Genetic thinking and everyday living: On family practices and family imaginaries

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Abstract
This article is concerned with exploring how ideas about genes and genetic relationships are rendered meaningful in everyday life. David Morgan’s concept family practices has significantly shaped sociological enquiries into family lives in recent decades. It represents an important step away from a sociological focus on family as something you ‘are’ to family as something you ‘do’. With a focus on family as a set of activities, it however functions less well to capture more discursive dimensions of family life. Combining a focus on family as practice with an attention to discourse, the article concentrates specifically on ‘genetic thinking’ – the process through which genetic relationships are rendered meaningful in everyday family living. The study draws on original data from a study about families formed through donor conception, and the impact of such conception on family relationships, to show that genetic thinking is a salient part of contemporary family living. The article explores the everyday, normative assumptions, nuances and understandings about genetic relationships by exploring five dimensions: having a child; everyday family living; family resemblances; traits being ‘passed on’; and family members working out accountability and responsibility within the family. Showing the significance of genetic thinking in family life, the article argues for a more sustained sociological debate about the impact of such thinking within contemporary family life. The article also argues for the need to develop a sociological gaze more sensitive to the relationship between family as a set of activities and the feelings, imaginations, dreams or claims with which they are entwined.

Keywords
accountability, donor conception, family discourse, family practices, family resemblances, genetic relationality, ‘passing on’, reproductive technologies

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Introduction

David Morgan’s *Family Connections: An Introduction to Family Studies* (1996) has significantly shaped the development of sociological thinking about families and relationships in Britain in recent decades. Morgan’s book took a stance against the then prevailing structural focus in family sociology and challenged the functionalist framework operating at the time, which saw family as a self-evident unit that could be readily studied – the heterosexual ‘nuclear’ family. Recognising that family formations were becoming increasingly diverse, and yet ‘family’ remained central, Morgan invited readers to shift their gaze away from exploring family as ‘structure’ or noun (something that people ‘are’) to studying family as practice: something people ‘do’.

The emphasis of Morgan’s work was to explore ‘family life as a set of activities’ (Morgan, 2011, p. 6). Importantly, he argued that it is through engaging in activities that ‘a sense of family is itself reconstituted’ (p. 10). The concept ‘family practices’ contributed to shifting the sociological gaze towards everyday actions, flows, rituals and habits. It came to inform studies of divorce and stepfamilies (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards, & Gillies, 2003; Smart, Neale, & Wade, 2001), contemporary fatherhood (Dermott, 2008) and motherhood (Thomson, Kehily, Hadfield, & Sharpe, 2011), and everyday heterosexuality (Hockey, Meah, & Robinson, 2007) and non-heterosexuality (Almack, 2007; Nordqvist, 2012a; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001). Morgan’s ‘demotion’ of the family from institution to practice also gave rise to new directions in sociological theorising, as in Finch’s (2007) concept of ‘display’ and Smart’s (2007) framework ‘personal life’.

The concept of ‘family practices’, with its emphasis on family as constituted through everyday activities, has functioned less well as a means of capturing more discursive and ideological dimensions of family life however (Morgan, 2011, pp. 67ff.). People deploy, even live, ideas and concepts of what makes a family. Contemporary empirical sociological work indicates the place of ideology, ideas and norms in shaping both the structure and practice of family. For example, ideologies of being a ‘proper family’ impact on lesbian family making (Nordqvist, 2012b) and idealised concepts of ‘the family’ filter their way into everyday lives (e.g. Gillis, 1996; Smart, 2007). Gabb and Fink (2015) show that couple relationships are becoming an increasingly idealised form of intimate life, and Thomson et al. (2011), studying first time motherhood, highlight the salience of mothering norms and discourses in shaping mothering experiences.

One of the key ideas associated with family life is that of genes and genetic connectedness. Families may have taken on more plural forms in recent years, becoming more fluid and nuanced, however older tropes such as ‘genes’ and ‘blood’ have not lost their social and cultural significance in defining family relationships (e.g. Dermott, 2008). I came across these suggestions very powerfully while researching non-genetic family relationships in the context of families formed after infertility treatment and involving donor eggs, sperm and embryos. As I will go on to demonstrate in this article, the data present striking evidence of the way the cultural trope of ‘the gene’ carries vital importance for how people approach family life. Arguably, such data speak to a broad cultural tapestry of the contemporary ways of understanding connectedness within families.

