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# Contemporary spinsters in the new millennium: changing notions of family and kinship

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**CONTEMPORARY SPINSTERS  
IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM:  
CHANGING NOTIONS OF FAMILY AND  
KINSHIP**

Roona Simpson  
Issue 10, July 2003



New Working Paper Series

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This new working paper series is designed to bring new ideas and new findings in the field of gender studies into the public arena. The author/s welcome comments.

Roona Simpson is completing her PhD research on Contemporary Spinsterhood in Britain at the LSE Gender Institute. Her research interests include family and household change, and the constitution of gendered identities ([r.e.simpson@lse.ac.uk](mailto:r.e.simpson@lse.ac.uk)).

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# **Contemporary Spinsters In The New Millennium: Changing Notions Of Family And Kinship**

## **Abstract**

Familial change in recent decades has been the subject of much academic theorising and political attention, with concerns raised that changing familial forms signal a decline in obligations and commitments and a concomitant rise in selfish individualism. Remaining single can be seen as paradigmatic of individualism in contemporary Western societies, and single women in particular risk being depicted as strident individualists characterised by their lack of connection to significant others, despite their singleness historically being explained in relation to duties to care for parents and wider family members. This paper draws on ongoing research on the family and social networks of contemporary spinsters<sup>1</sup>. I look specifically at their caring relationships as daughters and mothers and argue that the changes and continuities illustrated reflect more an increasing diversity in the context and meanings associated with these caring commitments rather than their decline. I suggest this research both challenges a conception of the individual as autonomous and self-directed, supporting rather a more relational interdependent conception, and that it supports arguments about the progressive potential of diversity of familial practices in the context of changing cultural and societal conditions of contemporary Western societies.

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<sup>1</sup> This research is being conducted as part of my PhD research on Contemporary Spinsterhood in Britain. The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC Award R42200124462) is gratefully acknowledged.

# Contemporary Spinsters In The New Millennium: Changing Notions Of Family And Kinship<sup>2</sup>.

## Introduction

This paper looks at the caring relationships of contemporary spinsters in Britain. Examining these provides an opportunity to investigate a number of theoretical claims pertaining to the impact of individualism in relation to familial obligations and social change. I firstly set out some pertinent issues emerging from the debate and then consider some of the main findings of the empirical research on the familial relationships of spinsters, situating these in a changing societal context.

Dramatic changes in patterns of partnership formation and dissolution in Britain during recent decades include an increase in the numbers of those remaining unmarried (ONS, 2001)<sup>3</sup>. Familial change has been the subject of much academic theorising as well as political attention, with concerns being raised by academics, politicians and polemicists (see for example Bellah et al, 1985; Putnam 2000)<sup>4</sup> that a rise in individualism is resulting in atomised individuals unlikely to engage fully with family or community (Lewis, 2001)

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<sup>2</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the British Sociological Association Annual Conference, April 2003.

<sup>3</sup> The proportion of those who have never married has increased from 24% of all adult males in 1971 to 34% in 2000, and from 19% to 26% of all women (ONS Population Estimates Unit data, own calculations). Scase estimates these proportions will increase to 39% of men and 31% of women by 2011 (Scase, 2000). Being never-married does not preclude being in a cohabiting relationship (this is discussed further below).

<sup>4</sup> Shadow Social Secretary David Willets considered this theme in his presentation 'Searching and Settling in Work and Relationships', National Centre for Social Research, 14<sup>th</sup> November 2002.

However, change in values, meanings or motivations cannot be deduced from statistics on changes in family and household structures per se. Much recent research analysing contemporary familial forms challenges a pessimistic ‘family crisis’ rhetoric, arguing that these changes represent less a decline in family than increasing diversity in its formations (Morgan, 1996; Smart and Neale 1999; Silva and Smart, 1999; Wright and Jagger, 1999). An important dimension of this research is a focus on the political and conceptual significance of ‘the family’, which builds on feminist challenges to assumptions of a self-evident, naturalised family form<sup>5</sup>. Recent empirical research utilising a wider notion than the conjugal heterosexual couple with children also interrogates the meaning of family (see for example Weston, 1991; Finch and Mason, 1993; Dunne, 1997). Conceptualising family as open to change and modification allows the term to encompass emotional ties not based on kinship, for example the term ‘families of choice’ to describe the relationships of affinity of non-heterosexuals (Weeks, Donovan and Heaphy, 1999).

