2017, Gilding 2010; Heaphy 2018).

The problem with invoking 'choice' alone to account for behaviour is that this supposes individualised decision-making by an imagined rational, self-determining agent of neo-liberal democracies (such as Illouz's rational decision-making subjects). In reality, much more

complex processes are at work, processes which are made invisible by the cloak of ‘choice’ (Thwaites 2017). For example, in family studies, researchers have pointed to the importance of relationality in decision making, seeing this as fundamental to understandings of identity and agency (Mason 2004; Roseneil and Ketokivi 2015). Most significantly, Duncan (2014) in studying women in living apart together (LAT) relationships found that women rarely reported being in these relationships simply because they preferred to. Instead women expressed variously preferences, constraints, vulnerabilities and strategies in living with and managing the relationship with their partners and significant others. Thus Duncan concludes, these women’s agencies were sometimes active, sometimes passive, sometimes limited by more powerful agencies such as the child support agency, sometimes a response to perceived vulnerabilities and sometimes more purposeful but still relational and bonded.

In order to examine further the rationale behind family ‘choices’, and the ways in which ‘family’ is therefore troubled (or not), I use the framework developed by Carter and Duncan (2018). This approach proposes that we can understand how choices are made by using bricolage to mean ‘the piecing together, assembling and combining of multifarious resources and types of information to reduce cognitive effort in creating something new as a response to change’. This in turn produces a re-traditionalisation of family practices in the face of social change. Individuals actively or passively draw on ideas from past and present- tradition (real or invented) and modern- in order to make sense of their lives in a time of apparent social change. This drawing on pre-existing ideas and customs enables the well-resourced social bricoleur to choose low energy and safer options (Carter and Duncan 2018). In this way, rather than moving towards a democratic ‘family of choice’, as individualisation theorists have suggested, we are instead seeing a restatement of traditional family life articulated through ‘choice’, including choosing gendered roles within relationships and family practices (in both form and practice). What gives this reinvention of coupledness

legitimation is the language of late modern individualism and choice feminism: I argue that whilst co-residential marriage is no longer widely necessary for legitimate family life or child-bearing, it is now ‘freely chosen’ as a romantic and desired ‘traditional’ family practice for those who can access the resources required to be a social bricoleur. In this way, ‘the family’ is re-traditionalised and re-invented in the face of de-traditionalisation, in particular for heterosexual, young, white British women. While in some cases this reflects a continuation of tradition, it is *re*-traditionalisation when traditional practices are invented and incorporated into the traditional norm (such as cohabitation- the fastest growing family type in the UK, see Carter and Duncan 2018). Moreover, re-traditionalisation involves a re-statement of traditional values after a real or imagined period of de-traditionalisation (for example, the re-statement of moral sexual values in response to a liberalisation in general attitudes towards sexuality).

Clearly it is important to study these issues in more depth. The next section outlines the methods used to collect qualitative data from women respondents about these notions of ‘family’, tradition and choice. The section after this provides a case study of one participant in her own words which illustrates some of these arguments. The remainder of the paper draws on women’s narratives to explore choice, tradition, and bricolage in the family further.

Methods

This paper presents data from a wider project which focused on young women’s marital intentions in an era where marriage is no longer widely required legally or socially but is still very much present in popular culture (films, TV, books, magazines), politics (The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013) and industry (the wedding industry was reportedly worth £10 billion in the UK in 2011 (Hitched 2011)). The aim of the research was to test the claims of individualisation theorists that there had been fundamental shifts in personal and family life

towards reflexive decision-making, short-term and flexible relationships and transitory familial bonds and away from permanent ties, commitment and long-term partnerships (Giddens, 1992; Bauman, 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). To test these claims, young women, who were expected to be at the forefront of social and political change, (Giddens 1992) were selected.

An 'intensive' research approach (Sayer, 1992) was adopted, which focuses on understanding how and why certain things happen and what the connection is between cause and effect. Such research is best at explaining patterns and relations for particular cases- such as marriage decisions- but these cannot be representative of, or generalised to, a wider population. I wanted to know how women made sense of their personal and family lives, what they thought about marriage in particular, and whether they demonstrated any evidence of the short-term, transitory ties noted by others (Giddens, 1992; Bauman, 2003).

Participants were recruited for this study through various means which included snowballing from contacts, using Facebook to advertise the project to my network, and placing adverts for participants throughout various city locations. The project was presented to potential participants as a study on attitudes towards marriage and relationships and relationship ideals and practices in the UK. The only limits placed on the sample were gender (women only) and age (ages 18-30) for the reasons outlined below. Close friends were not interviewed as part of this project although more distant contacts through Facebook were included. This approach was beneficial in many cases as it allowed rapport to develop quickly and put the interviewees at ease. Inevitably these recruitment methods also led to a sample reflective of my own social circle, although this was not wholly accidental as it is this group of young, white, women in full-time employment, who may be best positioned- socially, culturally,

economically- to mobilise both individualised and postfeminist ‘choice’ discourses. This sample may therefore be taken as a case where the central key issues are heightened.

