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Revitalising Intimacy Research Through a Focus on Intimate Inequalities, Ruptures and Dissonances

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sro**Katherine Twamley**

University College London, UK

Jenny van Hooff 

Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

Abstract

This article revisits and reimagines dominant theoretical approaches in the sociology of intimacy. Drawing on empirical research with mixed-sex couples, we use in-depth case studies to illustrate our intervention in this scholarship. We begin with an overview of the prevailing themes in couple intimacy research, noting an overwhelming focus on mutual and agentic processes, driven largely by the legacy of individualisation theory. This has led to a tendency to study how intimacy is practised or achieved but with less attention to how it may be disrupted or impeded. Through two case studies – one exploring couples' transitions to parenthood and the other examining infidelity in relationships – we argue that relying on individualisation as a frame limits the analytical potential of intimacy research. Our analysis shows how practices of intimacy within couples are not always aligned, as structural conditions shape and constrain individuals' capacity to sustain intimate connections. We propose a shift in focus to the ruptures and constraints that hinder intimacy, in order to better understand how structural conditions produce inequalities in intimate life, alongside the factors that enable connection.

Keywords

couples, gender, infidelity, intimacy, parenthood, personal life

Introduction

This article revisits dominant theoretical approaches to the sociology of intimacy, specifically the individualisation framework that has long served as the bedrock of contemporary British sociology, arguing that it is time for a revitalisation of intimacy theory and

Corresponding author:

Katherine Twamley, Thomas Coram Research Unit, UCL Social Research Institute, University College London, 55-59 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0NU, UK.

Email: katherine.twamley@ucl.ac.uk

focus. We trace the ways in which questions around the links between intimacy and individualisation have shaped intimacy research and argue that while important in understanding contemporary intimate life, we need to go beyond this framing in advancing intimacy scholarship. We propose shifting focus towards ruptures and impediments to intimacy and relating, alongside the conditions which allow intimacy to flourish, thus highlighting the structural conditions which create inequalities in intimate life.

Drawing on two in-depth case studies, we highlight the need for greater attention to inequalities within and across couple relationships, particularly around gender, ethnicity and access to material resources. We echo the critiques of scholars such as Butler and Vincent (2024) and Carter and Duncan (2018), who emphasise the neglect of institutional and unequal dynamics in couple research. For us, this means going beyond a practices of intimacy framework which we argue has resulted in an overemphasis on agency and mutual negotiation in intimate couple relationships. Our case studies reveal that understandings of intimate practices are not always aligned and that couple relationships can involve disconnections alongside intimacy. In particular we highlight how social institutions and structural conditions impact intimate relating, thus allowing attention to how inequalities shape intimate attachments and practices both within and across couples. We argue that this has been sorely neglected in wider intimacy scholarship but is more urgent than ever in a time of heightened disparities.

Intimacy in couple relationships

Intimate relationships have been and continue to be a primary focus for *Sociological Research Online* (SRO) reflecting a broader sociological shift in attention to intimacy or personal life over the past 30 years. A dominant strand in this research has been focussed on the ways in which intimacy has changed over time. This was sparked by an influential group of scholars in the 1990s and early 2000s who claimed that processes of individualisation and detraditionalisation had transformed intimacy. In sum, their argument was that intimate relationships in the past were governed by moral frameworks of families and local communities. Individuals were once expected to marry someone of the opposite sex and adopt conventional gender roles. Scholars such as Bauman (2003) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 2002) argue that the rise of individualism weakened these norms, contributing to the fragility of couple relationships and greater diversity in relational forms and gendered practices. While individualisation practices existed in the past, these theorists note that they now permeate across socio-cultural groups, though their focus was on Western Europe. Similarly, Eva Illouz (2012) examines the decline of moral communities that once guided romantic decision-making, arguing that individuals today must rely on their own reflexive and rational thought processes when choosing a partner.

Giddens (1991, 1992) makes similar but more optimistic observations. He argues that the dissolution of traditional family and gender roles was an opportunity for the new 'pure relationship' to flourish – an intense couple connection noted for its gender equality – which exists solely for the satisfaction and pleasure of the couple (and therefore may end when such satisfaction is no longer met). This form of intimacy is *also* disembedded from family and community and freed from the constraints of class and gender.

