

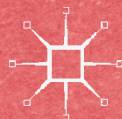
REINVENTING
COUPLES

TRADITION,
AGENCY AND
BRICOLAGE

JULIA
CARTER

SIMON
DUNCAN

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Julia Carter • Simon Duncan

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Tradition, Agency and Bricolage

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macmillan

Julia Carter
School of Psychology, Politics and Sociology
Canterbury Christ Church University
Canterbury, UK

Simon Duncan
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Bradford
Bradford, UK

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1

Introduction

Change and Tradition in Personal Life: A Case Study

The ideas in this book emerged from our own empirical research on contemporary personal life. Like many other researchers, we found a mismatch between what we actually found ‘on the ground’ and the leading conceptualisation of what we should have found, as provided by individualisation theories. In these accounts, tradition and traditional bonds and beliefs become increasingly enfeebled and irrelevant in modern societies, causing structuring social forms to atrophy. Expectations and understandings of ‘family’ are just one example, notoriously dismissed by Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim as a ‘zombie category’—still existing in some debased form but really dead (2002: 204). Such detraditionalisation then leaves individuals to ‘decide for themselves’ how to conduct their personal lives in a ‘search for new ways of living’ according to Beck-Gernsheim in her book ‘Reinventing the Family’—indicatively subtitled ‘In search of new lifestyles’ (2002: xii). This conclusion rests on implicit assumptions about agency: in late modern societies individual agents discursively and reflexively create their own biographies just as in historical societies, people acted habitually according to tradition.

There is a glaring problem with individualisation theories. As Carol Smart puts it, they are ‘largely devoid of empirical support’ (2007: 20) and simply do not match with contemporary personal lives—nor, we might add, historical lives (Duncan 2011a). Theorists have confused what people might potentially do with what they usually do, a confusion buttressed by a romanticised, one-sided view of agency which overemphasises the exotic and neglects the unmarked majority (Brekhus 1998; Duncan and Smith 2006). But, despite this empirical mismatch, individualisation theories remain dominant as a means of framing research on families and personal lives, partly for lack of an alternative. It is perhaps individualisation theories that have fallen under the ‘zombie category’.

In this book, we work towards an alternative framing which can provide a more helpful account of the ways in which people build their personal lives. In contrast to individualisation theories, we stress the mixing of ‘tradition’ and ‘modern’. People use, adapt or even invent tradition as they improvise family practices in new or changing situations. This is a process of bricolage as people make do with what they have at hand (Duncan 2011b). Similarly, we emphasise the mixing of ‘the individual’ with ‘the social’. People make their decisions and choices in relation to others, sometimes as individuals, sometimes as collectives or institutions. Throughout, the nature of their agency varies in different circumstances. De-traditionalisation also involves re-traditionalisation, and individualisation involves relationality.

In this introduction, we introduce these themes by drawing from one particular case study interview from earlier research. This allows us to point to some of the fundamental concerns of this book: tradition, relationality, agency, and bricolage. It should be noted here that the voices represented in this book do not represent the UK’s full diversity of ethnicities. Sociology in general, and much of family studies in particular, have a problem with race- where whiteness and white families are still considered the norm and too often this is not called into question. Often this is due to methodological approaches which target ‘known’ groups, available participants or majority groups, all of which exclude those who are less visible, less accessible or in a minority. This book presents data from a number of different studies, none of which were explicitly focused

on majority white populations but all of which, nonetheless, recruited samples with majority white participants. This includes the nationally representative surveys used in Chapters 4 and 6 on cohabitation and living apart together and the 'elderly' survey material used in Chapter 2, just as much as the small qualitative samples supporting the chapters on marriage, name change and weddings. Exceptionally, the qualitative interviews with cohabitants were supplemented by small purposive samples of cohabitants of African-Caribbean and Asian heritage, groups which displayed marked differences from the white 'norm'. Although not always accounting for ethnic diversity, we feel that our arguments concerning tradition, agency and bricolage may be abstracted from particular identity positions to explain wider social processes. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that theory built on the study of majority white groups and individuals will necessarily produce a biased account.