I recruited and interviewed 22 young women between the ages of 19 and 30 (see Table 1) from a wealthy city in the North East and a provincial area in the South West of England. At this age, women are expected to be able to access the resources needed to experiment with their life course (Jackson and Scott, 2004). Many of the women were educated to degree level, reflecting this group of supposedly ‘most individualised’ people, although around a third of the sample were from more working class backgrounds. Out of the 22 participants, 21 were white and one was mixed race, all were British. All were able-bodied, lived in secure housing and all but one identified as heterosexual (this one exception identified as bisexual although she only described relationships with men). As might be expected from such a sample, relationship statuses of these women ranged from single to LAT (living apart together), cohabiting to married. None had experienced divorce although most discussed experiences of relationship breakdown.

After securing appropriate informed consent, my conversations with the women were guided by some general questions regarding their relationship history and current romantic involvements but they were also given the space to direct the conversation into areas that were of importance to them. These interviews elicited a roundness of understanding, taking into account the context in which the talk was produced and participants’ own understandings of their social reality. Rather than accurate reflections of social reality, interview accounts will have been reworked and reinterpreted by the participant and researcher. It is also worth recognising that a sensitive interview over an hour or so can access habitual behaviour that might otherwise escape comment.

I implemented a thematic analysis to code recurrent topics emerging from the discussions and here pay particular attention to gender norms, sexuality and household labour. Although a homogenous sample in many respects, the women had a wide variety of past and present experiences with love, commitment and intimacy. 'Family' is used throughout this paper as a reflection of the way it was used by participants: to refer to generalised notions of family-like connections between unrelated adults in a sexual relationship, and children and wider kin, and involving practices of care, commitment and intimacy. As such, this paper will frame issues of sex and sexuality, monogamy and coupledness as 'family issues' in a broad sense and, as will become evident, these issues were related to notions of 'family' for participants.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Susan: a case study

At the time of interviewing in 2008, Susan was 20 years old, living in the south of England and had left education after completing her A-levels to find a 'career'. She worked in 'accounts' which was good enough 'for now' but she still did not know what she wanted 'to do as a career'. She was not worried about this, however, being just 20. Neither of her parents nor her fiancé Sam (who was also 20) had attended university. Susan and Sam had recently bought a house and were living together waiting for their wedding a few months later.

Although Susan had been christened as a child, this was to be a civil ceremony and both sets of parents were supportive of the marriage. Susan did acknowledge her unusual circumstances, getting married at just 20 (in 2010 the mean age for first marriage was 30 for women and 32 for men in England and Wales; ONS, 2012), and she explained that others had been 'shocked' when they found out how young she and Sam were. However, she explained the decision to marry through the longevity of their relationship: she and Sam had been

friends for many years before they started dating and therefore knew each other well enough for the relationship to progress at some speed.

Susan explained that, once married, she would exchange her surname for Sam's, despite being 'still quite a feminist really at heart'. The reason for this was that Sam 'said it means a lot more to him like me having his surname and as I wasn't particularly bothered either way, I thought: nice gesture to take the name and kind of do the traditional thing' and 'I think his family were expecting me to take it anyway'. Susan wanted to combine her teenage 'rebellious' fantasies of having 'black hair and wear[ing] a black dress' as a bride with tradition. The result of this negotiated desire was the 'traditional ivory dress [...] but it's not too princessy, it's kind of quite a plain, not a plain, well yeah, quite a simple design'. Rebellion as an adult is achieved in an off-white simply designed wedding dress.

Susan's marital influences included her parents who had been married for 26 years and had also married in their early 20s, and her 'close knit' family, none of whom had divorced.

Susan had idealised images of family life but these were also inflected with realism. For example, when asked about the division of household labour and childcare, she responded:

He always jokes about it, if we were to have a child that he would go off to work and I would be the house mummy and do all the cooking and cleaning and everything like that but I don't know, realistically whether that would happen or not. But until the situation arises I think it will all really come down to who earns the most money and who can provide best for the family [...] I wouldn't mind if it was him or me really but I don't want to frighten him by talking about that too much.

She went on to say that household chores were split equally, 'I wouldn't be in a relationship with someone who expected me, if I was a woman, to do cleaning and ironing and things just because I was a woman'.