Research published in SRO has been at the forefront of a debate over the extent and nature of a transformation of intimate life, within the context of wider social changes (Harris et al., 2006). Four previous special issues of SRO (Anderson and Ettore, 2006; Carter, 2022a; Faircloth and Twamley, 2015; Gabb and Silva, 2011) have focussed on intimacy and many other articles published on this topic. A number of these have shown that couple relationship practices are far from being liberated of gendered inequalities, a key tenet of the individualisation thesis (Twamley, 2012; van Hooff, 2015; Al Hourani, 2023). For example, Milton and Qureshi (2021) discuss how for midlife female divorcees, feminine notions of respectability undermine narratives of self-discovery and fulfilment. Other research demonstrates the persistence of gender inequalities in childcare and domestic work (Chowbey, 2017; Christopher, 2021; Faircloth, 2015; Twamley and Faircloth, 2024; Morris, 2015; van Hooff 2016) and sexual practices (van Hooff, 2015). In the conclusion of a paper by Twamley (2012), for example, she writes that Giddens's claims that 'modern intimate' relationships will necessarily entail greater equality between the sexes was clearly disproven.

Other articles have questioned the degree to which 'tradition' has lost its sway over intimate life. Carter (2017, 2022b) shows that tradition continues to play a part in young women's marital aspirations, as people make decisions about their personal lives pragmatically, in connection with others not only relationally, but institutionally (Duncan, 2011). Similarly Heaphy's research with same sex couples (a group heralded by Giddens (1991, 1992) as at the forefront of the development of the pure relationship) highlights 'how traditionally regulative conventions are not superseded by, but are incorporated into, emergent contemporary conventions' (Heaphy, 2018, final paragraph). Other scholars contend that even with a greater diversity of relationship forms, a hierarchy of intimacy persists, with certain relationships prioritised and idealised (Budgeon, 2008; Roseneil et al., 2020). Budgeon (2008) argues that monogamous couple relationships, reinforced by ideologies of family and marriage, remain central to normative sexual practices, regulating the acceptability of intimate relationships. Research in SRO has shown how the couple norm structures living arrangements (Holmes, 2006; Roseneil, 2006) and limits intimacy between friends (Martinussen, 2019), while homophobia continues to inhibit same-sex intimacies (Formby, 2022).

Meanwhile research conducted beyond Euroamerican contexts has explored whether and to what degree such transformations of intimacy are observed elsewhere (Al Hourani, 2023; Twamley, 2012). For example, research on the intimate practices of young Emirati married couples (Al Hourani, 2023) found that gender inequalities suppressed 'disclosing intimacy', as increasing empowerment of women in the public sphere is not reproduced in the home. These studies help to nuance the contours of detraditionalisation theories, although we agree that concepts developed by and within the Global South might provide richer explanatory value (Donner and Santos, 2016; Jamieson, 2011).

Together these studies can be said to categorically show how there hasn't been a straightforward process of individualisation, but rather, as Carter and Duncan write a 'blurred distinction between what is modern and what is traditional' in intimate everyday life (Carter and Duncan, 2018: 212). They resolve the tension through proposing a 'bricolage' approach to studying intimate life, but this arguably still keeps the individualisation-traditional thesis at the conceptual forefront.

This focus to date, whether on refuting or reconciling theses of detraditionalisation, has set the agenda in intimacy studies in several ways. One is the substantive focus outlined above (such as agreeing/refuting/contextualising individualisation and attendant aspects, such as whether gender equality is truly an underlying basis of contemporary couple relationships). Another attendant outcome is that as researchers have tended to study the various ways in which intimacy may be understood and practised (and therefore whether intimacy can be said to be more individualised or not), the ways in which intimacy is *achieved* has been an analytical focus. Most commonly cited in this regard is the intimate practices frame developed by Lynn Jamieson (2011), drawing on David Morgan's (1996, 2011) concept of family practices. The practised based approach to studying intimacy enables a move away from predefined institutional frameworks in defining intimacy, instead focussing on 'practices which cumulatively and in combination enable, create and sustain a sense of a close and special quality of a relationship between people' (Jamieson 2011: 2:1). This approach allows for the uncovering of new and enduring modes of relating (Gabb, 2011), but the focus on practices has two unintended consequences: First, it overlooks ruptures and impediments to intimate connection (since the focus is on how intimacy is sustained) and second, it can lead to an emphasis on agency at the expense of attention to structural constraints (Heaphy, 2011; Morgan, 2013). These concerns are particularly pressing in today's landscape of polycrises (Torkington, 2023), where inequalities have not only become deeply entrenched but also increasingly intertwined with other global challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic isolation periods underscored the urgency of addressing these inequalities, as the disruption of everyday life magnified the critical need for intimate connection and care. During this time, the vulnerabilities created by social, economic, and health disparities became even more apparent, illustrating how these inequalities shape, and are shaped by, intimate relationships. The crisis exposed the fragile foundations of personal and collective wellbeing, making the need for focused research on inequalities in intimate life more vital than ever (Garcia-Iglesias et al., 2024).