Sociological theorising has also lately addressed transformations in intimate relationships (see for example Giddens, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Jamieson, 1998; Beck-Gernsheim, 1999). The focus of work such as Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) however is the heterosexual couple (albeit Giddens’ account of the contingent ‘pure relationship’, constructed on the basis of negotiation rather than ascribed social norms, considers gay and lesbian relationships as in the vanguard of social change). The psychological necessity and centrality claimed for intimate (and intimacy here is understood as

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<sup>5</sup> Such assumptions not only fail to address the variable arrangements of kinship, sexuality and the household across cultures and class, but are a crucial element in the normative ideology of familism, critiqued for its role in shaping gendered power relations (Barrett and McIntosh, 1991; Van Every, 1999).

sexually based) couple relationships in these accounts is assumed as self-evident. Such ‘naturalisation’ of heterosexuality has been challenged by feminist work (for example Barrett and McIntosh, 1991; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1993; Richardson, 1996)<sup>6</sup>. In addition, assumptions of a necessary dyadic relationship disregard the relationships of those living outwith the (hetero)sexual couple. As Jamieson argues, intimacy can be conceived of as about other things than the ‘pure relationship’, and cannot be assumed just to exist in close associations (Jamieson, 1999). Expanding our capacity to picture varied social relationships extends the possibility of ‘plural paths’ to intimacy (Simon, 1987:110); privileging the (hetero)sexual couple limits creativity in forming relationships and denies the opportunity to form primary relationships which are *not sexual* (Dunne, 1997:14, emphasis in original).

Lewis states that there has been “widespread academic support for the idea of increased individualism as a major explanation for family change” (Lewis, 2001:8). However there are varying notions of individualism evident in different accounts, which relate to differing conceptions of the self and of the role of agency<sup>7</sup>. Giddens’ optimistic account develops earlier ideas on the concept of the reflexive self (for example in *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 1991) and assumes agents reflexively negotiating relationships of sexual and emotional equality. However other accounts see an increase in singleness less as a consequence of individual choice than as an outcome of powerful cultural pressures that

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<sup>6</sup> Theoretical analyses of heterosexuality emphasise the importance of considering heterosexuality as an ‘institution’, and of not conflating heterosexuality as an institution with sexual desire or sexual acts (Jackson, 1996)

<sup>7</sup> Meanings attached to individualism range from independence and self-reliance to self-interest and normlessness (Gordon, 1994); a detailed analysis of the distinctions between these is outwith the scope of this paper, however feminist critiques of different conceptions of individualism are discussed below. The notion of individualism predominant in these debates is based on a conception of absolute individuals responsible for the course of their own lives.



undermine the foundations of enduring relationships. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, for example, ascribe familial changes to the demands of modern market economies that force men and women to build lives of their own “at the cost of commitments to family, relations and friends” (1995:6)<sup>8</sup>.

Singleness is often problematised in such accounts, both for the individuals themselves, and for wider society. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim for example portray single people as “pursuing ideas like independence, diversity, variety, continually leafing over new pages of their egos, long after the dream has started to resemble a nightmare” (1995:4), and draw attention to the ‘emerging’ problem “affecting those women who pursue an independent career but must in many cases pay a high price, the loneliness of the professionally successful woman” (1995:63).

The way singleness is experienced is an empirical question. Women who remain outwith normative expectations of marriage and motherhood however are often constituted as culpable in ‘pro-family’ discourses (Faludi, 1992; Campbell, 1993). Single women in particular are at risk of being depicted as strident individualists characterised by their lack of connection to significant others (Chandler, 1991). Popular representations of contemporary spinsterhood connote anxieties about isolation and rejection<sup>9</sup>, while empirical research indicates unmarried childless women are perceived as selfish, lonely, and shirking their duty (Lees, 1999:65).

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<sup>8</sup> In recent work the Becks explicitly differentiate their notion of institutionalised individualism from a neo-liberal idea of the free-market individual based on an ideological notion of the autarkic human self; they argue that while processes of individualization paradoxically compel people to create not only their own biographies but the bonds and networks surrounding these, this does not necessarily preclude the possibility of an ethic of ‘altruistic individualism’ (2002: 4).

<sup>9</sup> For example Bridget Jones’ fears of dying alone and being found ‘three weeks later half-eaten by an Alsatian’ (Fielding, 1999).

This paper draws on ongoing empirical research on the familial and social networks of contemporary spinsters which finds that these play a central role in their lives, substantiating other empirical research on never-married women (see Allen, 1989). For the purposes of this paper however I look particularly at the caring relationships of contemporary spinsters as daughters and mothers. Spinsterhood has historically been explained in terms of obligations to care for parents and wider family members (Hill, 2001); however, aspects of the socio-economic situation of the participants in this study epitomize wider social changes which are often taken as signifiers of a 'decline' in family values, such as women participating in the labour force, living alone, being lone mothers, and being unmarried.