Christina

Christina¹ was interviewed in 1999 as part of a project concerned with how mothers combine paid work and motherhood (see Appendix 1). Aged 41, white and married, she had five dependent sons aged 2–12. Her major job was running the house, and caring for her children, her husband, and an ailing father. Timed around this caring work, she was also employed 25 hours a week in a poorly paid part-time job as a factory cleaner. This employment gave her some financial independence and she spent the small income it provided on her own car, holidays, children's treats, and horse riding.

At first, acting as unpaid homemaker and carer combined with some part-time unskilled work appears as a rational response to Christina's lack of human capital (Christina had only low-level school leaving qualifications and her employment experience was all in unskilled work). This role also fits the 'traditional' normative expectation that mothers, wives, and daughters should take on unpaid caring as required. Similarly, her husband worked full-time as a foreman painter and decorator, and worked away from home most weeks. He saw himself as the 'breadwinner', and while he undertook do-it-yourself (DIY) home improvements

and enjoyed cooking as a 'hobby', took on little domestic work. Employed full-time at the birth of her first child, Christina had gradually relinquished identity and role as a worker. Her paid employment was now subordinate to a primary caring role. Established constraints of class and gender had certainly not disappeared for Christina.

But this was not the whole story. For Christina was not content with simply accepting this combination of low-level employment and unpaid care, and as the children got older her ambitions lay with job fulfilment and 'career':

I'm still deciding what to do with my life at this age...all I've done I've had babies and done menial jobs ... 'cos I'm quite a caring person and I feel like I could do summat useful and more than being a cleaner.

What was more, Christina was doing something about this. She had just started a course that would qualify her to be a childcare worker, and in the meantime she was planning to leave her cleaning job for a better position assisting in a nature reserve. In agentic terms, she had rejected 'patency' (having things done to her) and was discursively and purposefully taking action to realise a project of the self.

However, Christina's individualistic employment project did not exist in a social vacuum. In fact, her plans for self-improvement clashed with her own given understandings of proper motherhood and those of her husband and her neighbours. First and foremost, Christina took the view that 'the mum should be with the kids,' and that mothers provided the 'ideal' childcare. The childcare arrangements she had made with friends and an aunt (her own mother had died) were not just unsatisfactory for the children, but displaced her own emotional engagement with her children:

I couldn't see t'point of having a child and then leaving him with somebody else ...I felt like everything were pointless and I thought I'm having these babies and I'm going back to work and I don't see 'em and seem like I'm missing out on things with me children.

The fact that a carer's role also meant taking on nearly all domestic work 'didn't bother' her. As for mothers who worked full-time, she just could not 'see why they've had their kids... I can't see why they want to go back to work

when they've had a baby.' In contrast mothers who give up work altogether to stay at home 'are very brave and I think they've made the right decision'.

So after every child, at the end of each period of maternity leave, she told herself she would leave work to look after her children full-time. But instead she went straight back to work, at first full-time 'but hated every minute, I didn't like it....through all that time I thought I'm going to leave, I'm going to leave, I don't like this, I couldn't settle'. The only reason she had kept at least some employment was 'just financial financial, financial, it were financial, yeah, yeah. I would [have left paid work] if finances had have been better yes I would have, I would have.' In fact, she would reverse government policy to support what she saw as proper motherhood:

I think they encourage people to go back to work but - it would encourage mothers to stop at home if they paid 'em to stay at home 'cos this were summat that were mentioned once at Government, if there'd been summat in in t' law ye know that gave me £50 or £80 a week to stop and look after me kids.

So, on the one hand Christina wanted better paid and more fulfilling employment, but at the same time she experienced paid work as a cowardly retreat from proper behaviour as a mother, and as a risk to the fulfilment motherhood brings: 'if I'd just been a bit more braver and I wish I'd have stayed at home with the kids.'