Yet few studies explore how differential resources (material assets, social position, cultural beliefs, and so on) as well as discrimination (racism, sexism, classism, ableism) may shape the experience of intimate coupledness, with a few notable exceptions (e.g. Butler and Vincent, 2024; Johnson and Lawler, 2005; Milton and Qureshi, 2021; Raghunathan, 2022). These studies show how inequalities are produced and reproduced in intimate life (Milton and Qureshi, 2021), or are 'bedfellows' of intimacy (Twamley and Faircloth, 2015). Further work is still needed on how intimate couple relating is less accessible to some than others. Scholars of divorce have long noted the correlation between poverty and relationship dissolution (eg Bridges and Disney, 2016) but this has largely remained outside the purview of intimacy scholars. Arguably it has been more attended to in research on parent-child intimacies, such as the work of Fletchman-Smith (2011) who traced the legacy of slavery on intergenerational relationships in Black Caribbean families and Nancy Scheper-Hughes's (1993) ethnographic research in the favelas of Northeast Brazil in which she showed how mothers' love for their newborn babies was delayed or withheld in reaction to the high mortality rate of young babies among poor mothers. More recently Benchechrone (2024) examined how UK hostile

immigration policies impede the friendships of racially minoritized mothers with insecure migration status.

In this article, we argue for a shift away from detraditionalisation as a conceptual starting point in intimacy studies, with renewed attention to ruptures and inequalities in intimate relating, in addition to the practices which sustain intimacy. Here we are inspired by the work of Ken Plummer (1996) who highlighted the ways in state policies may promote or inhibit ‘intimate citizenship’. We call for an extension to this work to consider the material and social circumstances which shape intimate relating. We work through two case studies from our research on couple intimacy to show how a reading beyond the individualisation-tradition frame can reveal the ways in which social positioning and material circumstances impact on everyday intimate couple relating.

Methods

This article presents case studies from two separate research projects to explore conceptualisations of intimacy. Following the approach of Holmes et al. (2021), we revisit existing qualitative data to address new conceptual questions, rather than radically reanalysing the studies. The selected case studies offer rich narratives of intimate couple life. Case study research is particularly suited to exploring theoretical developments (Yin, 2014), and while issues of validity and reliability are often raised (Priya, 2021), we address this by avoiding generalisations to the broader population (Yin, 2009).

Study 1

This mixed-methods longitudinal project, led by Katherine, set out to explore how understandings of intimacy in couple relationships intersect with ideals and practices around gender equality. The study was comparative in its design, aiming to explore differences and similarities in the experiences of those who do and do not share parental leave after the birth of their first child. The first part of the study was a survey of expectant parents in antenatal clinics in two hospital trusts in England in late 2016. A sub sample of 42 (21 mixed-sex couples) were recruited from the survey participants for a longitudinal qualitative follow-up. These participants were dual-earner couples at the time of recruitment. All were university-educated and in white-collar occupations.

The parents were interviewed as a couple when the mothers were 8 months pregnant, when the babies were 6 months old, and then individually when the babies were approximately 14-18 months old (after the UK leave period is over). In addition, the parents kept individual weeklong diaries at four different time points over the study period. Interviews explored meanings and ideals of intimacy and family life, intentions around and later actual divisions of care and paid work. The diaries focused more on everyday practices of intimacy. Ethical guidelines from the British Sociological Association (BSA) were followed. All participants are referred to by a pseudonym. The overall analytical approach in this study was informed by the ‘Listening Guide’ approach to analysis, as developed by Andrea Doucet (2018a,

2018b). This is a relational and narrative approach, underscoring an interest in how family and intimate meanings and practices are negotiated with others.

