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Individualisation versus the geography of 'new' families

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Abstract

According to leading sociological theorists we have now entered a 'late modern' epoch of 'de-traditionalisation' and 'individualisation'. Families are crucial in this vision, where the social ties of kinship and marriage are weakened, increasingly replaced by the project of self. In this paper we take three geographical indices of central elements of the individualisation thesis, examining the distribution in Britain of same sex couples, births to cohabitants, and mothers' withdrawal from the worker role. Analysis of all three indices give support to two levels of criticism of individualisation theory. First, pre-existing social structures have not gone away; the prevalence and the effect of the components of family form and change examined here seem deeply influenced by pre-existing local structural conditions. Secondly, the analysis supports the criticism that while people might indeed have more room for manoeuvre in late modern society, and may well be less constrained by older traditions, this does not necessarily mean individualisation. The behavioural components of individualisation theory may be a non-sequitor from the observation of changing family forms. We conclude that it seems likely that individualisation may be better conceptualised as one part of pre-existing social and structural processes, and that its behavioural assumptions are unjustified.

1. Introduction: family individualisation and its critiques

According to leading sociological theorists like Ulrich Beck (1992) and Tony Giddens (1992) we have now entered a 'late modern' epoch of 'de-traditionalisation' and 'individualisation'. Economic prosperity, education and the welfare state have freed us from externally imposed constraints, moral codes and traditional customs. The social structures of class, gender, religion and family are withering away, so that people no longer have pre-given life trajectories. Instead individuals are compelled to reflexively make their own choices and hence create their own biographies. At the same time, the 'project of self', with an emphasis on individual self-fulfilment and personal development, comes to replace relational, social aims.

Families are crucial in this vision, where the social ties of kinship and marriage are weakened; we no longer have to get engaged and marry as we become adults and then go on to have 2.4 children, subsequently staying in the same marriage for life. Rather relationships based on individual fulfilment and consensual love, with sexual and emotional equality, replace formal unions based in socially prescribed gender roles. Sexuality is largely freed from institutional, normative and patriarchal control as well as from reproduction. This then produces a 'plastic sexuality', which serves more as means of self-expression and self-actualisation rather than as a means to reproduction and

cementing institutionalised partnership (Giddens, 1992). This also means that heterosexuality is no longer a secure taken for granted. In turn, all this changes partnerships from formal marriage towards what the Giddens calls the 'pure relationship', an 'ideal type' that isolates what is most characteristic for intimacy in reflexive modernity. This is devoid of the 'inertial drag' of pre-existing social structures and traditions, is continually subject to self-reflexive examination and assessment, and is 'sought only for what the relationship can bring to the partners involved' (Giddens 1991, 88-9). In place of socially prescribed commitment, the pure relationship depends instead on a commitment which, if this 'effort-bargain' does not pay off, can be immediately revoked – a possibility which places a premium on the sustaining of mutual trust. Paradoxically, just as permanence and tradition are undermined, then the attraction of a close, confirming relationship becomes all the more important, and love and intimacy become all the more sought after to ease the isolation of this new autonomy and plasticity. Children become highly valued as almost the only permanent and non-conditional site of personal intimacy, but at the same time threaten severe constraints and costs (ibid, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, Beck-Gernsheim 2000). For all relationships, intimacy now needs to be communicated and demonstrated verbally through emotional disclosure; it can no longer be simply taken for granted. So we still search for some sort of family, but these are now reflexive 'families of choice' modelled on same-sex relationships (Weeks 2001) - diverse, fluid and unresolved, constantly chosen and re-chosen.

This vision of the contemporary family has led to two contrasting interpretations. The first, as in the work of Giddens and Jeffrey Weeks, focuses on a positive reading of these changes; the greater diversity of lifestyles and the opening up of choice leads to democracy in personal relations, and liberation from oppressive institutions. The second vision, as in the work of Zygmunt Bauman (2003) and Francis Fukuyama (1999), stresses that the breakdown of traditional ties leads to a disintegration of families and the moralities once maintained by them; this 'demoralisation' then produces individual alienation and social breakdown. These more popular interpretations of Beck's earlier notion of individualisation, which stressed that liberation and breakdown could proceed together and are not mutually exclusive, are themselves simplifications. Needless to say, these utopian and dystopian visions are also ideologically charged – they feed into and reflect contemporary political stances on 'choice' and the 'breakdown of the family'.

There are severe problems with both these almost millenarian visions of contemporary society – they are not well founded in terms of empirical and historical evidence, they lack reliable methodologies, and they pay inadequate attention to stabilities and continuities as well as change. They are also top-down, abstract visions with little connection to particular social contexts. This suggests that the epochal sense of family transformation often claimed may not be warranted. Thus Göran Thernborn (2004), in his magisterial world survey, sees individualisation theory as a geographically and historically limited exaggeration among the variety and long durées of socio-sexual systems.