The ways in which genetic relatedness is rendered meaningful in ‘the everyday’ (rather than e.g. medical contexts) is however under-researched within the area of...
sociological family and relationships studies. With some notable exceptions (e.g. Mason, 2008; Nordqvist, 2014a; Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003), the topic, along with kinship relationships more broadly, has received little sustained analysis. When genetic relationships exist between people, such as between parents and children, that relationship has tended to be treated as a little interrogated backdrop, rather than a focus of analysis in its own right (see e.g. Dermott, 2008; Hockey et al., 2007; Thomson et al., 2011). Thus, sociological understandings of the nuanced detail of how and when genetic discourses are rendered meaningful in the context of heterosexuality, fatherhood and motherhood, or intimate life more generally, are relatively limited.

This gap deserves exploration, especially given the salient place of ‘the gene’ within contemporary culture. More than two decades ago, theorists such as Lippman (1991) suggested that we were witnessing a ‘genetisisation’ of society, and later Finkler (2000, p. 2) argued that prevalent discourses were marked by the ‘hegemony of the gene’. The science of ‘new genetics’ has recently reshaped medical and clinical practice; Clarke, Mamo, Fosket, Fishman, and Shim (2010) argue that society has undergone a process of biomedicalisation. Sociologists exploring the relationships between new genetics, the laboratory, the clinic and patient populations (e.g. Featherstone, Atkinson, Bharadwaj, & Clarke, 2005; Latimer, 2013; McLaughlin & Clavering, 2011) show the now salient medical role of genes in family lives, and also the vital role of family relationships in contemporary medical practice. Latimer (2013) and McLaughlin and Clavering (2011), for example, indicate that notions of parents as accountable for how their children ‘turn out’ acquire particular significance in the context of genetic medicine, and moreover McLaughlin (2014) shows how paediatric attention to (problematic) genetic links in families reverberates in family lives also outside the clinic.

Genetic relations have also been at the centre of the public discourse which has emerged around the new reproductive technologies, and consequently a key area of debate in research has explored ‘the new kinship’ (e.g. Edwards, 2000; Golombok, 2015; Nordqvist & Smart, 2014). Such work highlights for example the shifting emphasis on genetic relationships in policy in the UK (Turkmendag, 2012), and also the controversies around secrecy and disclosure to children born through donation (Nordqvist, 2014b). Explorations of egg donation (Nahman, 2013) and surrogacy (Pande, 2014; Teman, 2010) suggest that new reproductive practices give rise to new linkages through bodies, genes, blood and pregnancy and that they require careful thought and management on behalf of all involved.

Studies in both ‘the new genetics’ and ‘the new kinship’ look at departures from underlying norms of genetic relating in families. In the first case, the norm would be healthy genetics being passed on, and in the second, intact genetic families. But what do we see if we instead focus our gaze on the shadowy background of normality to which these departures implicitly refer but do not speak of directly? What assumptions, nuances and understandings about genetic relationships might we discover if we shine the light on the unspoken ideas at play here, making them the explicit focus of analysis, rather than looking at the departures? And if we did so, what would that tell us about genetic thinking and how it shapes and underscores not just families that diverge from the norm, but family relationships in general? What might that, in turn, tell us about the relationship between genetic discourse and family practice?
This article is concerned with exploring how ideas about genes and genetic relationships are rendered meaningful in the everyday. It foregrounds an analysis of how genetic thinking emerges, shapes and matters in family living. In doing so, it seeks to bring an analysis of genetic thinking to the field of sociological studies of families and relationships. To this aim, the article explores how values, perceptions, assumptions and ideas embedded in the discourse of being genetically related translate into morals, practices, modes of being, habits and relationalities within everyday family living. It explores five instances of genetic thinking, which it argues surface in everyday family life. Ultimately, it draws on this analysis to reflect on the role of genetic thinking in contemporary everyday life, as well as the relationship between family discourse and family practice.

I deploy the term ‘genetic thinking’ as a way of capturing the different ways in which connectedness in and through the body (referred to as blood, pregnancy, biology or genes, or a combination thereof) operate to guide people’s thinking. My aim is to show that the broad cultural frame of natural connectedness and genetic thinking play a striking role in contemporary family cultures and in doing so, I hope to open up this area for debate within relevant sociological research communities.