Caring has traditionally been construed as a normative element of femininity, and feminism has drawn attention to the importance of relations in the private sphere through which gender identity is reproduced. Much feminist work has addressed inequalities women face in social relationships (see for example Moller Okin, 1991); feminism has also drawn attention to the way in which the individuality of women has been "sacrificed to the 'constitutive definitions' of her identity as member of a family, as someone's daughter, as someone's wife, as someone's mother" (Benhabib and Cornell, 1987:13).

However feminism has long been critical of the notion of 'individualism' that has characteristically typified western liberal democracies for its gender-specificity and for ignoring social relations of power in the context in which such individualism operates (see for example Pateman, 1988). Versions of individuality based on masculinist ideals of the

autonomous self have been exposed as a myth; rather, people are *necessarily* interdependent given the development of persons requires relations of dependency with others (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000). Androcentric notions of individuality serve to render invisible the necessary caring work for others that is overwhelmingly undertaken by women. This paper draws on a reconceptualised notion of autonomy that recognises people as socially embedded and shaped by a complex of intersecting social determinants, such as race, class, gender and ethnicity (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000:4). This notion challenges a conception of individualism that values substantive independence; rather, relational autonomy encompasses the values of caring and responsibility that arise from necessary relations of interdependence and interconnection with others.

Caring work has been conceived of as a ‘labour of love’, a notion that crucially incorporates material and symbolic dimensions (Graham, 1983). The revaluing of both these dimensions of unpaid work has long been argued for by feminists working on social policy issues (for example Finch and Groves, 1983), and those proposing an ethic of care (see for example Tronto, 1993). Those who seek to avoid a potential reification of caring as an essential dimension of female identity have drawn attention to the need for both an ethic of care and an ethic of justice (see for example Benhabib, 1987; West, 1997).

In this paper I argue that caring responsibilities undertaken by contemporary spinsters indicate that inter-related societal changes, such as people living alone or remaining single, does not necessarily mean a decline in caring obligations and commitments in intimate relationships; rather, the research findings demonstrate values of caring and

responsibility. However, they also draw attention to the ways in which gendered norms impact on women's lives. I argue that the various ways in which these caring relationships are enacted support arguments about an increasing diversity in family practices, and conclude that this research illustrates the progressive potential of such diversity.

### **Methodology and Terminology**

Defining singleness is problematic. Partnership status is dynamic and subject to change over the life course, while meanings of singleness shift in relation to changes such as the increasing incidence of cohabitation; both factors contribute to the difficulty in presenting singleness as a robust conceptual category. Singleness as a civic status means never-married, however it has increasingly come to mean being currently unpartnered and may refer to the separated and divorced (Kiernan, 1999), while being never-married does not preclude being in a cohabiting relationship.

The terminology available to describe never-married women is also problematic: terms such as 'spinster', 'old maid', 'celibate', may nowadays be viewed negatively or be inaccurate, however 'never-married' has the disadvantage of negatively defining people by what they are not. Much research on 'single' women includes the 'ever-married', such as the widowed and divorced. Singleness is defined for the purposes of this research as never-married and not currently in a cohabiting relationship. I use the term spinster in this paper to distinguish these women from the 'ever-married', and use the term 'single' when referring to research which includes the widowed and divorced.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted taking a 'life-history' approach. Qualitative interpretative research methodologies have come to be seen as 'quintessentially feminist' (Maynard and Purvis, 1994); however, all research methodologies are supported and framed by a particular view of the social and how the social can be known. This analysis represents a particular understanding of the meanings and experiences of the caring relationships in which women were embedded, based on a specific set of discourses derived from interviews set in a particular cultural context.

Looking at the specificity of certain gendered, classed and raced constructs potentially avoids the traps of generalising (Smart, 1992:10). The intention of this research study is not to make claims on behalf of all single women, rather it aims to explore in detail a specific set of women, and the data is drawn from in-depth interviews with thirty-seven white heterosexual spinsters aged over thirty-five from a range of social backgrounds. All women interviewed had not been in a cohabiting relationship for at least five years and defined themselves as single. However, three women were in non-cohabiting relationships with men, described variously as 'intermittent' and 'casual'; none of the women intended these would become cohabiting relationships. Interviews took place mainly in the central belt of Scotland, with five in London and one in the South West of England. Pseudonyms are employed throughout.

### **Spinsters As Daughters And Mothers**

Looking after parents or other family members has traditionally represented a socially acceptable explanation of spinsterhood as related to caring and duty, while still within the control of the family. Previous research on the parental obligations of spinsters has explained these in

terms of a ‘family strategy’ of keeping one daughter at home to ensure the well-being of parents in the absence of the welfare state (Allen, 1989; Gordon, 1994).