There are two kinds of critique, based on more detailed research, which inform this disquiet. First, the structures of economic necessity, social groups and moral codes have not gone away, although they may have changed. The 'traditional' structures of class, gender, religion and so on have a continuing importance (eg Jamieson 1998, Duncan and Irwin 2004, Brannen and Nilsen 2005). However, individualisation theorists would not necessarily disagree – they would rather maintain that these structures are no longer the mainsprings of family behaviour and, furthermore, that these are historical lags which will gradually disappear. The second type of criticism is more fundamental, however. Agreeing that there has been de-traditionalisation in that some institutions are no longer so important, and also that many people (although not all) do have more choice or at least more room for manoeuvre, this work nevertheless argues that people value connection and commitment to others just as much as before, and that in making family decisions they search for the morally right thing to do with relation to others. If there is individualisation, it is within social bonds, not away from them. True enough, commitment may no longer take traditional forms as in marriage or even conjugality, and what matters within families and across generations may have changed (attentiveness to needs rather than duty, for example), but a wider relational and committed 'family' remains central in people's lives. People do not generally act like selfish individuals or, if they do, their selfishness is expressed in terms of wanting commitment with others, especially partners, parents and children (Williams, 2004; see also Lewis 2001, McCarthy et al 2003, Duncan et al 2003, Pahl and Spencer 2004, Roseneil 2004, Smart 2004, Barlow et al 2005, and Bengston et al 2002 for the USA).

There is, however, a qualification which must be made to these critiques of individualisation theories about family change. They largely rest on the evidence of qualitative work using purposive samples of particular social groups in particular contexts and localities. They do not often use representative samples or total population figures which can accurately portray overall social patterns. This qualification to the critiques follows from one of their major strengths; in reacting to the over-abstract individualisation theory they take what Andrew Sayer (1992) calls an 'intensive' research design. Through in-depth interviewing these detailed studies were able to access social process more directly, and understand its context. This enabled a more evidence based explanation of family change; hence the critique of individualisation theories. But as Sayer also points out, such work needs to be complemented by 'extensive' research on patterns and distributions, using representative survey for example. Not only will extensive work complement the intensive explanations by better enabling generalisation, but in turn intensive work will enable us to better interpret the representative patterns revealed by extensive work; we can link process to pattern directly rather than depending upon post-hoc deduction (cf Duncan and Edwards 1999).

At the same time individualisation theorists have underplayed the significance of the social and geographical patterning of values and behaviour; in making top-down generalisations they neglect the importance of local cultural and social contexts (Duncan 2005, Irwin 2005). This is not just an important social and geographical qualification to individualisation trends; it is also a theoretical one. If behaviour is socially and geographically embedded in particular contexts, then rather than generalised epochal

change we may instead be witnessing specific groups working out what to do, differently, in particular situations. Hence individualisation theory may be seen as an unwarranted generalised abstraction from particular instances.

The research reported here aims to provide an extensive, geographically based, complement to the intensive critiques of individualisation theory. It does this by assessing overall family change using the locality scale in Britain as exemplar. We use two of Britain's largest data sets – the 2001 Census and the Population and Vital Statistics (1) – to construct geographical indices of three key aspects of 'individualised' family formations. These are (1) same sex co-residential partnerships, where lesbians and gay men are seen as pioneers for pure relationships and plastic sexuality, and hence at the forefront of processes of individualization and de-traditionalization for heterosexuals as well as for themselves, (2) births to cohabiting, but unmarried partners, where this partnership form is seen as more appropriate for, and congruent with, the trend towards pure relationships and, (3) the 'motherhood employment effect', the degree to which mothers withdraw from the labour market compared to other partnered women in the same age group, where women's employment – especially for mothers – is seen as both marker and central source of individualisation in gender relations.

Section 2, which follows, theorises these indices in relation to individualisation arguments, and also notes the problems arising from our use of aggregate, spatial statistics. Section 3 then goes on to describe, and map, geographical variations in the indices for local authority areas in Britain. Section 4 turns to an explanation of these

differences, and what they imply for individualisation theory. Section 5 then concludes by briefly returning to the introductory issues.

2. Theorising the indices

2.1 Same sex partnerships

Giddens (1991) identifies lesbians and gay men as `pioneers' for pure relationships and plastic sexuality, and hence places them at the forefront of processes of individualization and de-traditionalization for heterosexuals as well as for themselves. This is developed by Jeffrey Weeks and colleagues (1999) who suggest that 'one of the most remarkable features of domestic change over recent years is ... the emergence of common patterns in both homosexual and heterosexual ways of life as a result of these long-term shifts in relationship patterns' (ibid, 85). Developing this, Sasha Roseneil (2000, 3.10) goes on to claim that 'at the same time the married, co-resident, heterosexual couple with children no longer occupies the centre-ground, and cannot be taken for granted as the basic affective unit in Britain'. Furthermore, all this adds up to 'a significant decentring of heterorelations …processes of individualization and detraditionalization are releasing individuals from traditional heterosexual scripts and from the patterns of heterorelationality which accompany them' (2000, 3.10). This amounts to a 'queering of the family', as meanings of family undergo radical challenge, and as more and more kinship groups have to come to terms with the diverse sexual practices and living arrangements chosen by their own family members.