Understanding genetic thinking

In approaching genetic thinking, I am influenced by feminist anthropological thinking about kinship and genes. Such scholarship has provided critical insights into the relationship between kinship and nature; the interplay of genetic and social concepts of relating as well as the wider social significance of genes. Schneider (1968/1980) separated out the ‘facts’ of biological reproduction as scientific truths from their operation as forms of cultural knowledge, and in doing so laid the groundwork for understanding Euro-American kinship as a cultural (rather than natural) system of beliefs. Strathern (1992) furthered this idea, suggesting that kinship is indeed a dichotomous relationship between social and ‘biological’ facts, but she argued that both ‘the social’ and ‘the biological/natural’ are socially constructed. Importantly then, genetic and biological relations should be understood not as denoting ‘real’ family relationships but as social discourses invested with meaning.

One of the specific ways in which genetic thinking is rendered meaningful in social life is through its cultural association with ownership and claims about ‘belonging’. Analysing these entanglements, Edwards and Strathern (2000) explore the linkages between genetic thinking and the social processes of claiming a person or child as ‘one’s own’ (see also Melhuus, 2012). They argue that social and genetic kinship thinking operate together in a system of associations; one is both ‘born’ and ‘bred’ into kinship networks (Edwards, 2000). Genetic links are conjured up as part of that system of associations; they are socially perceived to enable people to class elements together so that they seem linked (as in ‘we belong together because we are genetically related’). Not just this, but they are socially understood to be ‘facts’ rather than discourse.

These connections have strong emotional resonance. Edwards and Strathern note, ‘Connections appear intrinsically desirable. People take pleasure in making links of logic or narrative, as people take pleasure in claiming personal links’ (2000, p. 152). Empirical research shows that the practice of claiming links, genetic or otherwise, is perceived as a
pleasurable part of family life (Nordqvist, 2010), and a practice which itself used to construct connections. According to Mason, the fact that relationships are seen as ‘fixed’ and ‘undeniably there’ is felt to be alluring, desirable and fascinating. People are engaged in making created relationships seem as though they are ‘fixed’ ones, thus marking how desirable ‘fixed’ relationships are perceived to be. This also shows how fixity is infused with genetic thinking without being reducible to it (Mason, 2008).

Further to this, I have previously found that genetic thinking plays a role in shaping how people approach genetic and non-genetic family relationships differently (Nordqvist, 2015). In a study of lesbian mothers and their parents, I found that genetic kinship was typically ‘lived’ in that it guided how people ‘did’ relationship. It was seen to protect relationships when they were put under strain. For example, a grandmother who experienced her daughter having a child with a partner hostile towards herself, attributed her ongoing relationship with the daughter and grandchild to the fact that they were genetically related. Another genetic mother experienced that as her couple relationship broke down, the female partner’s parents, previously much involved non-genetic grandparents, dropped contact with the grandchildren. Seemingly, genetic thinking guided how people engaged with relatives: genetic relations were conceptualised (and so became) ‘strong’ whereas non-genetic kin relationships were considered ‘weak’ and translated into more fragile relationships.

The study

To build my analysis, I draw on original data produced in the context of a study about heterosexual and lesbian families formed through egg, sperm and embryo donation, in which both genetic and non-genetic parents and grandparents of donor conceived children took part. The data were produced within the project ‘Relative Strangers: Negotiating Non-Genetic Kinship in the Context of Assisted Conception’ 2010–2013 (Principal Investigator Carol Smart, Co-Investigator Petra Nordqvist), which explored donor conception and non-genetic kinship within the context of family relationships in England and Wales. We interviewed heterosexual and lesbian parents of donor conceived children (22 in each group) and also 30 grandparents; these family members were genetically and non-genetically related to the donor conceived child within their family. The interview predominantly focused on exploring participants’ processes of sharing information, but we also asked specific questions about if, when and how having a donor conceived child impacted on their everyday life, e.g. in conversations about family resemblances. We asked no direct questions about how they viewed genetic relationships per se.

In total, 119 individuals took part in individual or couple interviews. Parent and grandparent interviewees were recruited from different families to avoid the risk of inadvertently conveying sensitive information during interviews and to ensure anonymity and confidentiality in writing. Most of the parent recruits came through the Donor Conception Network and local Lesbian Mums Groups. The grandparents, who were a particularly hard-to-reach sample, were mainly recruited through parents of donor conceived children (who were not themselves taking part in the study). All names, places and identifying details have been anonymised in the following accounts (see also other publications from this study, e.g. Nordqvist, 2014b).
Among the 74 families we interviewed, 54 experienced sperm donation, 16 egg donation, two embryo donation, one sperm and egg donation combined (called double donation) and one both sperm and embryo donation. The total number of donor conceived children in the families in the study counted 111 (including four pregnancies where the children were due to be born in 2011). In all cases but one, siblings were conceived using the same type of donation but not necessarily from the same donor.