Nevertheless, when it came to children, Susan would 'personally rather get married before having children, just 'cause I'm slightly more traditional in that view' even though she

thought it acceptable for ‘others’ to have children outside of marriage, this being a ‘perfectly fine situation’. In fact, Susan went on to say that the reason she would prefer to be married was because

it’s still a taboo subject I feel in the eyes of kind of general society, it’s more slightly more unacceptable [...] to have a child before you get married, especially if you’re with someone long term [...] it’s more kind of traditional to get married and then have children.

In this case study there is evidence that Susan is making sense of the modern family through a combination of ‘tradition’, convention and modern attitudes. This is illustrated in her division between what she would do (marry before having children) and what others can do (have children before or without marriage). Despite identifying as a ‘feminist’ she sacrifices her surname with little evident scrutiny of this decision, although she aims for more equality in her household division of labour. As a whole, this case study is an archetype for the limits of both the democratic family and individualised choice and instead encapsulates the combining of different resources in creating a narrative that makes sense for Susan in the context of her life, relationships and her history. This is the difference between what is possible- choices made free from social constraints, tradition and norms- and what happens.

Sex and the family: strategic responses to female sexuality

This tension is also apparent in British social attitudes: while generally becoming more liberal regarding issues of sexuality (such as same-sex relationships and sex before marriage), studies are finding consistently strict social attitudes towards sex outside of ongoing couple relationships (e.g. Carter 2012; van Hooff, 2015; Park and Rhead, 2013; Natsal, 2013).

Positioning such couple relationships- whether married or not- as family-like, this section highlights the connection participants made between appropriate female sexuality, traditional gendered norms and family practices. As will become apparent, ‘the family’ (in particular, monogamous adult coupledom) continues to represent a space of relative sexual security and

safety for these participants, which both contradicts claims to ‘plastic sexuality’ in the ‘democratic family’ (Giddens, 1992), and reinforces the importance of understandings of a ‘family’ setting in which female sexuality can be safely explored.

In making choices regarding their sexuality, the women in this study appeared to be largely drawing on traditional or historic notions of dangerous female sexuality. This was articulated both through the repeated assertion that sex should be kept within the confines of a loving relationship and through the pathologising of those who were seen to deviate from this norm. For Abigail (21, engaged LAT), this deviant behaviour is caused by insecurity, she said: ‘I think people who do that [have casual sex], they [are] obviously very insecure, they wanna be wanted even if it’s just for like a couple of minutes’. Similarly, Mandy (30, married) said, ‘if a woman was sleeping with hundreds of men I’d worry if she was feeling alright about herself and would start to think maybe there was something going on there’. Michelle (29, cohabiting) agreed: ‘I would probably question why they were doing it check that they were okay in themselves and weren’t you know seeking some kind of validation’. Since an excess of sex continues to be at odds with versions of femininity and appropriate romantic relationships, a woman engaging in too much sex (outside of a couple relationship) may be diagnosed as deviant. This deviance was framed by participants in terms of personal ontological insecurity, un-wellness or as needing ‘validation’. For Illouz (2012), this is all part of the suffering now endemic in finding romantic love. These evaluations originate in a language of the individualised ‘self’ where the solution (secure and safe monogamous relationships) is self-directed and actively chosen; even if this choice emerges out of a sense of vulnerability and lacks extensive scrutiny.

There was also some awareness among participants of a double standard in terms of sex and sexuality: while there was some concern for women who had multiple sexual partners, this was different for men:

I think it's fine for a man to sleep with as many people as he wants but if a woman's got that amount of sexual freedom, if she's that confident in her sexuality, I think she gets looked [down] upon for it yeah and definitely double standards. (Hermione, 29, married)

Similarly Fiona (23, married) commented, 'it's expected of men to sort of be like that whereas ladies are meant to be more feminine, more lady-like'. Less critically, Abigail suggested men just want sex because 'like they get more horny and things than women do' – a pervasive narrative based on popular evolutionary or behavioural science models of human sexual behaviour (Jackson and Rees 2007). What starts to emerge here is some reliance by participants on specific gendered understandings of sexuality and sex behaviours- whether critical or more accepting of these. Thus a sense of vulnerability emerges that contests an active type of agency in engaging in sex. These women must be more cautious to avoid negative labels, and cautious in a way that need not concern men in similar situations (the reality of which may be entirely different). The notion that sex is best practiced within loving couple relationships could, therefore, be understood as a strategic response to women's vulnerability in the sexual field.