Roseneil sees this social decentring of heterorelations expressed and reflected in popular culture, particularly in advertising, fashion magazines, popular music, dance culture and television. In all these spheres, she claims, openness, fluidity and diversity are celebrated, the privileging of heteronormativity is challenged, the queer and the sexually ambiguous are valorized. For example TV dramas and sitcoms are now 'post-heterorelational in their thematic concerns and narrative drive' and 'offer images of the warmth and affection provided by networks of friends in an age of insecure and/ or transitory sexual relationships' (ibid 3.12).

At the same time Roseneil admits that it would be 'sociologically naïve (ibid, 3.15) to assume that changes in popular culture necessarily give rise to or reflect transformations in people's everyday beliefs and practices. Indeed, other research suggests that it is personal contact with alternative role models that has the most meaningful effect on how people forge their personal and sexual identities (Cleaver, 2001). Celebrating camp in public as a fashion image does not necessarily mean accepting diversity in private family practice. As Roseneil also points out, there are countervailing tendencies such as social movements based around sexual and gender fundamentalism, homophobia remains including violence against lesbians and gay men, while the appellation 'gay' remains a socially terminal insult in many British schools. She also problematises the diffusion of this queering of society; it may be a mostly 'urban' phenomenon with much less impact on 'the general population' (ibid). This is interesting from the point of view of the socio-spatial patterning of these supposed pioneers, for by 'urban' Roseneil probably means a particular sort of 'cool' town or city – in Britain inner London or Brighton might be

examples, not the much less fashionable industrial towns or outer suburbs. Similarly, her appellation 'the general population' implies a socially distinct avant-garde living in these more fashionable places.

We will attempt to assess the depth and spread of this diffusion using the 2001 census which allows us – for the first time in Britain - to construct a map of couples recorded as living with a same-sex partner. Given the element of self-definition involved (household members were invited to record their relationship to each other) this can provide an index of both the relative density and acceptability of gay and lesbian 'families of choice'.

2.2 Births to unmarried, cohabiting parents

The nature of commitment between partners lies at the heart of individualisation theory. As we discussed above, the trend is supposedly away from formal unions buttressed by outside structures towards 'pure relationships' dependent on commitment from within. Unmarried cohabitation should be more congruent with this trend, and should increase as formal marriage declines (Giddens, 1991, 1992, Hall 1996).

The evidence does indeed show de-traditionalisation along these lines. Cohabitation is increasingly practised and accepted; for example already by 2000 a quarter of births in Britain were to unmarried cohabitants. While older people practice cohabitation less, the majority are still accepting of it and even think it is a good idea before marriage. Nor is there much social variation in cohabitation rates or attitudes by class or income, except that middle class partners are more likely to marry if they have children (Barlow et al

2005). At the same time marriage rates are declining and divorce has reached record levels. Marriage is also changing and qualitative evidence suggests that partners - whether married or not - increasingly see commitment as based on a morality from within, from love and respect for the other person, rather than on an externally imposed moral codes. It is perhaps more accurate to say that marriage has become more like cohabitation. This seems to be why there appears to be little difference between commitment levels and behaviour of similar demographic and social groups of married spouses and cohabitants (ibid; Lewis 2001).

So far, so good for the individualisation thesis. However, the same research does not suggest any increase in self-centred individualism or a decline in commitment between partners and to their children. It is just that unmarried cohabitants see their commitment as more private than the public expression made by married cohabitants. Unmarried cohabitation is more like a do-it-yourself version of marriage. This do-it–yourself solution to partnership in late modern conditions seems like a half-way house between Giddens' ideal type of the pure relationship and 'traditional' marriage (which we can well see as another ideal type) – still committed, even if individually and flexibly created.

We will trace the diffusion of this 'do-it-yourself' marriage in Britain by using the proportion of couple births accounted for by unmarried cohabiting parents as indicator, taken from the Population and Vital Statistics.   Having a child together can be assumed to mark longer-term commitment, while also excluding the 'trial marriage' (now more commonly 'trial cohabitation') of childless young adults. This excludes births to lone

mothers - nearly all births to the minority of single mothers (those lone mothers who did not have a pre-existing married or cohabiting relationship). These are both strongly clustered and associated with social deprivation. Very few result from any choice or preference, or from any calculation that individual self-fulfilment will be better achieved by parenting without a partner (Duncan and Edwards 1999).

2.3 The motherhood employment effect

Women's paid work, particularly by mothers, plays a key role in individualisation theory. For the individualisation of gender relations in late modernity is partly, and centrally, driven by mothers' increasing labour market participation (Beck 1992). As mothers undertake paid employment their labour becomes commodified and the male breadwinner model of family life becomes weakened, which further draws mothers into paid employment. This process gives women in particular a greater sense of rethinking and choosing their own biographies and lifestyles, rather than following predetermined gendered roles. Women thereby see an identity as a paid worker as part of the development of their individualised 'self' as a project. And as couples are no longer tied together in the economic complementary of domestic and market specialisation, this reinforces the move towards the reflexive, mutually satisfying, democratic intimacy described above. Nonetheless, for heterosexual couples, this has not yet resulted in symmetrical gender relations either in the labour market or within families. Rather, there is a growing discrepancy between women's expectations of equality and the still unequal gendered division of domestic labour that they experience with their male partner. Hence

the rapid rise in divorce, mostly initiated by women (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, Giddens 1992).