Several women interviewed for this study had cared for parents, however this was undertaken in a variety of ways, and not all remained in the parental home. Three women did continue living with their parents until their death, however others had had parents move in to their homes, or to live nearby. Another cared for her mother through a protracted illness by spending three days a week in her mother’s home.

Seven of the participants were mothers; two had had unplanned pregnancies and were not in a relationship on the birth of their child (though one subsequently lived with the father for a period of months), one participant had a child while in a long-term cohabiting relationship, and another while in an ongoing non-cohabiting relationship. Three women had ‘opted into’ motherhood via artificial insemination and adoption. There is very little information specifically about ‘solo mothers’, women who choose to have children while not in a relationship, and the solo mothers in this sample did not match the profile of never-married lone mothers as typically younger, poorer, less likely to be working and more likely to be in receipt of benefit (Kiernan and Wood, 1996). The ‘solo mothers’ in this sample had their children in their thirties and forties<sup>10</sup> and had above average incomes when in full-time employment.

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<sup>10</sup> The average age of women giving birth was 29 in 2000 (Women and Equality Unit, 2002).

The overwhelming majority of participants lived alone, or had done so prior to having children<sup>11</sup>. Living alone is a modern aspect of spinsterhood; unmarried women historically typically lived in the households of employers or other family members (Vicinus, 1985). Seven women lived in social housing and four rented privately, however the majority of women owned their own home. This can be seen as a particularly important aspect of financial security for women who do not have access to a husband's wage or occupational pension, and depend in the main on their earnings in a context of a persistent gender pay gap<sup>12</sup>; while the majority of participants were or had been in paid employment, this was not necessarily consistent, full-time or well-paid<sup>13</sup>. The economic marginality and reliance on state welfare benefits of some participants illustrate that female labour force participation per se does not guarantee financial independence<sup>14</sup>.

Single people living alone have been perceived as 'in a conspicuously isolated, lonely, and therefore vulnerable situation' (Adams, 1981:222). However, the interviews indicate that participants generally experienced living alone positively and in some cases with great pleasure. The majority of women expressed a preference for living alone and had no immediate plans to change their living status. The proportion of people

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<sup>11</sup> At the time of interview, 29 women lived alone (of whom 3 were living in supported social housing, in independent flats); of the others, 1 lived with a lodger, 3 in the parental home and 4 with their dependent children.

<sup>12</sup> Women full-time workers in the UK in 2000 earned 82% of men's hourly full-time wage; the ratio of women's part-time earnings to men's full-time earnings is close to 60% (Women and Equality Unit, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> This was reflected in the range of income reported. The employment and occupational status of participants corresponds with previous research findings of unmarried women as more likely to have higher qualifications and high status occupations (Kiernan, 1988); however, ten women reported an annual income less than the £11,200 median income for women in the UK in 2000 (Women and Equality Unit, 2002). Income for other women ranged from £12,000 to £70,000, however some of these figures related to previous full-time employment, and several women had returned to studying or were working part-time at the time of interview.

<sup>14</sup> Although in some respects gender inequalities have narrowed in Britain during the past two decades in the context of a more liberal labour market, increasing material inequalities in Britain have meant that there is evidence of widening class differences between women (Breugel and Perrons, 1996).

living alone in Britain has increased significantly over the past twenty years<sup>15</sup>, and estimates suggest single person households will be the predominant household type in 2010, accounting for almost 40% of households (Scase, 2000:24). Recent research identifies both demographic changes and a changing propensity to live alone as factors explaining this rise (Ogden, Hall and Hill, 1997).

Some women had made significant choices, for example about where to live and patterns of work, in relation to their caring responsibilities for both parents and children. These caring responsibilities had evidently shaped the lives of some of the participants in major ways, and the actions of several women suggested considerable personal cost, however this was rarely specified as such. Overwhelmingly, the women who had looked after parents spoke about this in terms which indicated both their willingness and pleasure at being able to do so. Participants who were mothers did not talk about looking after their children in such overt terms of pleasure and willingness, and this may be due to the naturalisation of motherhood; seen as a component facet of normative femininity, this caring relationship may not be open to the same scrutiny as that of spinsters caring for parents. Living with parents particularly was described in a somewhat ‘defensive’ tone and often depicted as sharing a household, with reciprocity and continued autonomy emphasised. The following excerpts demonstrate these themes. Tricia had bought a bungalow to enable her elderly father to live with her until his death, and stated she was “happy to have the chance to do it”. Her father had previously lived with her married sister:

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<sup>15</sup> There are marked differences between men and women. In 1998/99, 8% of adult women under pensionable age were living alone, compared to 13% of men; however, this is reversed for older people, as women tend to outlive men (ONS Social Trends, 2000).