Study 2

Study 2 draws from a project by Jenny on the evolving dynamics of heterosexual relationships and examines the intimate lives of women in long-term relationships. This qualitative study involved in-depth interviews with eight women aged 26–39, discussing various aspects of their relationships, including domestic labour, childcare, love, sex, commitment, and finances. The study aimed to explore the sexual and intimate experiences of women, particularly focusing on the balance between intimacy and equality in these relationships.

Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling, leading to a relatively homogeneous sample of women, most of whom were white British professionals, with only two being parents. The interviews ranged from one to two and a half hours, and the data were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns and themes around intimacy, equality, and relationship expectations.

The two studies complement each other by offering distinct but connected insights into how intimacy and gender equality play out in heterosexual relationships. Study 1 provides a structured, longitudinal view of how couples negotiate intimacy in the context of shared parental responsibilities, revealing the intersection of gender norms and work-life balance during a critical life transition – parenthood. In contrast, Study 2 delves into the lived experiences of women in long-term relationships, focusing on intimacy beyond parenting roles, including sexual dynamics and emotional connections, which are less constrained by parental duties. Together, these studies highlight how intimacy and equality are mobilised differently in various relational contexts – whether structured around the demands of family life or evolving within long-term partnerships. By presenting case studies from both projects, we aim to shed light on the diverse ways in which couples navigate intimacy, revealing how these processes reflect and reproduce gendered power dynamics in contemporary relationships. The cases were selected for the thick data they present pertinent to our analysis here.

Case Study 1: Helen and Henry

Helen and Henry were recruited for Study 1, which aimed to explore the intersections of intimacy and equality via research on parental leave at the transition to parenthood (Twamley, 2024). They are first-time expectant parents at the time of recruitment, both in professional jobs. Their first interview, when Helen was 8 months pregnant, focussed largely on their sadness and frustration of being ineligible for Shared Parental Leave. They explained how a similar division of leave and parental care was essential in supporting ‘equality’ within the couple and in sustaining an intimate connection between them:

Helen: The plan is that neither of us will feel, you know, more responsible than the other or that the other person is doing it somehow wrong or inadequately

because I think that would be really awful for you as well, like I think to feel that I didn't trust you or, or whatever must be, you know, bad, and a lot of the couples I know I think they have a little bit of that, and.

Henry: Mmm. It sounds like it's also kind of a factor in your first round of friends' divorces.

Helen: Mmm, yeah.

Here we can identify how Helen and Henry drew on popular discourses around the importance of couple equality for intimacy (Jamieson, 2011), even indicating that couple inequality may lead to divorce. To salvage the situation, Henry planned to take 4 weeks unpaid leave from work with some annual leave weeks after Helen returned to her work from maternity leave. They have also put 'extra effort' into ensuring equitable divisions of labour between them after the baby arrives by planning rotas around caring for their son and alone leisure time for each parent.

However, even this cobbled together leave was uncertain. Henry had recently been unemployed for some time and now was in a job which he felt he was over-qualified for and in which he did not get on well with his manager. He was therefore searching for another job, which if successful, would mean he couldn't take any parental leave and potentially not much annual leave. This was creating anxiety for Helen, for whom at least some leave was crucial to establish shared parenting. However, she said in this first interview that it was more important that Henry had a job that he liked so they were prioritising his job search.

Despite the narrative of a united front in terms of desires and plans, there were notable divergent perspectives on their relationship in their manner of speaking. Helen's talk in the interview was dominated by 'we', even in talking about things which would be more commonly understood as 'hers', such as her job: She talked about how 'we' manage her work and 'we' will deal with her long commute. Her view of them as a couple was deeply relational. In her narrative the focus was on how they worked together as a couple to achieve common goals. Henry, however, used 'I' terms constantly throughout this interview. When he spoke of his search for a job, for example, he used 'I' and 'you' terms around the difficulties and consequences.

After the baby was born, however, the couple described several struggles.

Harry (the baby) had reflux, which they took months to identify. He barely slept in the first months, which meant Helen, who was on maternity leave and taking on the bulk of the care responsibility, barely slept. They moved house, but the new house required substantial work. New windows were put in, but they were the wrong ones and they needed to negotiate with the company to get them replaced. They could no longer afford a cleaner. Meanwhile, Henry continued in the same job, which he hated, while still looking for a new one. The job searching necessitated late nights filling in application forms and networking to hear about new opportunities.