A key element of individualisation theory is, therefore, the move by female partners, especially mothers, into a worker role with significant paid work. We will assess the diffusion of this move using the Motherhood Employment Effect (MEE) as indicator. This index is derived from the 2001 census and provides a standardised measure of the difference between the full-time employment rate of partnered mothers (defined as living with dependent children) and the full-time employment rate of non-mother partnered women (those in the prime motherhood age range of 20-45 who do not have dependent children).

The MEE thereby indicates the relative withdrawal of mothers from full-time paid work into either what the GB Census labels 'economic inactivity' (in fact usually full-time, but unpaid, caring and domestic work) or into part-time employment combined with such unpaid work. Most part-time paid work by partnered mothers in Britain can be taken as an index of withdrawal from a paid worker role in that it is usually seen (by both partners) as supplementary to a caring role. It becomes organised around the priority of unpaid caring and domestic work both in terms of taking up employment and hours worked. Partly for this reason, mothers' part-time employment is often short time and low paid. It is important to point out here that we are not arguing that women's part-time work is unimportant, either to themselves or to household incomes. But we do claim that, for most, moving from full-time to part-time work indicates withdrawal from a worker

role in a social and cultural sense. (See Duncan and Smith (2002) for further details of the MEE, although note that it is calculated in a different way here for data availability reasons).

2.4 Spatial frameworks and problems

We use the 408 district and unitary councils in Britain (England, Scotland, Wales) existing in 2001 as our mapping unit. Although there are problems with their varying spatial and population sizes, they do represent the smallest standard local government level in Britain, which can roughly represent geographical variations in social and economic conditions. These local authority units can also be taken to approximate Travel to Work Areas - which spatially link commuting to job opportunities - at a scale appropriate for mothers and the lower skilled (2).

This spatial research design introduces some general problems. First, is that of representing social relations through spatial patterns. Variable spatial units themselves will aggregate or cut across information, different social processes can lead to the same spatial outcome, and the ecological fallacy prevents any simple projection from aggregate patterns to social behaviour (3). On the other hand this is better than a common social science assumption of just one uniform spatial unit – the nation state - or, with individualisation theorists, western, late modern or even global society. More positively, visualisation through mapping is an efficient way to represent simultaneous universality and diversity. Secondly, the source material is largely restricted to the 2001 Census, and the Population and Vital Statistics, outdated snapshots of an unfolding social landscape.

At the same time our statistical indicators depend upon making proxy assumptions, some more heroic than others. Nevertheless, we consider that the indicators do indeed provide an indication of relative variation, and we are encouraged in that they do produce recognisable and coherent geographies which can be associated with other social geographies. These geographies also fit in with previous research on the geography of family formations based on the 1991 census (Duncan and Smith 2002). We can at least provide a descriptive baseline.

3. Mapping individualisation – the three indices

3.1 Same-sex couples

Figure 1 maps the distribution of same-sex couples, as defined in the 2001 census. The first thing that emerges is the rarity of reported same-sex couples throughout most of Britain. For most of the country less than a third of one per cent, below 0.3%, of couples defined themselves as same-sex for the 2001 census. In some local authorities the census records almost no same-sex couples at all. These figures may be a significant underestimation, as not all gay and lesbian couples would have formally identified themselves as such; also, those living alone (although still part of a couple) are not included. But even if we were to double the reported figure, then only Brighton and Hove would top 5%, and only another three local authorities would top 3%.

Figure 1 here

Using the recorded figures, Brighton is the 'gayest' town in Britain, where 2.67% of all couples defined themselves as same-sex. Only Islington, with 2.26%, approaches this figure, although much of the rest of inner London shows between 1 and 2%. Manchester - the 'gay capital of the north', Edinburgh and Glasgow, also top 1% of couples. Outside these large cities relatively 'high' proportions, over half a per cent, are found in some university towns– often a site for alternative living - such as Cambridge, Oxford, Stirling and Exeter. Some seaside towns have also traditionally harboured people seeking a freer, or different, way of life, and Blackpool, Bournemouth, Eastbourne and Torbay stand out, as do the traditional 'rural idyll', 'escape areas' such as the far the west of Cornwall. Local authorities round the larger city concentrations also show some suburban diffusion as gay and lesbian couples seek better, cheaper housing in nicer areas (Smith and Holt 2005). Lewes and Hastings near Brighton, and Hebden Bridge between Manchester and Leeds - now proclaimed as the 'Sapphic capital of Britain' (The Observer, 29.7.2001) - are examples.