Women's sexual vulnerability also emerged when interviewees drew on historical notions of female sexual passivity enshrined in the formal laws regarding sexual consent, where women are constructed as the passive receivers of sex (Waites 2005). Thus, Catriona (19, LAT) explained, 'I think girls that do that [casual sex] get more of a reputation but I think then they should do cause it's more intrusive to a girl's body so I think you have to respect yourself more'. Such a biological understanding of sex places women as passively intruded upon, in turn shaping the social and cultural view of sex as damaging to women (and their reputations)

and something they should both resist and control. Thus before entering relationships, women are expected to limit their (outward) sexual desire and encounters, and within relationships, women are responsible for maintaining an appropriate sex life (van Hooff 2015).

Moreover, despite the increased freeing of sex from reproduction through the introduction of widely available contraception, the dangers of pregnancy resulting from sex remain for these women. Grace (24, cohabiting) for example, explained that sex was seen as a greater risk for women because they can become pregnant and, while men can easily walk away from this situation, women have to shoulder the responsibility. Similarly, for Penny (27, engaged), women are criticised more than men for an active sex life because they have this extra responsibility of pregnancy. It is assumed, therefore, that sexual behaviour is biologically determined because of this ongoing link between sex and reproduction (Sharpe, 2004).

Although this link is largely no longer predetermined, it is still commonly considered that sex is a 'natural' biological imperative for the continuation of the species and sexual behaviours are determined by biology. Interviewees commonly interpreted this in 'popular' socio-biological terms where men are biologically freer, even pre-determined, to sleep around ('sow their wild oats' - Eleanor, 26, cohabiting) whereas women should be more sexually conservative and follow the 'basic human instinct that says I need to have a mate' (Eleanor).

This gendered distinction in appropriate sexual behaviour was also justified in emotional terms. Going on, Eleanor for example, commented:

I suspect that women seem to get, feel more of an emotional attachment than men do, men just seem to be able to walk away much more easily and women seem to be the ones that get more messed up by it [casual sex].

And Alice (25, single) theorises:

Women I think get more- I think we are more emotional with our hormones and everything, anyway it's a whole different thing but I think we get more attached and see it as more than that [casual sex] even quite early on. I think most women you

know if you like someone you just think oh this is it there's going to be marriage.

The assumption of gendered differences in approaches to sex and emotions is stark. Illouz (2012) explains that gender inequality remains because power differentials are retained and reproduced through the experience of sexuality and romantic relationships. Men continue to dominate sexual fields where a high number of sexual partners provides their status and legitimacy and withholding emotional attachment enhances their power in and with relationships. Meanwhile women continue to seek emotional exclusivity and therefore, sexuality remains subordinate to marriage and family (2012: 102). In this way, 'sexual freedom' legitimises and organises sexual inequality. This inequality is one of the reasons why the quest for love is full of suffering for women, according to Illouz. As another example, Penny (27, engaged) discussed her ideas of 'promiscuity' and saw this as causing unhappiness: 'a lot more people just don't seem happy in one-night-stands'; a view that was repeated by Rebecca (24, LAT) and Lauren. One-night-stands were viewed as lacking in physical intimacy and romance and were, therefore, a less satisfying sexual experience for women that can make them 'unhappy'. The idea of (physically and emotionally) 'safe' sex was repeated in accounts: sex should happen only if 'you're in your right mind when you're doing it' (Amy, 20, single); if it was 'safe' (Mandy, 30, married) and 'careful' (Michelle, 29, cohabiting and Rebecca, 24, LAT) and 'as long as no one else gets hurt in the process' (Claire, 24, engaged).

Thus we see women drawing on ideas from the past about the dangers of active female sexuality, which linger despite increasingly liberal attitudes towards sex and sexuality more broadly. These ideas rooted in the past are combined in a bricolage with more recent notions of individualised sexuality linked to legitimacy of the self (although in a negative way- see Michelle's comment above about seeking validation through sex).

What results is a confusing of what is *possible* with what actually *happens*: 'plastic

sexuality', freed from constraints of stigma, disease or pregnancy is possible, but what is reported here does not reflect this discourse. Instead, women are still required to suppress sexual desire and be concerned with their perceived sexual reputation (Jackson and Scott, 2004; Illouz 2012). As a solution, participants located safe female sexuality within traditional coupledness, where female sexuality can be freely and safely expressed. In this way, the monogamous couple relationship, as a part of a wider family narrative, is not troubled by participants and instead is chosen as a 'negative preference' response to vulnerability (Duncan 2014). Heterosexual coupling is an invaluable strategy employed by these women to avoid the risks of dating or single life involving fleeting sexual encounters.

Female identity and the appeal of 'the family'

If the sexual field is the site of success for men, for women this site is 'the family' and particularly marriage and children. Indeed in this study, marriage was often talked about as the very culmination of successful female identity. For example, Adele (27, single) stated that being married would 'probably change other people's perceptions':

I think probably you'd get questions: 'oh when are you starting a family?' And that kind of thing which seems to sort of go with it [...] I think people would probably maybe feel, not relieved that's too strong a word, but sort of glad, sort of think 'oh good she's married, that's it, she's sorted now', that kind of thing.

