Intimate and Family Practices and Social Inequalities

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Introduction

It is roughly twenty years since I first elaborated my ideas around 'family practices' (1996). These ideas were developed, not quite as an afterthought, at the end of a discussion of the ways in which family studies could be seen not simply as an area of interest in their own right but also as making a significant contribution to other areas of social enquiry. One of these areas, discussed at some length, was the study of 'social stratification'.

In this chapter, prompted by Goldthorpe's defence of his approach to class analysis, I quoted Schumpeter who wrote in 1955 that:

> "The family, not the physical person, is the true unit of class and class theory'.

But what was 'the family' in this case? Was it some construction of the nuclear family, was it the household or was it a set of relationships that extended across households and across generations? I concluded that family relationships were, indeed, at the heart of the analysis of social stratification but that most existing notions of 'the family' or 'the household' did not really provide for a fully developed account of these connections. Somewhat uncertainly, I was moving towards an idea of 'family practices'. Part of my argument was to do with the fluidity of these practices and that what may be seen as 'family practices' through one set of lens may also be seen as 'gender practices' or 'class practices' through other sets.

Fast forward to 2016 we find John Goldthorpe, writing in *The Observer*, of 'the inherent 'stickiness' between the class positions of parents and their children' (2016: 36). Parents and their children, he argues, are more concerned with avoiding downward mobility than they are with achieving upward mobility and they will adopt all kinds of strategies, using the resources that they already possess, to ensure this. To put this in my terms, the analysis of family practices is crucial to understanding existing patterns of inequalities.

My aim, here, is to explore in a little more detail the relationships between family practices and the deep and persisting social inequalities within British (and other) societies today. To date much of this discussion has focussed on the practices of lower class families and the extent to which these serve to either resist or to reinforce the impact of structural inequalities. In some cases, rightly or wrongly, these analyses can be seen as 'blaming the victim' (England, 2015). There is clearly scope for the analysis of the relationships between family practices and social inequalities at all levels of society but here I intend to focus on the practices of the more privileged sections of society. This is partly for the reasons that Goldthorpe suggests and partly because of a belief that if we want to understand social exclusion

we need to look at the practices of the excluders rather than simply those of the excluded.

I have referred to 'family practices' here and this will be the focus of my analysis. But I cannot ignore the fact that recent analyses has pointed beyond family relationships, narrowly conceived, and encouraged us to consider intimate relationships more generally (Jamieson) or personal relationships (Smart, May). Our personal networks will include friends and acquaintances and these wider sets of relationships may also be implicated in the reproduction of social inequalities.

Wealth and Inheritance

The most obvious place to begin our enquiry into the relationship between family practices and inequalities is inheritance and, in particular, the inheritance of wealth. There is still a shortage of data about the practices of wealth transfer at the highest levels of society but, nevertheless, the broad picture is clear. As a recent special issue of *Fiscal Studies* points out, wealth is concentrated among a small number of households and this concentration is greater than is the case for incomes. The top 1 per cent hold around 20% of household wealth and this concentration has increased since the turn of the century (Crawford & Hood, 2016; Crossley & O'Dea, 2016). The use of the household rather than individuals as the unit of analysis immediate alerts us to the fact that we need to look at strategies and practices between people who are most likely to be related by family ties.

Of key importance here, are practices of inheritance although, as the recently published 'Panama Papers' demonstrate, transfers between partners and within generations are also significant. Crawford and Hood (2016), using the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, find that'…those with higher levels of education and higher levels of household income are both more likely to receive an inheritance, and on average receive a larger inheritance. We also find evidence of concentration of inheritances and gifts within the same households' Generally, the unsurprising picture is one of underlining '…the role of inheritance in reproducing privilege' (Finch et al P4). In Dorling's words:

> 'Wealth is a measure of inequality and most wealth is amassed through inheritance…' (Dorling 2015(ii) 31)

While Dorling and others tend to be chiefly concerned with the concentration of wealth at the highest levels, similar processes may be discovered at the middle levels of British society. It is here, indeed, that we frequently find insights into the role of family practices and family values in the reproduction of economic inequalities. 'Inheritance', note Finch & Mason, 'is very much a 'family matter''(Finch & Mason, 2000, 68) The overall framework for these practices is testamentary freedom and the overall fluidity of English kinship such that we are dealing with 'negotiation not regulation' (Ibid 181). The practices of inheritance within families are woven into discourses around the way families should behave and notions of good parenting. The practices involve a sense of balance between the older generations enjoying what they have accumulated during their lifetimes and their hopes and aspirations for the

younger generations. A notion of good parenting involves passing something, but not everything, on to the children.