If same-sex partnership is at the cutting edge of family individualisation, then the geography we have shown here suggests that this is a numerically weak and spatially limited cutting edge, particularly outside a few areas. Can the 6 recorded same-sex couples in rural Teesdale, the 26 in industrial Redcar, or the 56 in suburban Solihul (among those areas with less than 0.1% of couples self-defined as same-sex) do that much to change the way people in those areas run their intimate lives? How much influence can the 1,500 same-sex couples in Brighton and Hove exert on the 46,000 apparently straight couples there? (4). And if large numbers of gay and lesbian couples

in vast swathes of Britain are hiding their identity, and so are not reported in the census figures, then this speaks volumes about their lack of influence and the dominance of straight society

3.2 Births to cohabiting, unmarried, parents

Figure 2 seems to show a radically different geography. For example inner London, the gay 'hot spot', is now relegated to the depths of conservative Britain when it comes to marriage and parenting, while the valleys of South Wales and the ex-mining areas in the North East and South Yorkshire – where gay and lesbian couples were almost unrecorded – are now among the highest scoring. The South East and rural / small-town north England and Scotland score low on both indices, while a few local authorities score high on both, like Manchester and Brighton.

Fig 2 here

Figure 2 is also quite different to Figure 1 in that unmarried, but cohabiting, parenthood is nationally pervasive and quite common. The British average was 31% of couple births in 2001, compared to the 0.3% national average for couples recorded as same-sex; even the lowest scoring areas record 12% of cohabitant births. In the very highest scoring local authorities, like Hull, Blaneau Gwent, Scunthorpe and Dundee, around half of births to all couples were to unmarried parents. Note that if we included births to lone mothers, the percentage of births outside marriage would be even higher. This 2001 distribution is similar to the 1997 geography, as discussed in Duncan and Smith (2002); overall levels

of births to cohabiting couples may have increased, but regional and local patterns remain relatively fixed. Partnering and parenting have become widely de-traditionalised in Britain, although more in the older industrial towns and cities than in more prosperous suburban and small town areas where having a child generally continues to mean marriage.

3.3 The motherhood employment effect

Figure 3 shows geographical rates of mothers' relative withdrawal from the worker role. This map seems to show yet another geography – in brief, it replicates the North - South divide. Mothers withdraw from full–time employment after childbirth throughout Britain (unlike Denmark for example where childbirth is associated with greater involvement in the labour market) but there are marked North-South differences in the degree of withdrawal. However, this familiar geography is turned on its head. It is the relatively prosperous South East of England and the rich west London boroughs that show high MEE scores (that is, *greater* withdrawal from the labour market with motherhood). In these areas partnered mothers demonstrated a pattern of greater reversion to the male breadwinner family formation. In contrast, in areas of relatively stagnant economic fortunes and lower incomes, such as east Lancashire or Merseyside, a particularly low MEE score emerges as *fewer* women withdraw from full-time employment and hence are more likely to maintain an adult worker family model. If anything, this reverse correspondence is even stronger than 10 years ago, at the time of the 1991 census (Duncan and Smith, 2002). Where there are more job opportunities and higher wages, mothers are most likely to desert the worker role and revert to a more traditional caring

role, but where job opportunities and wages are lower, mothers are more likely to stay in an 'adult worker' role.

Figure 3 around here

4. Explaining alternative geographies of individualisation

4.1 Same-sex couples

Researchers on gay and lesbian geography have traditionally focussed on the emergence and definition of a few clearly identified 'gay and lesbian spaces' (Bell and Valentine 1995, Smith and Holt 2005). It is in these areas that gays and lesbians feel safer, more accepted and benefit from a range of social and cultural facilities, and where they can develop a political and social identity (ibid, Knopp 1998, Rothenburg 1995). This work parallels the mapping results in Figure 1, which similarly pinpoints a few particular urban areas where there is any density of same-sex couples recorded in the 2001 census.

We explore this 'further by using two further indices of 'alternative' family life, focussing women's social and economic independence and dependence. These are (1) 'independent women', defined as the proportion of women under 60 who live by themselves (or with children), and have full-time paid work and, conversely, (2) 'dependent women', defined as the proportion of married and cohabiting women under 60 who do not have paid work. In this way these two indices present opposing measures of relative adherence from traditional breadwinner family norms. As can be seen from

the scattergrams in Figures 4 and 5, these indices are associated – positively and negatively respectively – with the distribution of recorded same-sex couples. Those areas with a high proportion of 'independent woman' are the same as those with a relatively high proportion of same sex couples, while the reverse is generally the case for areas with a high proportion of 'dependent woman' (although there was a high proportion of both in two London boroughs with a significant Muslim population). As an associated indication of alternative political orientation, these same few areas also recorded the highest share of votes for the Green Party in the 2005 general election; again Brighton contained the highest Green voting constituency (22%), followed by parts of inner London, Edinburgh and Manchester with between 5% and 11%. Overall, these 'alternative' areas might be called areas of individualisation by choice, where people actively choosing alternative lifestyles and positions congregate - often, in the process, displacing more conventional families (Smith and Holt 2005). They are, however, relatively few and spatially concentrated.