The salience of this view was buttressed by Christina's husband, Richard, who strongly advocated a breadwinner/homemaker-carer arrangement, even to the extent of undermining her part-time job: 'he sees [himself] as breadwinner, he says you leave your job, you don't need to work, you stay at home and I'll support yer.' From Richard's viewpoint, this was fair enough. As Christina relates:

after a bit of time unemployed and with not having a job I felt like I weren't contributing and although - me husband always says "you are contributing because you're bringing us family up and it's what you wanted in t' first place."

Richard (who was interviewed separately) saw this gendered caring as natural:

To look after children, oh it's gotta be mum hasn't it, always has...I've always thought the mum should be with the kids, I've always thought that, it's an old fashioned thing but that's the way I've always been, the mum should be there for the kids.

Similarly, a wife's domestic role was a historical fact:

It's always more the wife, it always is, it's always been through hundreds and thousands of years, it's always been t'woman... You'll sit down, you'll get your tea made which is nice, you come home from work, even though she's been at work, you let 'em do it.

Indeed, in his own childhood:

Me dad did 'nowt, nothing in t'house, nothing, nothing, all me dad did were go to work, come home, entertain us for a couple of hours then go to t'pub at night. As everybody did then... me mam did everything, yeah.

This gendered view was replicated by neighbours who, according to Christina, made fun of her for going out to work: 'they're not patting yer on t' back, they're taking t' fun on yer - making fun on yer 'cos you work.'

All this was consistent with normative views in the local area. Christina and Richard lived in an ex-coal mining village near Barnsley in South Yorkshire, had both been brought up locally, and made their social lives there. This region is notorious as a type-case male-breadwinner/female-homemaker area both by repute and on an aggregate statistical level (Duncan and Smith 2002). In the interview sample, most male partners had been miners or, if younger, had expected to be so like their fathers and grandfathers. Interviewees' mothers had been carers or at most part-time workers. The economic basis for these roles had weakened or even disintegrated as mining jobs disappeared, with fathers now in low wage unskilled or casual work and mothers thrown into a more active wage-earning role. Arthur was an example, coming from:

a mining family, all me parents have been miners and miners and miners over the years but obviously the pits have died and so has the mining community but other than that, we still find jobs and still work.

But the local social definition of proper gender roles still referred to this more settled past (it was disturbing that several male partners were said to be depressed or ill because of this disjuncture in their expected biographies).

Christina did not uncritically accept this tradition, whether expressed by neighbours or even her husband, because of the threat to what financial independence she did have:

My husband always, always wanted me to stop working, yeah. Ye know, this were always a bit of friction between me and Richard 'cos he'd always say we'll cope and we'll manage ye know but I were always, I've always had money so I were always scared of just relying on his wage ... I've always had a job, from 19 I've always worked and I've always had me own money.

This 'friction' had led Christian to be economical with the truth. For Richard knew his wife was leaving the factory cleaning job, and thus believed she would be unemployed, leaving him as complete breadwinner. But Christina had not told him about the replacement job in the nature reserve: 'Oh yeah, oh yeah, yeah 'cos he thinks I'm leaving in October but I'm not.' Christina's critique of this tradition was only partial, however, limited to her appreciation of financial pressures; her view of proper motherhood—unemployed and at home with the children—remained dominant. Consequently, she would ideally have accepted a traditional homemaker–carer role: 'but as I say, if things had been, if he'd have been in a better paid job, I could have packed it [employment] in.'