Helen wrote in her first diary entry (when the baby was just 4 weeks old): 'With baby we have something in common on a level we've never had before.' She again emphasises the tied nature of their relationship, apparently reinforced by their becoming a family of three. This is a decidedly nuclear unit in its idealised form. Her mother moved in with them, but Helen didn't feel it was right or appropriate to have her mother take a

primary role in the care of the baby. Helen appeared to conform to contemporary ideals around parenting in which mothers, and increasingly fathers, are seen as solely responsible for the care of young children (Faircloth, 2015; Hays, 1996). For her, Henry, now as father as well as husband, was central in ways that he was not before – he should share the responsibility of their child, that can be shared with no one else.

But the demands of caring for a small colicky baby were taking their toll. Intimacy in the diaries during Helen's maternity leave was dominated by a theme of 'sacrifice'. Helen wrote 'we have only one pie now, and the more Henry takes, the less there is for me'. Henry's diaries were filled with defensive explanations of all the paid work he is doing, and his struggles to support Helen with unpaid work:

Off to work in the morning. Back home via football for an hour, which was a mistake—too exhausted to play properly. Had a phone interview for a job which I think went well but took last reserves of emotional energy. High point—none, frankly, I think I even left for work in the morning without seeing Baby. Low point—arguing with Helen. She thinks I'm not doing enough, and she's not wrong, but it's difficult to see where in my day I can do more if I also have to earn a living.

Their 'highpoints' of intimacy (as they were requested to write about in their diaries) are telling (when they were noted): Henry cited an acknowledgement from Helen of the support that he was giving her; and a 2 minute massage. Helen gave (few) examples of when they 'share well'. Even here we see diverging understandings of intimacy – for Helen it is sharing, but for Henry it is supporting. This is of course not unrelated to the gendered power relations and structural inequalities which undergird women's and men's participation in care and housework (Goldin, 2021).

In their final separate interviews, 14 months after the birth of their child, the focus was on repairing their relationship. Before they had a child, Helen and Henry had 'two pies', as Helen says. They had shared responsibilities in the house and towards the relationship. They described supporting one another's career and leisure. After having a child, the binds between them are strengthened. For Helen, this was portrayed as a positive development, strengthening their connection as a couple and family. But Henry struggled, as he describes when responding to a question on the impact of having had a child on their relationship:

I think now we're . . . [sighs] I don't want to say that we're closer now cause it's sort of different, but I think you know, we're sort of, you know, tied together by Harry and the shared experience of parenting a lot more in a way that is both good and sort of neut-, sort of morally neutral.

These two divergent views of the relationship, identified in the first interview, have become problematic over time. Their relationship in their final interview was described as 'a work in progress'. Most frustratingly for Helen, she told Katherine, was that she had become the family 'manager' of Henry:

I think it's the death of romance 100% [laughs] when you have to like report back on someone, you know, because they haven't done something right. But you know, you have a tiny person, it has to be done right, if you're not doing, you know what I mean, you can't let things slide as

you would in earlier life where you're just like ah, I'm just going to let that go so that you know [baby babbles] yeah.

They were not sharing care and household work in the way she envisaged (which Henry also attested to), ultimately disrupting their intimate connection.

One reading of Helen and Henry's account, could be that it demonstrates the limitations of the individualisation argument: Gender equality is not undergirding their relationship (though it is certainly an ideal they aspire to) and indeed 'traditional' normative gendered ideas of the father as earner (for example) are visible in their narrative. The narrated issues in their relationship may indicate future relationship dissolution, indicating their 'freedom' to dissolve the couple relationship, but their efforts to recalibrate suggest a desire to compromise and commit to one another.