Transfers of wealth do not simply take place between generations but also within generations. The recent use of the phrase ‘ the bank of Mum and Dad’ is illuminating in this context. This refers to transfers that take place between parents and their adult children often in order to help with student loans or, increasingly, housing. The phrase comes across as an affectionate term describing everyday expectations as to how parents should behave in order to assist their children to lead independent lives. Heath and Calvert, using the terms adopted by Finch & Mason, argue that middle-class parents frequently see this as ‘the proper thing to do’(2013). The ambivalence that may accompany often quite large transfers between parents and children is to some extent overcome by blurring the boundaries between gifts and loans. Yet, shifting the lens from family practices to stratification puts these transfers in another light. Heath & Calvert refer to:

> “…a set of negotiations which may not even be an option amongst less advantaged young adults’ (1121)

It is interesting that they note that the larger sums of money transferred tend to be for mortgage rather than rental payments although it would be interesting to see if this is still the case at a time when renting property is becoming the only option for many young people.

I have looked at the way in which family practices can, with a change of lens, also be seen as class practices. Inheritance of wealth is, perhaps, the most obvious example of this. However, as Dorling notes: ‘much more is inherited than money’ (2015 ii)

<u>Housing</u>

Any measure of wealth must include housing and the property or properties that individuals and households own. For many, indeed, a house is the major component of family wealth. In housing we see a major illustration of the importance of highlighting the overlap between everyday family practices and the maintenance of class and other social divisions.

Popular sayings may stress that ‘a house is not a home’ and, indeed, in some cases for women and children especially it may seem more like a prison. However it is important to stress that there is frequently a great deal of overlap between the two. In short there are strong interconnections between the physical environment of the home, ideological notions of property and home ownership and the imaginaries of warmth and safety. (Morgan 1996, 172-185; Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005, 68-86). The search for, the purchase and maintenance of a dwelling can readily be seen as family practices, as sets of linked and co-ordinated activities directed to existing and anticipated family members. This house will be a suitable place for the bringing up of children or for the accommodation of an elderly parent.

It is not just the obvious physical features of the dwelling that are important: the

number of bedrooms, the size of the garden or the garage. It is also a question of location, of being ‘a good place to live’. At early stages of the family life-course, these decisions, at least in Britain, are closely bound up with the perceived availability of ‘good schooling’. Again, given the well-known association between education and social mobility, we have the close overlap between family and class practices. For the middle-classes in particular, geographical mobility (even for small distances) is associated with planned or actual social mobility(Savage et al 1992).

It is also worth noting that the idea of a ‘good place’ to live also includes some idea of a good or appropriate neighbourhood. This good neighbourhood may include the right mix of housing, access to public transport, places of worship, schools and pubs and restaurants. Again we are not simply concerned with physical structures and purely spatial arrangements but also with the possibilities of developing social networks of friends and acquaintances beyond the immediate family. “The family” may be an important unit in systems of social stratification but it is frequently also a question of wider personal networks that constitute the context of class-related strategies and practices.

Social and Cultural Capital

Inheritance, as I have argued, is more than the inheritance of money or wealth in the narrowest sense. This becomes apparent when we look at housing, where a dwelling is seen as more than a physical location. For many middle-class parents the location of a house is strongly influenced by the availability of the right schools and a good neighbourhood. And education, the search for a good school, involves more than getting the best teaching. Dorling quotes Sarah Vine:

> ‘Of course the parents of private school children are paying for the best teachers and facilities. But, let’s be honest: they’re also paying for their child to mix with the right kinds of kids’ (Quoted Dorling 2015(ii) 32)

The quotation deals with fee-paying education but it is probably that similar considerations apply more widely in the search for the right kind of school.

We are moving into the areas of social and cultural capital. Mike Savage and his colleagues working on ‘The Great British Class Survey’ highlight the important of a more complexly nuanced analysis of social class in the twenty-first century (Savage, 2015). The complexities arise when you consider, following Bourdieu, not just economic capital but also social and cultural capital and the relationships between them.