As we have seen, Christina understood emotional engagement with children as being a mum at home. She particularly liked caring for babies and infants and, now that her youngest had turned two years old, wistfully wanted another child: 'just having children, every aspect of having children is enjoyable, yeah. Yeah, I want another one, yeah. He's had a vasectomy so we've no chance.' This emotional interpretation of her gendered role partly related to a strong identification with her own mother, who had died when Christina was in her twenties. Her own household divisions of labour followed her mother's traditional breadwinner/homemaker model: her father had a fairly well paid job that meant that he was away a lot, while her mother focussed on her child's needs and domestic work, although also worked part-time on the night shift. For, like Christina, her mother had valued her own wage as a means to indepen-

dence as well as supplementing household income. But in one important respect Christina differed from her mother; indeed she was strongly critical. For Christina was an only child, and experienced that as ‘rubbish’ which gave her no ‘social upbringing’; she wanted to improve upon this and saw this as the explanation for planning her own large family: ‘I think that’s what did it with me wanting a big family ’cos it’s what I’d missed.’

Superficially, Christina’s account might be interpreted as a conflict between an individualising and purposeful self-project (her career plans) versus unexamined, ‘traditional’ understandings (motherhood and being a wife), all set within severe constraints of class and gender. But things are more nuanced. First, Christina’s self-project was in fact primarily focussed on motherhood, which by necessity is a relational and emotional project with children. For both her and Richard, this ‘naturally’ created a domestic homemaker role; and this was supported and legitimated by accepted tradition. In so far as this view of motherhood was examined, it was to further buttress the traditional view that good mothers should stay at home and that full-time working mothers were unnatural. But Christina was also discursively critical of some consequences of this tradition; she valued economic independence and was wary of her husband’s more extreme breadwinner/homemaker model. Similarly, while this arrangement unconsciously followed her own mother’s example, she was deeply critical of her own childhood, which partly explained her emotional focus on motherhood. Christina’s choices and responses were not simply individual, but were relational in different ways. Institutionally, there were imbalances of power with her employers; contextually she had to deal with neighbours, and her choices were set within emotional relationships with her husband, her dead mother, and above all her children. Rather than individualisation versus tradition, we find mixtures of both as Christina adapted to her evolving life course and a drastically altered local economy.

Any interview case study is unique, particular not only to an individual life in a specific place and time, but also formed by the aims and agendas of particular research projects. With Christina, living near Barnsley in 1999, we heard about her struggles to try to find a career, while keeping motherhood and care central. Each case shows its own intricate combination of change and continuity in its given context. Nevertheless, we can draw out some general themes which inform how we will proceed.

Choice and Tradition

Christina made choices and decisions about her personal life in changing situations. And she used 'tradition' in doing so; that is she referred to pre-existing socially normative and collective understandings of proper or at least suitable and expected behaviour. But tradition was used in different ways. Sometimes tradition was unexamined and largely taken for granted. So just as Christina attempted to square the circle between developing her career and being a mother at home, both she and her husband naturalised her role as domestic homemaker, and reproduced the norm that good mothers should stay at home and that full-time working mothers were unnatural. This is tradition as a pre-conscious and habitual guide to action.

Christina did not just take tradition for granted, however. At least some elements came under discursive scrutiny. Despite her immersion in motherhood at home, she also valued economic independence through paid work. She was wary of her husband's more extreme breadwinner/homemaker model and examined its possible effects on her autonomy. This even led her to be economical with the truth, allowing her husband to believe, incorrectly, she was giving up paid work. Nonetheless, traditionally, if her husband had earned more she would gladly have given this up to allow mothering at home. While tradition provides an easily available guide and resource for action, elements can be questioned, adapted, invented or discarded. But developing an alternative is much harder, both cognitively and socially.