The interviewees lived in both rural and urban locations, with particular concentration in Greater London and Manchester. The median parent in the study was born in 1970 and the median grandparent in 1943; the median donor conceived child was born in 2007. Ninety of the 119 participants were women and 99 (83%) of participants identified with White British identities (Scottish, Welsh and English). In terms of religion, over half of our interviewees (53%) identified as atheist or agnostic. But there was also a substantial group of people of different Christian faiths in the study (40%) and a small proportion identified as Jewish (5%). No one of other faiths came forward to be interviewed.

Over two-thirds had a higher education qualification and looking at the parent group specifically, 78% had gone on to higher education. In the Millennium Cohort Study (Dex & Joshi, 2004), with a sample of almost 14,000 mothers in England and Wales, 76% had left full-time education by the age of 18. Admittedly, our sample includes both mothers and fathers, and most of them had their children slightly later in the 2000s, but it does give a broad indication that the parent groups were disproportionately middle class. It is thus important to emphasise that the study predominantly explored the experiences of middle class mothers and grandmothers of white atheist or Christian British populations.

The data presented below may well be shaped in particular ways because of these specificities. For example, the middle class bias within our sample may well have contributed to the emphasis on genetics that appears within these accounts (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003, p. 82). Also, the fact that participants draw on family lives in which donor conception features may also bring forth genetic thinking. On the latter point, I would however argue that these families bring meaning to their experiences of donor conception through wider socio-cultural discourses (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). As noted by Edwards (2005), new reproductive technologies do not intrinsically transgress ideas of family or produce ‘new’ ideas; rather they intensify existing ideas and make explicit that which is usually implicit.

Genetic thinking and family living

In this section I draw on empirical data to show how genetic thinking shapes family relationships and practices in salient ways. I focus my discussion on the following five areas: (1) having a child; (2) everyday family living; (3) family resemblances; (4) ‘passing on’; and (5) accountability and responsibility.

Having a child

[Egg donation] seemed like the next best option, it seemed like the closest that we could get to having our absolute own genetic child. (Erin, heterosexual egg donation)
It is certainly not a new idea that genetic links matter in reproduction, nevertheless the level of concern revealed in these data associated with achieving a genetic relationship with one’s child is perhaps surprising. Scholars of new reproductive technologies (e.g. Nahman, 2013) have previously shown that people who pursue in vitro fertilisation, donation or surrogacy do not necessarily embrace postmodern, fluid notions of family life. They are not necessarily particularly keen ‘brave new families’ (Stacey, 1990). Rather more commonly, as suggested in Erin’s account above, they do so because it is perceived as a ‘second best’; the least objectionable alternative route to becoming parents if genetic conception fails or is unachievable.

Erin’s account is reflective of the experience of egg donation specifically but it also sheds light on much broader social values. As a statement it only makes sense in a culture that values genes and genetic reproduction (Carsten, 2004; Melhuus, 2012). The concept ‘a child of one’s own’ is infused with the cultural perception that the genetic criterion needs to be fulfilled for this to be an irrefutable claim (Edwards & Strathern, 2000). Erin’s tale (below) tells of a deep seated desire to do so and shows her creative attempts to fulfil the genetic criterion as far as possible:

I always kind of thought about it [using egg donation] like … a bit of a pie chart really. So I’ve thought okay, let’s say we are all half environment and half genetics and so when this baby pops out … half of its make-up is going to be from my husband so it’s his environment, his involvement, his genes. And then it’s going to be no genes from me so that’s a quarter missing but it’s going to be seventy five percent because it’s going to be, you know, my environmental input. And then I thought to myself, well I’ve had this little baby growing inside me so maybe it would be a different genetic make-up, well it’s come out differently because it’s been carried by me, so I kind of added another kind of ten percent maybe, so I’m up to eighty five percent (laughter) so I mean, you know, so my pie chart’s almost a hundred percent. (Erin)

Egg donation affords the intended mother the opportunity to carry the child, thus mirroring deeply held cultural assumptions about how one becomes a mother (Nordqvist, 2015). Focusing in particular on the meaning attached to pregnancy, this lends Erin the opportunity to construct biological links between herself and the child in the absence of genetic links (see also Konrad, 2005). She does not challenge the hegemony of ‘the gene’, but rather she renegotiates its meaning, claiming it for herself. In doing so, she is able to claim having made a specific biological impact through the process of pregnancy that is personal to her. The implied understanding, perhaps taking inspiration from contemporary scientific developments in the field of epigenetics, is that another gestational mother would have produced a different baby. Thus, this baby is Erin’s baby. In doing so, Erin is seemingly also seeking genetic equality with her husband in relationship to the child (Melhuus, 2012).