In the case of social capital we are looking at the networks of personal ties, sometimes referred to as ‘personal communities’, within which people exist. Taking a broader family, rather than simply individual, perspective, we are concerned with the children your children play with or got to school with, the neighbours, the people encountered in the shops, the pubs and numerous other local sites and facilities. The notion of a ‘good place to live’ for oneself and for other family members consists of all of these and more. The decision to more to a new neighbourhood, therefore, involves more

than buying a new house or apartment. It involves building up social capital and this social capital, as Savage argues, plays an important part in defining where people are in class terms. It can be argued, further, that this applies most strongly at the higher levels of society where the intersections of economic and social capital are more apparent and more consequential.

Similar considerations arise in relation to cultural capital, all those markers of taste and distinction that play important roles in the way in which class boundaries are defined and experienced. There is a family dimension here too, although this is under-explored in Savage's book. For example he presents various cultural orientations and oppositions are relates these to 'Families'. Thus, for example, 'Family A' is distinguished by a liking for fish and chips, eating out rarely, not going to restaurants and so on. 'Family B', on the other hand, likes going to the theatre, opera, ballet, classical music concerts, museums are art galleries etc. These are presented as if they were sets of family practices although this family aspect is not elaborated. It might be suggested, although this would be worth exploring further, that the more 'elite' cultural practices of Family B are more strongly 'family practices' in that they are arranged and co-ordinated by the parents partly on behalf of the children and in collaboration with other members of their personal networks. The cultural likes and, especially, dislikes, of Family A on the other hand are less strongly family practices partly because they are presented more as not doing certain things rather than engaging in cultural worlds. This is speculation, perhaps, but what is important is the recognition that social and cultural capitals are not simply attached to individuals but to individuals within family and other kinds of personal networks.

Everyday Practices

In my discussion of family practices I emphasised the idea that family life was 'done', acted out on a day to day basis in relation to others defined as family members and in this process recreating the idea of my or our family. I also emphasised the frequently unremarkable, routine, not-worth-talking about character of these practices. Family researchers often encounter disbelief on the part of their informants that anybody else would be interested in what they are doing or saying. Yet it is in this everyday character of so many of these practices that some of the overlaps between class divisions and family lie.

Take 'Family A's liking for fish and chips. It can be assumed that this is not just a theoretical liking but is matched by fairly regular practices sometimes, if not always, involving some other family members. If there is a choice of outlets, one may be preferred over others by virtue of the freshness of the chips, the fat used or the size of fish. The location of the chippie will be part of local everyday knowledge extending out beyond any immediate family circle. The liking for fish and chips and the accompanying practices will be part of defining who the consumers are, our family and people like us.

Similarly, Family B's visits to theatres, museums or art galleries will be family practices although, again, perhaps extending out into wider personal social networks.

These visits will be accompanied by a variety of sub-practices such as reading reviews, joining 'Friends' associations and playing music at home. As with 'Family A' there will be everyday tacit understandings that this is what people like us do although there may be more overt recognition of the educational and social mobility values attached to these cultural practices. Yet further, these practices may be the subject of everyday snobberies involving disparaging remarks about those who go abroad but eat only fish and chips or whose artistic tastes are confined to cheap reproductions. Everyday family and personal practices say who we are and who we are not and are therefore implicated in the policing of social borders.

It is important not to be too deterministic at this point. Family A may include some younger members who develop a liking for jazz or theatre and adolescent members of Family B may decide that they really don't fancy traipsing around museums and art galleries and wish to find their pleasures elsewhere. The permeability of family and personal community boundaries reflects and reinforces the permeability of class and other social boundaries.

Legitimations

There is a strand in Conservative thought that argues that the ties that bind us move outwards from our families, to our local communities and outwards further to our nation. (Although not, probably, any further, say to Europe). It is in the family that individuals learn wider loyalties and allegiances. There were echoes of this in Prime Minister Cameron's various references to 'the big society'. It was on this basis that some thinkers claimed that the family was the basic unit of society.