Figures 4 and 5 around here

These social and geographical conclusions may be over simplistic, however. For they may conflate the geography of a self-conscious political and sexual identity with a more hidden geography of gay and lesbian residential distribution. This is possibly even more misleading as wider commercial and political interests have appropriated these identities for their own interests, for example in the unholy alliance between urban authorities and the leisure / alcohol industries in marketing 'regenerated' inner-city areas. Manchester's

Canal Street is just one particularly well-known example. In contrast, Jacqui Gabb (2005) has shown how some lesbians would see themselves more as mothers and partners rather than members of a self-conscious, lesbian 'scene'. Typically, these mothers would be older, partnered, and living outside the inner city. These 'suburban' areas are still exceptional areas, in that they are experienced as more socially diverse and tolerant instances of the widely sought after 'rural idyll'. Hebden Bridge in West Yorkshire, a gentrified Pennine town with a particular concentration of lesbian couples who often moved from Manchester and London in order to build a family life, is a good example (Smith and Holt 2005). But in another sense this is just a particular form of the general process of suburbanisation. As couples form, gain stable jobs, become owner-occupiers, and have children, they move out of alternative areas in inner city parts of those 'escalator regions' which, earlier in life, offered good career prospects and alternative lifestyles. They may also be repelled by the perceived rigidity of dominant big city gay and lesbian scenes (ibid). Figure 1 shows some refection of this, with higher rates of same sex couples around the traditional gay and lesbian spaces in London, Brighton, Manchester and Edinburgh.

How do these geographical processes, which can help explain the distribution of same-sex couples, relate to individualisation? Their concentration in particular gentrifying inner-city areas, and the beginnings of diffusion via suburbanisation and counterurbanisation to small towns, may be one part of reflexively choosing biographies. But if this is individualisation, these processes of inner-city gentrification and small town suburbanisation are hardly novel.

4.2 Births to unmarried, cohabiting couples

The geography we see in Figure 2 is also linked to social class and the local economy – but in a different way. The roll-call of areas where unmarried cohabitant parenting is more common is largely a list of the poorest areas of Britain with the highest proportions of working class families. Some of the areas with the very highest rates of cohabitant births are notorious for the economic breakdown of once thriving working class industries. The ex-coal and steel areas of South Yorkshire, with almost 50% of couple births to cohabitants, are prime examples. In contrast it is the more advantaged areas which, in general, are associated with traditional family building within marriage. Thus the high status suburban local authorities west of London, and west London itself, record the lowest scorers for this index with below 20% cohabitant births. Figure 6 uses a composite index of household deprivation (5) to further explore this association between cohabitant births and social disadvantage. In general, it confirms this association – the rate of cohabitant births is positively associated with the rate of social disadvantage.

These empirical results do not bed well with the notion of individualisation, for this posits that it is an increased ability to choose one's own biography that undermines traditional family forms such as marriage. But as Figures 2 and 6 suggest, in Britain cohabitant parenting is actually more likely in disadvantaged areas where people, presumably, usually have less room for manoeuvre. These results rather support our suspicions, expressed in section 2.2, that while there is a process of de-traditionalisation

in couple unions, this does not necessarily mean individualisation. We might call this family de-traditionalisation through lack of choice.

Figure 6 around here

There is however another dimension to cohabitant birth rates, as both the residuals to Figure 6, and the mapping in Figure 2, suggest. Areas where we can assume higher levels of religious adherence show much lower proportions of cohabitant births than their lack of prosperity would indicate. Thus Tower Hamlets in east London, and the Western Isles, both among the poorest local authority areas in Britain, also have some of the very lowest scores for cohabitant births (just 12% and 14% respectively). The former has a large proportion of Muslim residents, and the latter is strongly influenced by extreme Prestbyterianism (MacDonald 2002). Other areas where we can assume high levels of religiosity also show lower than expected cohabitant birth scores, like Ealing (with large Hindu, Muslim and Sikh populations) and Bradford (Muslim). This religious effect will also reinforce the general class effect outside these particular areas, for middle-class Whites are the more active church-goers.

This second dimension, of religiosity, returns us to more familiar empirical and theoretical ground. For we know that religious adherence is associated with less acceptance and lower rates of cohabitation outside marriage (Barlow et al 2001) while cohabitation is rare, and births to cohabitants even rarer, among the Asian ethnic minorities in Britain. In theoretical terms, it is still common in these particular lower

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scoring areas to accept externally imposed moral codes for family behaviour in which

unmarried cohabitation is disallowed; in terms of the individualisation thesis these would

be laggard areas or, less pejoratively, another sort of 'alternative' area - the opposite side

of the coin to those 'conventional' 'late modern' alternative areas with higher rates of

same-sex couples highlighted in Figure 1.

In sum, the geography of cohabitant births shows de-traditionalisation more than

individualisation. Furthermore, the course of this de-traditionalisation – carried through

by parents who do not feel any necessity to get married – is influenced by the geography

of class (dis)advantage and religious adherence. This suggests lack of choice, rather than

reflexively choosing biography.