This analysis, we feel, would add little to the extant literature on intimate couple relationships. Rather, we wish to highlight that Helen and Henry's account demonstrates how intimacy is more effortlessly achieved in times of relative ease, before having a child. As their lives became more complicated, sacrifice for the other became increasingly important as a symbolic intimate practice – however, they were unable to agree on what this sacrifice looked like. The longitudinal nature of the research reveals shifts in intimacy which intersect with shifts in everyday circumstances and social positioning. The presence of a child shaped their relationship as a couple. It challenged their divergent ideas of couple and family, which only became apparent or problematic after they had a child and which were in part rooted in their different positions as man and woman, father and mother, as well as the 'hostile' UK policy landscape around parental leave (Twamley, 2024). The contemporary pressures of both intensive parenting and equal partnership (Faircloth, 2015, 2021) strained their relationship. We have also highlighted how their financial situation framed their experience as they struggled to make ends meet. Henry holds on to a job he hates, causing stress and anxiety, putting further pressure on their relationship and limiting his ability to be a more involved parent. Ultimately, despite the couple's aspirations of equal parenting, in practice Helen becomes the primary caregiver.

Case Study 2: Lena

The second case study is drawn from research on the sexual and intimate lives of 15 women in long-term heterosexual relationships (van Hooff, 2016). Lena, a white British woman in her late thirties, was married, child free, and worked as a public relations executive. At the time of the interview she was 39, and over the course of two and a half hours shared details about her marriage as well as the extramarital affairs that had become a recent element of her intimate practice.

Lena describes how she had limited sexual experience before meeting her husband Stephen as a postgraduate student in her early twenties. She recalls an uneventful romantic life prior to this, with one experience of casual sex and three short-term partners. Lena and Stephen married when she turned 31, which she recalls as 'normal' for her friendship group, and an unreflexive next step for their relationship. Once married, Lena had anticipated becoming pregnant in her mid-30s. When that didn't happen, she found herself out of sync with her peers, most of whom were parents by then. Failure to conceive is narrated as a rupture in her marriage as Lena's focus increasingly moved from home life to

work, and she began experiencing significant success in her public relations career, having launched her own business 3 years earlier:

I was never that ambitious in my twenties, but in the last few years that really changed, now I'm so busy running [her PR agency] that I don't think I'd have the space for a baby in my life.

Lena is clear eyed about the impact motherhood would have on her professional life, and has reframed infertility as key to her independence. Lena and her husband retain the 'two pies' described in the first case study, where the shared responsibility of their relationship and home does not obscure their autonomy as individuals. Unlike the 'we' of Helen, Lena talks mostly in 'I's. When describing her marriage she talks about her own position and feelings, although she explains that she is committed to Stephen, there is little sense of a shared intimate project.

Lena began engaging in extra-marital affairs at the point when her priorities shifted from starting a family to focusing on her career. Alongside this change in life direction, there is also a shift in how she narrates her experience; her affairs become framed not simply as infidelity, but as a source of personal validation and agency. This reframing occurs after her failure to conceive, potentially as a way of reclaiming meaning and coherence in the face of an unanticipated life trajectory. The disconnection she felt from friends with children also facilitated this shift. Although married for almost a decade she had become habitually non-monogamous in the past 3 years following a short-term work-place affair, which motivated her to leave the company and start her own agency.

[The first affair] went on for about six months, he ended it actually, he was married too and couldn't cope with the guilt, but what shocked me most was that there was no guilt, or hardly any, really. I think that's just what people tell you to stop you cheating because it was basically a massive thrill.

Do you worry about getting caught?

Definitely, but probably not as much as I should. I love Stephen, we have a nice life together and I want to stay married, which I'm always really clear about, but that thrill that you get with someone new you just can't get it in a relationship. So, as well as a few one offs, I've had two other flings, I suppose you could call them and I get totally caught up in it all. I do worry though, if I got caught, or got an STI or something that really would be the end of my marriage.

Lena describes working in a exciting industry, marked by frequent travel and events that facilitate casual sexual encounters. She speaks of her freedom as an individual who has 'worked hard' and 'earned' the pleasure from these relationships. Her current narrative contrasts sharply with her descriptions of earlier relationships in her teens and twenties, which she frames as 'doing what is expected' and 'following the rules'. Lena has disrupted the normative heterosexual script by not having children and pursuing her career and affairs, and is defiant about her choices. Her intimate life, enabled by economic independence and freedom from domestic responsibilities (she employs a cleaner), is one not typically available to women. While her imagined future had involved

motherhood, Lena reframes infertility as autonomy, transforming her intimate life using the time, money and emotional space that not having children affords her.