A few participants also anticipated feeling a sense of pride once married, and that being identified as a wife would be a positive experience. Eva, although single at the time, reported that had she married a previous long-term partner she, 'would have felt it would have been a sense of pride in me' and Lucy (30, LAT) agreed, commenting, 'I imagine when you're a Mrs that you're quite proud to be a Mrs and be married to that man'. Ruth (27, LAT) also stated: 'I think [my identity] will [change] in a way that I want it to, you know, I think I'll be identified as being somebody's wife and that's a good thing'.

Not only did participants positively anticipate becoming wives, in addition all but two in this sample (Lauren, 22, LAT and Rebecca, 24, LAT) reported that they would change their surname on marriage. This was most frequently expressed as taken-for-granted: ‘well obviously your name changes but I don’t think I’d feel any different’ (Penny, 27, engaged), ‘I feel it [marriage] would change my identity ’cause I’d be changing my name so that makes me feel different in the first place’ (Lucy, 30, LAT) and ‘I’m so looking forward to being a wife and having my surname changed’ (Abigail, 21, engaged LAT). There was rarely reflexive scrutiny here and most frequently this ‘decision’ to change surnames involved a take-for-granted, habitual or passive type of agency (Carter and Duncan 2018). There was more scrutiny of alternative naming practices, however, and double-barrelled names, in particular, were dismissed: Grace (24, cohabiting) ‘wouldn’t want to have a double barrelled name’; it ‘just seems sort of really tacky’ (Lauren); ‘I think double barrelled names are a bit crap’ (Michelle); and Rebecca was ‘not into all this hyphen stuff’. This rejection seemed to come, in part, from the associations with the upper classes, and also because it goes against the romance of marriage and new-family-creation (under the husband’s name).

Thus, the traditional practice of female name-change on marriage was used to convey particular meanings and for many in the sample it was important to conform to this social and moral convention: ‘that’s you know the done thing’ (Adele, 27, single); ‘it’s traditional and conventional’ (Eleanor, 26, cohabiting); it’s ‘the right thing to do’ (Lucy, 30, LAT). This issue was heightened when children were considered and the appeal to a normative sense of ‘family’ (a couple with children) became paramount: ‘it’s just what’s expected as you become a family and that family have one name’ (Zoe, 19, single).

Thus sharing a ‘family’ name represented the creation of a new ‘family’ unit: ‘you feel more part of the family unit [if] you’ve all got the same name’ (Catriona, 19, LAT); ‘I’d want the

family to have all one name not different names' (Elizabeth, 25, engaged); and 'some people want to have the same name and like...to feel like they belong or whatever' (Rebecca, 24, LAT- although she rejected this for herself). Here the 'same name' is the name of the male partner, not the participant's name. Indeed, not adopting a husband's name may even be taken to represent limited commitment or a challenge to 'the family'; Hermione (29, married), for example, commented: 'me Auntie's married and she's kept her own name and I can- it doesn't feel as permanent I think' and Zoe (19, single) said:

I think like also if you've kept your name it be kind of like saying I'm not really that committed to you because I don't know I think it's just what's expected as you become a family and that family have one name.

This name-change imperative was so strong that it even won out over competing emotions of loss and sadness; for example, Fiona (23, married) reported: 'I was quite upset to say goodbye to my name because I don't think that [surname] is going to be carried on'.

Likewise, Hermione (29, married) said:

The only thing that I was upset about at taking his name was I'm the last of the [surname]s and I'm a woman so obviously I wouldn't have that, but if I had any kids there won't be any more [surname]s.

What the language of 'choice' has enabled is the space and terminology for reflecting on the loss of a name and, by extension, family identity. This is a reflection that may not have been possible or desirable in the past. Nevertheless, the extent of this reflection was limited and the appeal of conventional name-change in order to create a new 'family' unit was so strong that little departure from this was discussed by interviewees. While Lauren and Rebecca both anticipated retaining their own names, not a single woman talked about 'the family' adopting her own surname or creating a new family name together.

The taken-for-grantedness of this naming practice is striking, all the more so given its roots in fundamental patriarchal laws of coverture in Britain (where a wife becomes the property of

her husband). While participants reflect on their ability to choose to keep their own names, if so desired, this choice is rejected in favour of traditional and patriarchal naming practices (see also Thwaites 2013; 2016). In this way, these young women are piecing together meanings from past (traditional naming) and present (ability to choose) to create a new form of reasoning: a choosing of tradition as a response to the widening of choices. This is not just a continuation of traditional practice since the decision to change names is now much more optional, open and discussed than in the past. Rather this is a re-traditionalisation of practice, a re-statement of tradition as a desirable, not just socially required practice.