This is not the place for a detailed exposition or critique of this argument. What can be noted, however, is that elaborations of who we are also include statements as to who we are not and that a sense of who is included implies a sense of those who are excluded. Further this may be extended to an understanding of the social divisions that cut across these other ideas of inclusion. In other words, in family practices and family discourses we may find legitimations for class and other social divisions.

Danny Dowling explores five beliefs that he sees as upholding injustice in modern society: elitism, exclusion, prejudice, greed and despair. (Dorling 2015 (ii)) At least some of these can be seen as being elaborated in family practices and discourses. As we routinely do things with reference to and in the presence of other people and insofar as these others frequently include those we define as 'family' so we build up a sense of the everyday world that excludes and divides as well as uniting and including. As Dorling writes:

> 'A belief in inheritance both creates and maintains the ideas of racial groups and racial differences' (Dorling 2015(ii) 208)

More generally, a belief in 'genes' and their significance provides a link between family practices and the persistence of social inequalities. Even without this, a belief in the naturalness of looking after ones own contributes to the legitimisation of such hierarchical differences. What is important here is that these legitimations do

not manifest themselves in the form of highly articulated and loudly announced statements but are part of the everyday practices as people go about their business of what they understand to be normal family lives. 'Putting the family first' (Jordan et al, 1994) would seem to be a widely held and 'natural' belief and one which plays a part in the 'inherent stickiness' (Goldthorpe) of the present British class system.

Concluding Remarks

I should recognise that my approach to family practices does not tackle issues of social inequalities directly although they are not entirely ignored. Indeed, I began to elaborate the idea of family practices in response to an argument that family studies could be seen as being at the heart of other areas of social enquiry, social stratification included. With a different pair of lens, family practices could be seen as class practices.

The most usual way of viewing the relationship between inequalities and family life is to see the former acting upon the latter, especially for the poorer or most disadvantaged classes. This is broadly the approach we find in *The Spirit Level* for example. However I have argued that it is important also to see things the other way around whereby family practices impact upon systems of social stratification. This is especially true for those that occupy elite and near elite positions for occupants of these positions help define the rules by which inequalities are maintained.

We see this most obviously in terms of inheritance of wealth and, again, this is most clearly discernable at the higher levels. But wealth is not all that is inherited and it is important to look at the whole inter-related package of economic, social and cultural capitals. Within these a variety of everyday family practices play their part. They also play their part, as I argued, in the legitimation of social inequalities.

I have also argued that while my focus here, and elsewhere, has been on *family* practices it must also be realised that individual intimate and personal lives are not totally subsumed by family relationships. In looking at the reproduction of social inequalities, we need to look at the wider personal communities and social networks within which people live their everyday lives. Again, this may sometimes require putting on a different pair of spectacles. What may seem to be a network of friends and acquaintances on the inside may be seen as a set of cronies, perhaps an 'old boys' network' from the outside. Although my emphasis has been on family relationships a fuller analysis must take into account these wider sets.

It is important to stress the difference between what the Great British Class Survey researchers define as the 'Elite' and those somewhat lower down such as the 'Established Middle Class', the 'Technical middle class' and the 'New Affluent Workers'. While at all levels everyday family and intimate practices play their part in the reproduction and legitimation of inequalities, it is likely that these are more explicit and certainly more consequential at the highest levels. The motto of the Curzon family (although perhaps originally a form of war cry) probably applies to many elite families: ' Let Curzon Hold What Curzon held'. In talking about social exclusion it is always vital to study the strategies and practices of the excluders.

Lower down, perhaps, things are more complex and the varied mixes of economic, social and cultural capitals combine with strategies to do the best for oneself and ones children or in lines with routine understandings of everyday life. This is not because members of these classes are consciously conspiring to reproduce the existing social order; in many cases they are simply trying to do the best with the hands they are played. Everyday understandings about how families should behave - everyday codes of ethics -are mingled with the world building practices based on the deployment of different capitals. For this reason, the 'Bank of Mum and Dad' is not likely to go out of business for some time yet.

What is important is that there should be continuing meetings between studies of social class and other inequalities and studies of everyday intimate and family practices. Indeed, much of the work is already done; but remains to be put together and re-read. There is also plenty of scope for the critical reading of biographical material and other accounts which illuminate family practices over time. Whatever we do, we need to keep several pairs of spectacles close to hand.