“Dad was wandering around doing his own thing, and I was wandering round doing my own thing. We happened to share a house” [Tricia, 43]

Franny remained in the parental home and continued living with her father after her mother died when Franny was 29 due to her father’s ill-health. She has worked full time since leaving school at 17, and has no siblings:

“I lived with my parents because my father was ill [...] and he needed a fair bit of support. So until he died, I lived in the family home [...] It was fine, I mean obviously if circumstances had been different I could have got my own place, but we got on fine [...] It was more like two friends sharing. I used to cook, because I was good at cooking, but he would do the DIY because he was good at that [...] And instead of sharing a flat with friends, actually I lived with my dad. It worked out perfectly well” [Franny, 58]

However, Franny later describes her father’s worsening ill-health in terms that indicate the experience was somewhat onerous:

“It was fairly traumatic, he was in and out of hospital, and they were going to operate and then they weren’t, you know the usual. I was fairly tired, it was only afterwards I realised it had taken a bit out of me” [Franny, 58]

Olive had left home at 17 and returned to the parental home at 20 when her mother became terminally ill; she looked after her mother and after her mother’s death she continued living with her father until his death. Olive continued working full-time throughout. She has one married brother. The following excerpts illustrates both the voluntaristic and reciprocal character of her relationship with her father, and the costs incurred:

“I think my father and I each thought ‘the other one may not pull through without my help’ – so, we battled on and managed to survive through what was a very painful time”

“My father’s health wasn’t that great [...] when my mother died he was in his 60’s, and I felt he almost felt he did not want to go on living. But (pause) I suppose in a way that affected me, I use to put in for jobs that were temporary, maybe a move to London for a year, then when my father wasn’t that well I just scrubbed it [...] I did, sort of, to a certain extent, tailor what I did to look after him, you know I was thinking ‘was I Daddy’s girl?’, [...] but I would have done it for my mother as well”

“I must admit when my mother was so ill, my work load was very heavy in addition to my home responsibilities” [Olive, 71]

While some participant’s accounts of caring for parents were expressed in terms of filial affection, some also reported acting to support parents to whom they were not emotionally close. Louise gave up her first full-time permanent job in order to support her mother during her stepfather’s illness. Louise was out of work for five months, and later gave financial reasons for not undertaking plans to travel abroad. She had earlier described leaving school at 16 as she did not get on with her stepfather and her priority was to get a job in order to leave the parental home, which she did at 17. She had not maintained contact with her stepfather, and was not close to her mother. Louise had lived with her biological father until she was 6, however subsequently had no contact with him prior to his death when she was 16:

“And with my step dad quite ill, I thought well, at the end of the day you can always get other jobs, but I really should be here, and putting in the time here sort of thing [...] So I thought, I would never get the chance to be there for my real dad, so I was like, well I really wanted to be there just to give my support sort of thing”

“With my step dad, all in all I wasn’t actually working full-time for five months [...] And I actually got more money put on to my mortgage to kind of tide me through those five months, so savings and that, I did use up the last of them as well” [Louise, 37]

The interviews indicate considerable altruism in the actions some single women had undertaken in support of parents; this was not only motivated by feelings of affection, but also a sense of responsibility. The interviews also illustrate the ways in which undertaking caring for others shapes women’s lives. These caring relationships had consequences for participants: choices such as where to live, stopping work or working part-time, and ‘delaying’ other projects such as to travel or move abroad were referred to in relation to responsibilities to parents. However, caring for parents was not reported as burdensome, and on occasion discussed in terms indicating pleasure at the opportunity to do so.

The role of ‘caring’ undertaken by the seven mothers in this study similarly illustrates the way caring responsibilities impact on women’s lives. Most had or were undertaking the majority of childcare themselves<sup>16</sup>. However, mothers with pre-school age children also used a mix of formal childcare (child-minders or nursery care); two also had regular support from parents and siblings, and one child’s father also provided occasional support. All except one mother had or were combining childcare with paid employment, however this included working shifts, part-time or intermittently in casual jobs. Five of the participants had children under 16 at time of interview; of these, only one worked full-time (though another had prior to having her second child). These mothers commented on the high costs of formal childcare, and the financial implications of reduced working hours. Some considered their

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<sup>16</sup> One participant’s child was in local authority care, living with her only at weekends.

work environment, characterised by a long working hours culture, as inimical to working mothers. Most of the mothers had considered alternative employment and retraining on having their children.