Again, rather than troubling the idea of ‘family’, these participants actively engage with the idea and use it as a means for creating meaning, value and self-worth. These appeals to ‘the family’, therefore, point to the extreme resilience of ‘family’ in the collective imagination, as an institution offering safety, as a unit to create meaning and identity, and as a set of norms guiding behaviours (see section below). But rather than just continuing to be important, the family is being used in new ways, as a resource for legitimising ongoing gendered inequality- the family becomes a frame through which inequality can be made acceptable and palatable.

‘Tradition’ and household roles

This inequality extends into the division of household labour where not only social norms and pressures but also economic constraints, gendered couple power dynamics and patterns of dependency are still real considerations for many women in couple relationships. These patterns are even replicated in more unconventional LAT relationships (Carter and Duncan 2018). In many ways the following section reflects very idealised accounts from the women interviewed, not least because more than half the sample were not currently living with a partner (10 participants were in co-residential relationships, 12 were single or LAT). Thus for many, their accounts were a reflection of an expected future ideal. Nevertheless, these

reflections can reveal much: about the normative position of ‘family’ in accounts of (imagined) domestic labour; about the impact of gendered norms on these real or imagined relations; and about the choices, justifications and reasons given for particular arrangements.

For example, while most participants agreed that housework and childcare *should* be shared equally between the couple, when it came to their own families and personal practices, there was much more ambivalence. Claire (24, engaged), for example, admitted that she actually held ‘old fashioned’ ideas of what a wife ‘should do’ but would try to live up to the expected norm of equality ‘and be equal as much as we can’. For Zoe (19, single), household jobs ‘should be spread equally, personally I would prefer it that way’ but ‘it probably wouldn’t end up being like that’, assuming here some interference from external forces: her partner’s wishes perhaps, the impact of differential engagement in the labour market, unequal economic resources, or simply the pressure of social norms. Tellingly, when it came to childcare, Zoe would ‘want to be the parent like the one that looked after everyone’ because ‘naturally I think it would be the woman that does the cleaning and the cooking’. So household roles ‘probably wouldn’t end up being’ shared because of both the pressure of gendered social norms concerning housework and the ‘natural’ division of labour rooted in biological difference. It is interesting to note that this unequal division is rooted for Zoe in ‘natural’ differences rather than economic, social or culturally organised divides.

This narrative does not sit easily with most participants, however, and Claire does recognise the anachronism: she has ‘old fashioned’ ideas. Thus we can see participants negotiating the competing discourses of lingering gendered inequalities inherent in ‘traditional family values’ and ‘feminism’ and liberated modern female subjects. The outcome of this tension is to draw upon alternative legitimating ideologies or resources to support decisions such as an appeal to ‘family’, ‘tradition’ or ‘natural’ gender

differences. Catriona (19, LAT), for example, said:

I'd like it to be like my house is a home like Mum's like- she's a bit of a clean freak but she does all like the housework and then my Dad's quite- he does all the DIY [...] I don't mind the whole sort of *family traditions* of the woman looking after the house and the husband sort of doing the DIY and the man stuff. (emphasis added)

Clearly aware of her disconnect with current feminist-influenced images of the 'modern woman', Catriona went on to say that this is not 'sexist I think that's just... I quite like that idea'. Ruth (27, LAT) also learned from her parents:

I've always thought that was how you did things, you know, my parents did it, I saw how it went, you know, I thought well this is how you do things [...] I want to have kids and I want to be the mum and, you know, do the shopping and all the rest of it.

While the ideal of gender equality in household tasks is often acknowledged, it is usually dismissed as impractical, possibly in anticipation of an expected unequal division of economic resources. Instead, in their narratives participants rely on notions of 'tradition', 'family' and 'nature' as external forces guiding their behaviour.

Given the starkly gendered division of childcare expectations in moral, political and public discourse and practice, participants aligned with traditional gender norms even more in terms of childcare than housework. For example, in Abigail's (21, engaged) household: 'we'd take [housework] in turns we're very 50/50 in our relationship' however, 'one day if I had children I would- I wouldn't want to work until they're like school [age] kind of thing'.

Others noted: 'I personally wouldn't like to have the Dad looking after the kids when I feel like it should be my job' (Zoe); 'ideally, if I had my ideal I'd probably stop [working] for a couple of years of having my children and then go back to work' (Catriona- her husband would do 'his bit' when he came home from work); and Fiona 'would want to be the one that would sort of stay at home and look after the children'. For these participants, this is expressed as a clear ideal, while the reality would more likely depend on financial resources

and other considerations (women may anticipate earning less than their husbands do, which would explain their preference for childcare, and/or the expense of childrearing may necessitate both parents continuing to work). In the absence of constraints, however, a preference for stay-at-home-motherhood is clearly stated by these participants, at least for the early childhood years.