At the same time, Lena placed great value on her marriage and makes a concerted effort to preserve it. Although she would prefer an openly non-monogamous arrangement, she believes her husband would not accept this. Instead, she keeps her extramarital relationships private, a choice that demands significant emotion work. She frames infidelity as entirely separate from her primary relationship. Lena is not seeking to leave her marriage but to complement its stability with the excitement of short-term flings. This phase of non-monogamy was neither anticipated nor intentionally pursued; rather, it offers her a way to experience multiple forms of intimacy. It also reflects and responds to shifting dynamics within her marriage, highlighting the dissonance and ruptures that shape her connection with her husband.

Lena explains that in early mid-life she can achieve what she wants in her personal life, in a way that she couldn't in her twenties when she was single. Milton and Qureshi (2022) note that midlife is often a time when women acquire more independence and satisfaction in their relationships, but that this is often complicated by contradictory femininities and implicated in a range of intersections. For Lena, maintaining her marriage bestows a certain status and security on her that enables her to take other risks in her professional and personal life. Her affairs are an 'ordinary subversion' (Holmes et al., 2021: 4) that challenges established gender roles while enabling Lena to maintain her socially privileged marriage. Lena identifies her choices as feminist, but her experiences align more with what Gill (2016, 2017) describes as 'postfeminist'—a gendered neoliberalism centred on individual satisfaction. Lena speaks of having 'earned' the right to sexual satisfaction through her affairs, enjoying both the security of marriage and the thrill of infidelity. However, she acknowledges that within a patriarchal society, the risks and reputational damage she faces are greater than those for men. Lena's privilege as a wealthy, thin, white woman also shapes her ability to live this intimate life, echoing critiques of postfeminism's boundaries around whiteness and heterosexuality (Dosekun, 2015; Gill, 2017).

There is a possibility to read Lena's account as evidence of a move towards individualisation: On one hand, Lena has carved out an intimate life beyond the traditional nuclear family which meets her own individual needs. This life is, however, constrained by traditional notions of appropriate intimacy so that she does not negotiate an open relationship with her husband, but rather maintains the marriage through hiding her extra-marital affairs. As with our first case, this is in line with, for example, Carter and Duncan's (2018) writing about bricolage whereby they note the coming together of the 'modern' and 'traditional' in everyday intimate life. Alternatively, we wish to highlight how Lena's case can be read as a means to understand how situational and material circumstances *enable* certain forms of intimacy, especially when contrasted with Helan and Henry's account.

For Lena, relative affluence has enabled her to conduct her personal life in a more traditionally 'masculine' way, marked by personal satisfaction and enjoyment. That her own professional success has led to financial freedom means that she feels that she has 'earned' the right to enjoy it. These contrasting cases also demonstrate the impact of motherhood on women's professional and personal lives, which Lena acknowledges

would have curtailed her choices. Lena's intimate life highlights the complex dynamics of couple relationships, particularly in relation to infidelity. Affairs often coexist with marriage, beginning, existing, and ending while the primary relationship remains intact. Crucially, infidelity is deeply intertwined with the couple relationship, as it both depends on and disrupts the primary bond (van Hooff, 2017; Walker, 2020). Lena's experience is noteworthy, as it reveals how the fluidity of intimate relationships is shaped by key life events and choices, such as marriage, parenthood, and employment. Her story highlights how intimate practices are shaped not only by agency but also by broader social conditions, with inequalities and life circumstances playing a critical role in shaping these dynamics over time.

Discussion and conclusion

We argue that scholarship on intimacy has been dominated by a focus on demonstrating, refuting, or nuancing arguments of a transformation of intimacy in modern society, as reflected in the scholarship published in SRO over the past 30 years. This has led to a large body of work which unpacks the meanings and practices associated with intimacy—that is, how intimacy is achieved, understood, and maintained – and the extent to which individualisation or tradition continues to hold sway. These have been an important corrective to theories of transformation which were devised with minimal attention to empirical data. We are not arguing here that there is no purchase in the individualisation thesis, nor that literature which has uncovered processes of continuity and change (such as Carter and Duncan's work, 2018) is not valuable. Rather, we argue that as a frame it has dominated intimacy research, with a concomitant neglect of other important facets of intimate life. In particular, we highlight how intimacy is not equally available to all individuals, and we call for new research which attends to the very real and consequential factors which underly disruptions to intimacy. While Jamieson's (1999) definition, emphasising practices that sustain close relationships provides a foundation, this article builds on it by highlighting how intimacy is also negotiated through discontinuities, conflict, and the influence of social institutions such as marriage and parenthood. Through an analysis of two case studies, we have attempted to demonstrate how we may shift our analytical attention, thereby highlighting the ways in which intimate inequalities may arise.