“I always worked in very male dominated work places, no matter who you were you were expected to stay late [...] In the last place that I worked [...] it was not family friendly. If you were young and single and you would stand on your head for them [...] I felt that I was made redundant because I had a child” [Birgit, 44].

“The men who were at my level and who married and did have children, almost inevitably to women who were happy to give up working. Because the hours they worked you couldn’t have a nanny, because nannies will only stay till 6” [Brenda, 37]

The findings of this research confirms findings from other research demonstrating that people take the issue of their obligations to each other seriously (see for example Finch and Mason, 1993; Smart and Neale, 1999). However, the interviews with participants also highlight the complex character of caring as work that encompasses emotional bonds. Graham emphasises the need to avoid a focus on the exploitation of women’s labour which underplays the symbolic bonds that hold the caring relationship together<sup>17</sup> (Graham, 1983:29); nevertheless, these interviews support feminist work which points to the costs of undertaking informal caring work, either as mothers or daughters.

‘Labour of love’ does not mean the absence of exploitation, and long standing feminist concerns with issues of power and equality within families have highlighted the various axes, such as gender and age, along which this can occur, despite a familial ideology of the family as a mutually supportive unit (see for example Barrett and McIntosh, 1991).

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<sup>17</sup> Graham simultaneously highlights the need to avoid a ‘psychological perspective’ which risks essentialising care (Graham, 1983:29).

This is illustrated in an interview with a participant living with her mother<sup>18</sup>. Debra had moved in with her divorced mother on returning to full-time studying at 26 for financial reasons, and continued to living there with her youngest brother Ben, 28; both worked full time. She described her family as very close, and her mother as her “best friend”. Debra spoke about her unwillingness to go out on New Year’s Eve, as she would not like to leave her mother on her own. Debra clearly cared about<sup>19</sup> and felt concern for her mother, however described a situation in which much of her domestic work was undertaken by her retired mother, whom Debra stated loved “looking after her children!”.

“They all go, ‘Oh you’re not still living at home with your Mum!’ (disdainful tone) and I say ‘Absolutely. She does all my washing and ironing, she has all my meals ready for me at any time and I don’t do any kind of housework. [...] I get tea in bed, I get out the bed, there’s nothing to do, it’s really good” [Debra, 37]

This description of being cared for by her mother can be read as somewhat defensive in light of the negative perceptions of others about living in the maternal home; however, looking after her adult children clearly involved work for Debra’s mother. Debra’s interview suggested she perceived her relationship with her divorced mother as reciprocal, with Debra providing companionship in exchange for the caring work that Debra perceived her mother as enjoying (her mother was not interviewed).

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<sup>18</sup> While the ages of all participants when interviewed ranged from 35 to 83, just over half (19) were under 45. Two of this younger cohort had been involved in caring for parents, however this was not yet an issue for most of these younger participants. Three of these younger participants were currently living in the parental home.

<sup>19</sup> Ungerson distinguishes between ‘caring about’ and ‘caring for’; the former denotes feelings of affection, but has little implication for how people spend their time (except that they might want to spend it together). The latter refers to servicing their needs, and involves time on the part of the carer (Ungerson, 1983:31).

Lloyd argues the need to challenge an orthodoxy that presents informal care as no more, no less, than unpaid labour performed out of duty by women, and suggests a distinction between ‘responsibility’ and ‘duty’ for the welfare of others, with the former connoting an affirmative action and the latter understood as implying some degree of reluctance or perceived lack of choice (Lloyd, 2001:723). The notion of relational autonomy encompasses the view that the identities of agents, as intrinsically relational, are in part constituted by elements of the social context in which they are embedded (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2001). Gendered expectations shape the range of options that are socially and culturally available to agents. The excerpt above highlights the need to consider the way in which such expectations, including those one may have of oneself, constitute the context in which an agent makes ‘choices’ about caring for others. As such, gendered expectations may blur the distinction between responsibility and duty suggested by Lloyd.

The interviews illustrate that not just gender but also marital status shape familial expectations about caring obligations. Participants who took on caring responsibilities for parents varied in terms of whether they had siblings, and whether they felt their unmarried status and/or sex was significant in shaping who looked after parents. Some participants referred to an expectation that caring for parents would be done by unmarried children. For others, this expectation was specifically in relation to being an unmarried, childless daughter. The interviews indicated that several participants had experienced an expectation that caring for parents was incumbent on them as spinsters. However, they also illustrate alternative responses to those expectations, illustrated in the excerpts below.