Yet, there was also evidence of adapting and/or rejecting these traditions, norms and social expectations. Both Lauren and Rebecca narrated more critical accounts of gendered family roles, even if Rebecca could imagine ‘falling into a trap of doing it’. Lauren explained that using the terms ‘husband’ and ‘wife’ could all too easily lead to the adoption of traditionally gendered household roles and as she explained: ‘I don’t want to end up inadvertently subscribing to that by like just sort of sleep walking into it by being a wife myself’. The way that gendered roles are talked about by both Lauren and Rebecca highlights that being a ‘traditional’ wife remains the default option and that in deciding not to follow this path, they are not only making an active choice but are going against the norm. Although generally more conventional, Adele (27, single) agreed commenting: ‘I can’t ever see that I would take on the housewife sort of role I think it would be more of an equal sort of split’. Finally, some respondents recognised the social changes that had inevitably brought about a change in women’s status within the home. Alice (25, single) said, ‘I just think you know women have to work there’s not a lot of choice really so they’re not just seen as the housewives’, and for Mandy (30, married), ‘the gender divide in other areas of life have come down so it was that you know the wife or the mother doesn’t really exist as much anymore’.

Very traditional accounts were, therefore, tempered by others, where considerations of social change and financial restrictions were accounted for. The latest data from time use research shows that in the UK, women on average undertake 26 hours of unpaid work a week-

cooking, childcare and housework- compared to men's average of 16 hours unpaid work (ONS 2016). Therefore, while tradition and equality both operated in the imaginations of these young women, it is likely that once they had children and established homes for themselves, the economic realities would clash with both imaginaries: for while women are often required now to work alongside male partners to support children (although often in part-time positions), they also continue to undertake a majority of the childcare and household labour.

Discussion

Going back to Susan, who started this discussion, we can see in her account very clearly the tension between competing discourses of 'tradition' and 'modern': she would rather be married before having children because she was 'traditional in that view' and yet would not accept taking on the housework simply 'because I was a woman'. We can also see a combination of individualised preferences and relational inclusion, especially of her 'close knit' family. And there is evidence of the pressure of external constraints, such as social norms, influencing her attitudes, especially regarding having children outside of marriage which she saw as still 'taboo [...] in the eyes of [...] general society'. 'Gender' and 'family' still operate as ideological constructs through which meaning is constructed, communicated and constituted.

In the absence of meaningful alternative choices, therefore, Susan- an independent, financially secure young woman- 'chooses' the traditional pathways of marriage, marital name-change and childcare responsibility. Once openly critiqued, oppressive, gendered practices are being reconfigured as desirable choices because while the narrative of choice has emerged as a rationale for action, the realities of available and desirable options have altered little. Rather than the empowered choice hailed under conditions of 'choice

feminism’, however, these choices are rather a reflection of the conditions under which the choices are being made: the retrenchment, resurgence or simple continuation of oppressive gender regimes structured around family life and supported by a conservative political and economic system which bolsters these arrangements.

The rationale provided by participants for choosing traditional family practices include historical hangover of gender norms, (re)invented traditions and re-traditionalised ideas of ‘family’. These are muddled together in a bricolage providing a low effort and safe response to a novel situation (Carter and Duncan 2018). It is clear participants felt both the weight of narratives of ‘democratic family’ and ‘gender equality’ in their accounts, and they worked hard to provide accounts that took account of these discourses while adapting, moderating or rejecting them. Which response a participant chose depended at least partly on their access to various resources including their position within class, wealth, and educational hierarchies. Thus, ‘choices’ were sometimes presented as taken-for-granted/habitual and sometimes subject to more evident scrutiny, while it is clear that the ability to act with purposive agency is also both bonded (with others) and bounded by constraints. Sometimes this leads to passive agency (taking no action whether consciously reflecting upon this or not) or ‘patience’ (being acted upon by others) (Carter and Duncan 2018).

This bricolage of tradition, social norms, feminist ideas, ideal family practices with ideas about agency and gender also infused women’s discussions of sex. This led to a range of responses, although most agreed that there were dangers associated with sex outside of monogamous heterosexual relationships. In response to this perceived sense of vulnerability and danger, sex was best confined to the safe space of relationships, and marriage as the ideal. Despite depictions to the contrary in British media (Jackson 2005), these young women are demonstrating a more considered, hesitant, pragmatic approach to sex as they try to

negotiate their desires, the perceived dangers involved, and the continuing social norms restricting female sexuality (see also Carter 2012).