Relationality, Emotionality, and Agencies

Christina made choices, took decisions, and carried through her actions in relation to others. These others included intimate individuals in her family, collectives, institutions, or were even imagined. These relationships were both rational and emotional. Christina's cost-benefit choices about employment and motherhood were articulated through her desire for self-worth and autonomy, but were also set within emotional relationships with her husband, her dead mother, and above all her children. At

the same time, she laboured under imbalances of power with her employers, and had to deal with the sniping of neighbours. Thus Christina's efforts to find job fulfilment were subject to her desires to mother her children at home. This is a 'bonded' agency, formed within—not beyond—ties with others. Christina's job search was also subject to the agencies of others with different agendas, notably her husband's lack of support in preferring a full-time housewife and the labour strategies of local employers. Relational agency also implies negotiation and inequality. Christina would have abandoned both career and employment if family finances had allowed it, to become a mother at home. Agencies also need to be resourced, both personally and socially. In this way de-traditionalisation reproduces, rather than diminishes, class and gender effects. It is, therefore, more accurate to talk about different agencies, rather than some abstract, universal, and free-floating 'agency'.

The Chapters

Christina's changing personal life shows complex interrelationships between choice and tradition, relationality and emotion, and agencies and constraints. The model of de-traditionalisation and individualisation is both too simple and too one-sided to adequately represent this complexity. But a model focussed just on continuity and tradition would be equally one-sided. Nor should we lurch from one-side of this binary to the other for, as Christina's narrative illustrates, personal lives combine both. Rather, we need a conceptual framework that provides sufficient scope and capacity to account for these interrelationships and combinations.

Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 develop solutions to this problem in the context of empirical research. Chapter 2 begins by focusing on the assumption that contemporary personal lives are radically new and different from those in the past. We examine the experience of personal life in Britain in the late 1940s and early 1950s for gay men and heterosexual spouses. Substantial, but not unambiguous, 'improvement' over the period, in terms of equality, openness and diversity, does not necessarily mean transformation in how people think about their personal lives and how they ought to conduct them. There is also a tendency to overempha-

side the abnormal and forget the ordinary. Examining ideas around extra-marital sex and divorce, we find that most people were ‘pragmatists’. They held practical views of what was reasonably proper and possible in adapting to, and improvising around, their circumstances. Chapter 3 examines the continued importance of traditional institutions in personal lives using the example of young women and marriage. Marriage continues to hold considerable popular and political significance, and operates as a prominent regulating institution. Traditional marriage re-emerges despite, or more accurately in combination with, de-traditionalisation in intimate relationships. Chapter 4 develops this theme of ‘re-traditionalisation’ using the example of unmarried cohabitation. De-traditionalisation has allowed cohabitation to emerge as a pragmatic solution to desired couple intimacy. However, this is not usually or mainly understood as some new way of conducting coupledness. Most often cohabitation appears as a form of ‘do-it-yourself’ marriage, sanctioned through ‘lived law’, and marked by a transition to increasing commitment and traditional family practices. Tradition is invented in support, notably, with ideas of common law marriage and the historical prevalence of cohabitation: both factually incorrect ‘myths’ first appearing in the 1980s just as cohabitation gathered pace. Chapter 5 considers the leakage of meaning from past tradition to contemporary practice in the context of women’s name change with marriage. How is it that a practice emerging from patriarchal history and redolent of women’s subordination to men has become so embedded in an age of women’s emancipation and de-traditionalisation? This is not just because emancipation is incomplete, or that name change is just taken for granted. Rather the conventional name change also appears as a handy tool for doing and displaying family—all the more convenient because it is legitimated by history, accepted as normal, and easily understandable. But using a symbol from the past allows a leakage of meaning from past to present. The handy tool also symbolises the abnegation of women’s pre-marital identity and the confirmation of male authority.

Chapter 6 considers people’s agency in deciding to live apart together (LAT). Rather than a strategic and purposeful search for autonomy with intimacy, LAT is more of a pragmatic response to obtaining coupledness in difficult circumstances. Cohabitation and marriage remain the reference point for most. This pragmatism involves different levels and types

of agency, characterised by imbalances of power and emotional bonds with partners. We pay particular attention to feelings of vulnerability and anxiety in providing a reactive agentic force. Chapter 7 continues from this point by using weddings as an analytical lens. Weddings are a unique focal point in personal life, which publicly launch the ‘project of the couple’. Yet, while couples seek to create a distinctive event, weddings usually look remarkably, and traditionally, similar. We focus on how wedding couples ‘do agency’ as a process of bricolage to explain how (re-traditionalised) conformity emerges out of an individualised event. Finally, in Chapter 8 we draw together these arguments in a discussion of tradition, agency, bricolage, and personal life.