Wendy has two sisters and a brother, all who married; she undertook caring for her mother who was ill for a year before her death:

“That’s when my singleness really came into play [...] When my mother was ill I fully realised the expectations from both my mother and from the rest of the family, that I was to look after her” [Wendy, 54].

One sister told Wendy she should give up her work to care for her mother; she continued working full-time out of financial necessity, however rearranged her workload to enable her to stay three days a week with her mother. She stated she had four days off during the year her mother was ill. Following her mother’s death she subsequently developed ME and had to give up working. She later described a wish to live with others, a desired community she described as “a surrogate family” that would be there for her in a way that her biological family “certainly hasn’t been”.

Nora had two sisters and three brothers, all of who are married. She had lived in London for many years, and was undertaking a degree in her forties when her mother, living in Yorkshire, became ill. She spent five weeks staying with her mother, however on learning that she was expected to remain with her mother, she returned to London and now has limited contact with her siblings:

“My mother became ill with cancer and that was when I was studying [...] and I went up to help her [...] and so I said to them [siblings] ‘look, I’ve been here for 5 weeks, I’m willing to go on a rota with you’, so that someone could come and live with her. And when I said this to them the reaction – my brother said ‘look, you haven’t got a family, we’ve got families, it should be your job’ [...]

So I said ‘forget it, it’s your problem’. So I just went back to London” [Nora, 70].

Nora’s excerpt illustrates the decision to ‘opt out’ of what she perceived as an unfair situation. Other interviews similarly demonstrate participants eschewing what they perceived as oppressive family relationships, and several of the women in the study had no or only limited contact with their family of origin. However, while some women had limited their contact with their families because of problematic relationships, this decision was also experienced as difficult.

Mary reported having problems with her father and difficulties in her family. She left home at 19 due to the ongoing problems with her family, which she described as impacting on her early adulthood:

“I became depressed because of what was happening with my dad”  
[Mary, 36]

For a brief period in her twenties she returned to the parental home out of financial necessity, which she described as follows: “and, the worst happened, I had to move back to my mum and dad’s”. Mary currently has no contact with her family. She is working full-time, and lives in social housing.

Margaret described her father as an alcoholic prone to ‘towering rages’; as a consequence she had cut off contact with her family for many years. She worked full-time and lives in accommodation connected to her employment. She had learnt recently that her younger sister and brother had had “a very, very hard time” as children, which she felt “bad” about,



despite describing limiting contact with her family as something she had to do:

“I stopped going to see them because I was so terrified [...] I couldn't cope with it, I literally just had to break away. For sanity and for self preservation I just had to just draw a line under it and not go to see them [...] I mean I have seen him a couple of times more in the last couple of years, but there was a time when I just (pause) couldn't”

“So I know now that she and my youngest brother had a very, very hard time [...] I feel, you know, well I went off and left them. And I do feel bad about that, you know, I do feel very bad” [Margaret, 46]

Much feminist work has addressed the power inequalities hidden within an ideological entronement of the family (see for example Barrett and McIntosh, 1991; Delphy and Leonard, 1992). Some of the interviews challenge an ideology of the family as provider of moral and material support; rather, these support feminist critiques of the social and economic inequalities connected with the family. As the excerpts above illustrate, some women had ‘opted-out’ of relationships with their families of origin; however, their accounts indicate decisions to do so were not made lightly, and were perceived less as a ‘choice’ than a necessary response to an untenable familial situation. The possibility of rejecting oppressive family relationships has been enabled for these women in part by wider societal changes such as labour force participation and the development of the welfare state. These interviews illustrate the way in which various factors such as gendered expectations, familial relationships, and the material options available, constitute the contexts that shape the ‘choices’ individuals can make.

## CONCLUSION

This paper looks at the relationships of care and obligation in which single women are involved as daughters and mothers in order to examine some of the claims made in relation to increasing individualism and contemporary changes in familial and social relationships. These changes have been interpreted as indicating the 'decline of the family', as people opt for the independence and autonomy of adulthood without the responsibilities of marriage and parenthood (Goldscheider and Waite, 1991); changes such as increases in living alone or remaining unmarried are seen as thus representing a decline in commitment and obligation to others, and argued as having negative consequences for wider society.

However, this research shows contemporary spinsters willingly undertaking caring commitments to parents and children. Rather than a decline in commitment to others, the interviews illustrate an increasing diversity in the way caring relationships are performed. This highlights the value and importance of a focus on what Morgan (1996) refers to as 'family practices', how individuals actively 'do' family, over a moribund and exclusive focus on a particular family structure. Such a focus limits the ability to account fully for the practices and meanings of the range of interpersonal relationships in which individuals may be embedded. Looking at the caring practices of spinsters as daughters and mothers challenges assumptions about the hegemony of the traditional family and establishes that the increasing diversity in family forms, possible in the context of changing societal and cultural conditions of contemporary Western societies, does not necessarily mean a decline in commitment and obligation to others.