Thus couple relationships (and married relationships as the pinnacle) were constructed as the best and ‘safest’ place in which women could express their sexuality. Such relationships were drawn upon and idealised because they provide a known and reliable solution to the problem of choice and uncertainty. Crucially, family relationships, including coupledness and gender normative spouse and parental roles, are *untroubled* by these participants. Rather they are reinvesting family and coupledness with legitimacy sourced through a bricolage of past and present, tradition and modernity (Carter and Duncan 2018). In this way family life and relationships become re-traditionalised in the face of de-traditionalisation.

Conclusion

Here it should be acknowledged that the discussion presented in this paper is based on a small somewhat homogenous sample, which largely reflects the subject position of mostly young white heterosexual women who lived independently, worked outside the home and were able to access significant freedoms and resources. There are, therefore, limits to the reach of the claims presented here, which are intended as indications of certain attitudes or beliefs rather than conclusive evidence, patterns or trends. Crucially, the bricolage presented here was only possible because the women were able to draw upon white heteronormative traditions of coupledness- traditions not necessarily open to all. Thus it should be highlighted that the ability to perform bricolage is always constrained and contained by the conditions in which an individual is operating. In light of this, a number of conclusions have emerged.

First, ‘the family’ seems to operate as an important ideological category for participants in offering structure to their lives, in creating meaning, and offering pre-determined behaviours and roles which allow them to conform to convention. In this way, ‘the family’ enables a

taken-for-granted or habitual legitimacy for action and is a handy resource for making sense out of changing social structures (Duncan, 2011). Women devise strategic responses to perceived vulnerabilities, promote monogamous coupledom, sometimes marriage, as a safe space and draw on easily available notions of 'family' to support this response. Within this, the women also displayed some reflexive scrutiny and troubled some traditional family conventions such as gendered divisions of household labour and childcare, to some extent; thus starting with ideas of traditional 'family' but adapting, moderating or rejecting these.

There were, however, limits to this adaptation. On the whole these women continued to be guided by historical and traditional pathways. This has some resonance with the findings of Illouz (2012), particularly around the continued structuring of gender inequalities in the sexual and emotional fields through romantic encounters. However, Illouz assumes too much change in the ecology of choice and the participants discussed here reported constraints of social norms, convention and tradition, all of which were also used as resources to legitimise choice. It could be argued, therefore, that this reflects a new form of reasoning which enables choice in situations of social constraint: if social norms guiding behaviour continue to restrict alternative courses of action, choosing the norm is both safe and reduces the cognitive effort in adaptation. Confining female sexuality to monogamous relationships, the practice of female marital name-change, and support (although moderated) for women's responsibility for childcare and housework, continue in practice, policy and expectation. By framing these oppressions as 'choices', women can make some attempt to reclaim and own their subordinated positions. Rather than seeing this choice as empowered in and of itself, it could be seen as a form of empowered choosing within the constraints of patriarchal neo-liberal Western democracies (for example), where constraint is reconfigured as choice.

As presented here, choices regarding family life are always a process of bricolage: where meanings are collected from the past, from social norms and convention in the present, ideas of tradition (invented/re-invented), personal beliefs such as religion or feminism, relationships with others and so on, are mixed together and fused to create unique and personal meanings. This form of choosing, involving the bricolage and piecing together of past and present, allows these participants to *untrouble* the family: to reinstate it as the gold standard with (re-)traditionalised and gendered norms around sexuality, naming and divisions of labour. This untroubling of the family enables its continuation as a site of oppression for women- now re-traditionalised through choice and therefore made much harder to critique.

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Table 1 Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Age	Marital status	Education level
Abigail	21	Engaged ⁱ	School

Adele	27	Single	School
Alice	25	Single	School
Amy	20	Single	University
Catriona	19	LAT ⁱⁱ	University
Claire	24	Engaged	University
Eleanor	26	Cohabiting	University
Elizabeth	25	Engaged	University
Eva	23	Single	University
Fiona	23	Married	University
Grace	24	Cohabiting	University
Helen	21	LAT	School
Hermione	29	Married	School
Lauren	22	LAT	University
Lucy	30	LAT	University
Mandy	30	Married	University
Michelle	29	Cohabiting	University
Penny	27	Engaged	School
Rebecca	24	LAT	School
Ruth	27	LAT	University
Shirley	27	LAT	University
Susan	20	Engaged	School

Zoe	19	Single	University
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Source: Interviews, 2008

ⁱ While all other engaged or married participants were cohabiting, Abigail was not cohabiting with her fiancé at the time of interview.

ⁱⁱ LAT (living apart together) refers to those participants who were in a relationship with someone with whom they were not currently living.