4.3 The motherhood employment effect

Figure 3 suggests that it is mostly in the economically stronger and more prosperous

areas, like the South East, that mothers are least likely to retain a worker role, and

conversely that in some economically weaker and poorer- such as the older industrial

areas – that mothers are most likely to retain a worker role. This is confirmed by Figure

7, which plots the motherhood employment effect against average household income by

local authority area (6). This evidence creates a paradox, for we know from statistical

research on the level of individuals that higher income mothers are most likely to retain

paid work, especially full-time work (Joshi, 2000). This implies that while lower paid

women may indeed be more likely than higher paid mothers to give up full-time paid

work when they become mothers, they are most likely to do so in richer areas and least

likely to do so in poorer areas. Conversely, higher paid women may be more likely to keep full-time employment than lower paid mothers, but they are less likely to retain full-time work in richer areas and most likely to do so in poorer areas.

Figure 7 around here

 How can we explain this paradox? In Britain an overall gender culture emphasises mothers' prime responsibility for caring for their children, ideally at home for younger children and outside school hours for older children (Duncan et al 2003). Within this dominant culture, certain groups may hold alternative views about the proper thing to do in combining caring for children and taking employment. For example, Black mothers, even those with low human capital, are likely to see full-time employment as part of good motherhood (ibid, Duncan and Edwards 1999). Conversely some White mothers who have high levels of human capital reject full-time working as incompatible with good motherhood (ibid, Duncan 2005). These normative views of what is best in combining paid work and child rearing will interact with what is possible and available. For example, Black mothers seeing full-time employment as the proper thing to do may not succeed in obtaining such work, or conversely those mothers who would prefer to look after younger children at home may have to take up paid work for financial reasons.

An explanation for the apparent paradox discovered in Figures 3 and 7 – that mothers in higher income areas are more likely to give up full-time work and reject a worker role – is therefore that moral ideas about the proper way to combine child rearing and

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employment interact with the more economic considerations of what jobs and wages are available to them. If circumstances permit, mothers will attempt to 'properly' mother as they see it. For most, this means withdrawing from the worker role. Higher household incomes – for instance from male partners' incomes and their own part-time work – will enable them to do this. Hence higher MEEs in richer areas.

An illustrative example of this process is provided in Duncan and Edwards (1999). As discussed above, the research found that Black and White mothers were likely to hold different moral views (or 'gendered moral rationalities') about how to properly combine motherhood with paid work. In general Black mothers stressed that good mothers have full-time jobs, and White mothers maintained the opposite. But what about mothers' actual employment behaviour? Large samples from the census provided confirmation of how these different norms were reflected in practice. First, a 1991 snapshot using the Sample of Anonymised Records (which records samples of census data at individual level) showed that for any level of human capital (e.g. educational level) and constraint (e.g. number of children), Black lone mothers were more likely than White lone mothers to be in paid work, especially full-time. Indeed, the least resourced Black lone mothers were more likely to have paid work than the most resourced White lone mothers in 1991. Secondly, this was reflected over time for those lone mothers' who had repartnered between 1981-91, as shown by the Longitudinal Study (which traces individuals between censuses). On average, such repartnered mothers would have acquired greater household income, and also access to the new male partner for some extra childcare time; certainly their existing children would be older. However, despite these greater resources and

lower constraint levels, White mothers in the sample (the large majority) tended to leave existing paid work, especially full-time work, and move into part-time work and unemployment. In contrast Black lone mothers tended to move from unemployment and part-time work into full-time work. In other words these mothers used their increased resources to better support that combination of motherhood and paid work they took to be morally correct – if in alternative ways for the two ethnic categories. This process of using the economic resources available, to better promote what is traditionally seen as 'proper mothering', fits in with the geography of the MEE found in Figures 3 and 7.

What does this say about the individualisation thesis? The evidence presented here runs counter to the general tenet of the thesis. First, as mothers gain greater access to resources, and in principle gain more choice and more room for manoeuvre, then they are the more likely to behave in accordance with traditional gender normatives. Secondly, this evidence does not support the idea that the choices mothers make about staying in - or leaving -the worker role when they have had a baby, express their preferences in line with a project of self. Rather, these decisions seem more likely to be structured by external social norms, and to be negotiated socially on the basis of what it means to be a good mother. Third, local conditions and social reference groups influence this negotiation with others. While there may be greater freedom for manoeuvre for many women, this does not automatically equate with individualisation. Rather, if they can, mothers appear to 'put family first'.

5. Conclusions and implications

In this paper we have taken three geographical indices of central elements of the individualisation thesis, examining the distribution in Britain of same sex couples, births to cohabitants, and mothers' withdrawal from the worker role. All three indices give support to the two levels of criticism of individualisation theory discussed in the introduction. The first criticism is that pre-existing social structures have not gone away in the dramatic way individualisation theorists often suppose, and continue to exert social consequences. Certainly the prevalence and the effect of these components of family form and change examined here appear to be deeply influenced by pre-existing local structural conditions, such as the nature of local economies, and class, ethnic and religious distributions. This also implies that these components of individualisation may just be specific parts of more general and long-established processes - such as the class based allocation of resources, gentrification, and suburbanisation - rather than something radically new. Furthermore, in that our analysis shows that 'individualisation' may be restricted to a few specific groups in a few 'alternative' areas, it raises the question of whether the whole edifice of individualisation has been erected on the specific experiences of particular minority social groups (where the theorists themselves are located). Individualisation may be important to a few but peripheral for the majority.