Both case studies illustrate how gendered identities impact on how intimacy is negotiated within and shapes couple relationships. Helen experiences a moral pressure to be present for her child in ways that her husband Henry does not. She aspires to equal participation in care and domestic work between her and Henry, as a key facet of their intimate couple connection. Other studies have also uncovered how intimacy and equality are ideologically linked (Twamley, 2012; Jamieson, 2011). However, there is evidence that this may not be understood in similar ways within couples (Twamley and Faircloth, 2024). Henry aspires to be a more involved and intimate father (Dermott, 2008) than his father before him, but earning a living for him is part of the fatherhood role and a way to express his care for Helen and Harry, which Helen does not value to the same extent. Their intimate meanings and practices do not align. Here, intimacy is practised and sometimes achieved, but through a relational negotiation that at times works better than

others. This attention to dyadic or opposing practices and meanings allows a more nuanced and processual view of intimacy to come into view, as well as to how individual position (such as here gender) shapes the available narratives and practices within which couples must negotiate.

Lena balances various infidelities with her role as wife. While adhering outwardly to the 'couple norm' (Roseneil et al., 2020), Lena also exercises agency in her affairs, engaging in non-normative relationships that suggest the possibility of more fluid and diverse intimate futures (Holmes et al., 2021). Free from the pressures of childrearing and financial concerns that affect Helen and Henry, Lena's life allows for the exploration of different types of intimacy. However, her divergence from monogamy and parenthood isolates her socially. By attending to the intersectional conditions of Lena's life, we see how gender and class come together to enable different forms of intimacy.

Before having a child, Helen and Henry described minor quibbles about housework but overall a close fulfilling relationship. The arrival of a baby came at the nexus of a series of life events – moving house, having a wedding, getting a new job – which created stresses for them. These were all complicated by tight budgetary constraints and, as mentioned above, idealised norms around who should care for a child. They described increasing tensions between them as they struggled to meet the demands of paid work and care of a baby. Such events impacted on their intimate connection as they struggled to support one another. In contrast, Lena's professional success supported her affairs. She was able to afford hotel stays and evenings out with her lovers, while also continuing a relationship with her husband in their shared home. Her social position gives her more agency in continuing with affairs, though potentially her gendered position limits her ability to negotiate a more open relationship with her husband.

As we mention above, there is a small body of research which explores how social positioning and prejudice shapes couple relationships such as on the choice of a partner and the practices of courtship (see Butler and Vincent, 2024; Jackson, 2011; Twamley and Sidharth, 2019 ; Johnson and Lawler, 2005). Literature exploring how social positioning impacts on intimate life, in particular how it may disrupt or challenge intimacy, is less common (though certainly better developed in research focusing on family and parenting). Our analysis of the cases above demonstrates how economic resources and wider stressors can create ruptures in intimate feelings within a couple, along with shifts to different practices and meanings, such as how mutual sacrifice became an important marker of intimacy for Helen. Given the centrality of intimacy for ontological security and well-being (Gabb, 2011) it is imperative that as sociologists we attend to who is able to be intimate and how structural forces impede its flourishing. We have focussed on white middle class mixed-sex couples in our research, highlighting how privilege and constraint coexist – much more is needed to understand how class and other minoritized positionings impact on intimate life.

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ORCID iD

Jenny van Hooff  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8735-8758>

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Author biographies

Katherine Twamley is Professor of Sociology at the UCL Social Research Institute. She is also an editorial board member of *The Sociological Review* and editor of the Routledge Sociological Futures Book series. Her research focuses on gender, love and intimacy, social policy, and families, in which she primarily draws on longitudinal, comparative qualitative methods.

Jenny van Hooff is Reader in Sociology at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her research centres on couple relationships, with a particular focus on interrogating couple normativity in personal life. She has published on topics including domestic labour, sexual practices, infidelity, dating apps, friendship, and sex work, and is the author of *Modern Couples: Continuity and Change in Heterosexual Relationships* (Routledge).

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