Notes

1. All interview personal names used in this book are pseudonyms.

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2

Pragmatic Tradition: Personal Life in the 1950s

An Easter Trip to Brighton, 1949

On Easter Sunday, 1949, a small party of ‘queer’ men left London for a trip to Brighton. An anonymous Mass Observation participant, who had apparently embedded himself in the group, recorded the trip in detail.¹ Helpfully, he explained that ‘queer’ was a ‘homosexual colloquialism for “homosexual”’. As well as the observer, the party consisted of Arthur,² a young musician; Michael, secretary to a prominent public figure; Peter, clerk in the film industry; and Frank, who owned what must have been a crowded car. Also in the group of friends, sometime lovers and associates, but not on the trip, were John, a receptionist at a large London hotel, and Paul, ‘a French youth of exceptional physical beauty’. John and Michael were ‘married’ and had lived together for 8 years, although their ‘conjugal life together’ was not monogamous. Their relationship, and their flat near Piccadilly, formed the social centre of the group. Neither was ‘at all keen on the company of non-homosexuals’, except for ‘borderline cases and possible converts’.

Before recounting the Brighton trip, the observer spent some time detailing the various liaisons and activities of the group. We can give a flavour here. Arthur was ‘fully in love’ with Michael, but realised this

would remain unrequited and he would be just a temporary bedfellow. Instead he embarked on a chequered sexual career. 'A most enjoyable adventure' in Green Park was 'only [with] a picked up tart and it was not worth bothering about him'. Later we find him cruising Piccadilly with Peter, aiming to pick up 'American navy boys'; supposedly many were homosexual or at least 'prepared to have a good time'. Finally, he answered a newspaper advert for a 'disciplinarian' companion for a holiday in France. Recognising this as code for sado-masochism, he began a 'flagellation partnership' which the observer, with more than a little fascination, spends some time describing. Meanwhile the 'married' couple was openly unfaithful, John sleeping with the French youth, Paul, and his partner Michael sleeping with Peter.

Michael, 'very polished in behaviour and manners', in fact 'almost Wildean', was in many ways the leader of this inward-looking group. Like his partner John, he bought bespoke clothes from 'the fourth best tailor in London', also homosexual. Pale blue, especially for socks, ties and pull-overs, was apparently the 'queers' trade colour'. They frequently held soirees at their flat hosting up to 25 male homosexual guests between 18 and 45 years old. Some were also known as 'married', including a solicitor and civil servant; others were 'non-known queers'. While 'the food was very good, drink was scarce'. Various games—varieties of hide and seek or forfeits—were usually played, some 'respectable', others less so, and sometimes with the lights turned off. Nevertheless behaviour remained 'usually reserved' seldom progressing beyond 'necking and petting'.

And so to the Brighton trip that Easter Sunday in 1949. Leaving London at 10 am, tensions developed from the start. Michael invited everyone to wear shorts; it was after all a particularly hot day, although it was clear he wanted to camp things up. Frank, the car owner, insisted on a lounge suit—he was the 'clandestine type of homosexual' who 'heartily disapproves of all varieties of camp'. Peter compromised with flannels. While 30 per cent of the conversation on the journey was spent in 'serious discussion' of cars, music and plays, most time was spent in commenting on boys and youths spotted on the road, often in shorts, who were variously walking, cycling or motoring. Sometimes this was simple admiration, with occasional 'deep sighs and longfull [sic] expressions'; at other times, the commentary was salacious or downright crude. But as the