Changing family structures have been understood as both the ‘cause and effect’ of macro-societal changes (Silva and Smart, 1999) and as reflecting the breakdown of ‘traditional narratives and legitimising discourses’ (Weeks, Donovan and Heaphy, 1999). Spinsters have traditionally undertaken caring responsibilities, however this research indicates these are now being undertaken in a significantly changed context, and include practices such as single women maintaining their own households and opting in to lone motherhood. In addition, these findings support other empirical research emphasising that, although ties to family of origin remain highly significant, they cannot be assumed, and are as much a product of negotiation as of consanguinity (Finch and Mason, 1993). Beck-Gernsheim addresses the negotiated nature of ‘post-familial families’, describing these as bound by ‘elective affinities’ (Beck-Gernsheim, 1998). Weeks, Donovan and Heaphy (1999) refer to the ‘new narratives about non-heterosexual relationships’ emerging from their research on ‘families of choice’.

In contrast to pessimistic accounts of the decline of the family, this research highlights the progressive potential for individuals to ‘create’ intimate relations, demonstrated in this research both by the women who chose to become mothers and those who limited contact with their family of origin. Notions of ‘families of choice’ also incorporate the option of choosing not to maintain relationships. However, while caring responsibilities and commitments may increasingly be a matter of negotiation, they do not change randomly and suddenly. Contemporary societal changes may enable more options for some women, however such choices are not unconstrained nor inconsequential (Silva and Smart, 1999). As Jamieson argues “personal relationships are not typically

shaped in whatever way gives pleasure without the taint of practical, economic and other material circumstances' (Jamieson, 1999:482).

This research supports a notion of 'choice' as contextually situated; the social relationships in which people are embedded are influenced by factors such as gender, and women are positioned differently in the material, social and emotional world. Much theoretical and empirical work has addressed the importance of gendered moral understandings underpinning caring obligations (see for example Gilligan, 1992; Duncan and Edwards, 1999). Caring is culturally defined as 'women's work', however this research indicates familial expectations about caring are mediated by both gender *and* partnership status. Traditionally spinsters could not 'offset' wider familial demands with the claims of their own partners and children (Simon, 1987). The interviews demonstrate that the expectation that caring for dependent family members is the duty particularly of spinsters, regardless of other commitments, is enduring and pervasive. Such expectations thus continue to form part of the contexts within which such choices are made.

The caring responsibilities undertaken by contemporary spinsters in this research challenge accounts of the impact of individualism on intimate relationships. This research also suggests that the conception of individuality on which these are based may be radically misconceived. Giddens' depiction of the personal sphere as emancipated from the needs of reproduction and kinship, and of adults choosing to maintain relationships to the extent they remain personally advantageous<sup>20</sup>, cannot

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<sup>20</sup> Giddens lauds contemporary women as 'pioneers' who are not simply entering a male world through the adoption of instrumental values; however, his depiction of the pure relationship indicates it is instrumental, held together by the acceptance on the part of each partner that each gains sufficient

account for the role of caring in women's lives. While Beck and Beck-Gernsheim are concerned in more recent work to establish that their conception of individualization does not imply the autarkic human self, earlier work seemed to "equate processes of individualization with the abandonment of ethics and rampant self-interest" (Smart and Neale, 1999:16). This research on contemporary spinsters as mothers and daughters supports a more interdependent conception of the individual, "one that may depend upon a more relational sense of self, that understands personhood as integrally bound up with others (Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards, 2001:771).

This research also highlights the value of the notion of relational autonomy to women's social relationships. A conception of individuals as interdependent and interconnected can also encompass a questioning of the particular social relationships in which they may be embedded, and this research on the familial relationships of contemporary spinsters highlights the importance of an ethics that encompasses care and justice. However, it also entails the questioning of expectations that women make the preservation of certain interpersonal relationships their highest concern, regardless of the costs to themselves. Changes in contemporary western societies, such as increasing educational and employment opportunities for some women, have meant many women no longer need to accommodate themselves uncritically to relational ties to sustain themselves (Friedman, 2000). The analysis of the familial relationships of contemporary spinsters supports earlier empirical research which concludes that modern single women try to balance out their need for intimacy and independence, striving to balance these in symmetrical

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benefit from the relationship to make its continuance worthwhile 'until further notice' (Giddens, 1992:63).

relationships, “not as isolated heroes of their own lives, but in interaction with others” (Gordon, 1994: 177).

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