Secondly, the analysis gives added credence to the second criticism of individualisation theory, that while people might indeed have more room for manoeuvre in late modern society, and hence they may well be less constrained by some older traditions or ways of being, and will act according to other concerns, this does not necessarily mean individualisation. People may be, so the critique goes, just as connected and committed

to others as before, if now in different ways and within different forms. This strikes at the heart of individualisation theory, for it suggests that its behavioural components are a non-sequitor from the observation of changing family forms. Our analysis lends support to this critique. If same-sex couples are indeed pioneers for pure relationships (which remains empirically undemonstrated), then their rarity in most areas of Britain can hardly support much active 'queering of society'. While births to unmarried couples are becoming more common, they are concentrated among those with less choice who, furthermore, are constructing a form of do-it-yourself traditional marriage rather than seeking pure relationships. Similarly, those mothers with more choice are more likely to use this freedom to construct a form of traditional mothering (as appropriate to their reference group). If this is a project of self, it is one which draws upon pre-existing normatives to further commitment to others. We can conclude that it seems likely that individualisation may be better conceptualised as one part of pre-existing social and structural processes, and that its behavioural assumptions are unjustified.

In this way we agree with Julia Brannen and Ann Nilsen's conclusion that the individualisation thesis 'comes very close to [C. Wright] Mill's notion of 'grand theory' and is neither sensitive to context nor to the complexity and diversity of societies' a (2005, 425). This insensitivity exacerbates the lop-sided development of individualisation as social theory; it sits firmly on one side of what Pierre Bourdieu called 'the most ruinous'….'of all the oppositions that artificially divide social science .. the one set up between subjectivism and objectivism' (1990, 25). While the theoretical task is to integrate structure and agency in explaining social practice, individualisation takes a resolutely subjectivist position.

These conclusions hold a number of theoretical and policy development implications. First, the disjuncture between our empirical work and individualisation as grand theory points to the importance of developing middle range theory in family research. Such theory, based on grounded research into actual family practices rather than on assuming universal patterns, would allow general statements about the behaviour of particular social groups in given contexts. While people make choices in their lives, it is clear that these are not individual preferences, but are influenced by their relationships with others. The practical content of such choices are then deeply influenced by social structures like class, ethnicity and gender, and will have a social continuity within given contexts.

Family policy also misses this 'middle range' and is left without much purchase on the processes of family life. Notoriously, policy comes to depend on simplistic assertions about the value of one family form (eg marriage) over another, combined with a focus on family failure rather than on what families actually do. It assumes that contemporary social change means that individuals have lost a sense of moral values or are simply self interested as families collapse and are replaced by a much looser, and more individualistic, regime of the self. A middle range focus would encourage more constructive interpretations of family life in allowing general, but context driven, statements about family practice.

Second, our critique has wider political implications. For individualisation as a theory, with its one-sided emphasis on individual choice and agency, provides intellectual support for neo-liberal ideology and its emphasis on consumer choice in markets. In this

it provides a sociological version of neo-classical economics, similarly fashioned round individualised preferences and utilities. Both theories - and the political ideology - abstract supposedly universal behaviour away from social context and social interconnectedness. In this way the critique of individualisation helps pave the way for a return to the politics of social access and distribution.

Notes

1. The British Census - a count of all people and households - is the most complete source of information about the population of Britain, and is undertaken every 10 years. The most recent census was held on Sunday 29 April 2001. Since the same core questions are asked and the information is recorded in the same way, the Census enables comparisons between different areas and social groups.

The Key Population and Vital Statistics provide quarterly and annual statistics for population totals, births, deaths and migration down to the level of local government and health areas in Britain. Although much more restricted than the census in topic coverage, it incorporates the same advantages of population coverage and question uniformity.

2. In Britain Travel To Work Areas (TTWAs) are conventionally defined by a cut-off point where 75 per cent of work trips begin and end, and are therefore often much larger than many of the local authority areas we use here. This arbitrary boundary condition conflates the TTWAs of different social groups, and is biased towards full-time employed

middle class males, masking the smaller TTWAs of women - especially mothers and carers of relatives (Flowerdew and Green 1993).

3. For example, in Britain there is a high correlation for census areas between the percentage of Black residents and the level of 'deprivation'. To deduce from this that being Black means being deprived (or even more induces deprivation) is an ecological fallacy - most Blacks are not 'deprived' while the substantial majority of the deprived are White. Individual level data would expose this error. See Openshhaw, 1984, Fieldhouse and Tye 1996.

4. The argument might be made that same sex couples have a political influence, if not a social one, much larger than their numbers would suggest, as evidenced by the passing of the civil partnerships legislation in 2004, which gives marriage like rights to same sex couples. Equally, however, this legislation can be seen more as administrative 'tidying-up' rational action, rather than a response to a gay and lesbian lobby. See Shipman and Smart (2006).

5. This was developed by the Department of Transport, Local Government, and the Regions, and for data availability reasons our use of this is restricted to England only.

6. For data availability reasons this is restricted to England and Wales. Income is estimated, based on occupational profiling.

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