Parents in Erin’s situation cannot ignore the normative expectation that children are their parents’ genetic offspring. Despite Erin’s elaborate efforts to renegotiate the meaning of genes, she was aware that others may refuse to recognise her as the mother, or disapprove of her method of conception. She lived in a small village and she had told nobody in her local community of the genetic origins of her daughter. Even though she had decided for herself that the donor genes (almost) did not matter, her decision about
non-disclosure, echoed by many in this and other studies (e.g. Murray & Golombok, 2003) speaks of the normative value placed on genes in families, and the potential stigma associated with non-genetic relationships. Genetic thinking underscores how families are perceived to belong together; what we may call ‘genetic normativity’ operates as part of everyday interactions. Erin’s case highlights the vital role of genetic thinking in defining ‘becoming and being’ family as well as ‘being seen to be’ family.

Everyday family living

Accounts of non-genetic family relationships suggest that genetic thinking also plays a role in how families carry out, live and organise everyday life. Consider the following account by a couple with a daughter through sperm donation:

Trevor: [As a non-genetic parent] you’re constantly trying to make sure you are there and you are putting in the full effort possible. … Because if I am missing something through the biological, I don’t want it to be a problem.

Monica: I think you almost kind of overcompensate and put pressure on yourself.

Trevor was working full-time and Monica was a stay at home parent, and so the couple ordered their lives according to a traditional heterosexual script. But, perhaps unlike other fathers, Trevor could not comfortably shoulder the traditional role of being the less involved ‘breadwinner’. As a non-genetic father, that distance was rendered problematic. The lack of genetic relationship brought questions to mind about being a ‘proper’ father, leading both Trevor and Monica to seeking to foster a ‘proper’ ‘father–daughter’ relationship. They mentioned, for example, that they did consciously ‘reserve’ father-and-daughter time at the weekend, rather than seeing relatives.

Non-genetic parents often sensed a need to ‘prove’ themselves: a question mark seemed to be attached to their role as parents that proved difficult to shake. Questions could become particularly pertinent when family life felt like a struggle. Erin, for instance, found the first year of full-time motherhood challenging, and this resulted in her questioning her ability to parent:

I think that’s really quite a difficult time [the first year], well it certainly was for me anyway because you are thrown into this kind of complete maelstrom. … I think if you’re not the one who’s got the genetic connection it’s just an extra layer of things to try and kind of come to terms with. … There’s a tiny little voice saying at the back of your head, ‘Maybe it’s because I’m not genetically related to this human being’. When they cry and you can’t settle them and just nothing seems to work and you don’t know what you’re doing. … There are times when you know you’re at your lowest ebb and you just think …, ‘This baby knows that I’m not their genetic mum’, which is a load of old bollocks basically but at the time you do, you do kind of question it.

Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2003, pp. 86ff.) found that middle class parents in their sample conceptualised biological parenthood as something that inevitably gives rise to ‘natural’, instinctive and intrinsic actions and unconditional emotions. This line of thought appears
echoed in Erin, Trevor and Monica’s accounts in which they build their thinking around the idea that within everyday parenting practices, a genetic parent is automatically competent in knowing how to parent their child. The absence of a genetic bond introduced a seed of doubt; the ‘missing link’ translated into a sense of falling short. This adds to the point that Carsten (2004) has made, that genetic kinship is culturally understood as a relationship that is ‘given’ as opposed to an affinity that is ‘made’. What we might see emerging in these accounts is the pressure felt among non-genetic middle class parents to ‘make themselves into (proper) parents’ because they were unable to tap into a cultural understanding of their parenthood as simply ‘given’.

Speaking more broadly, this is suggestive of how genetic ‘given’ relationships constitute an important backdrop that ‘frames’ parenting practices. It would appear that a genetic relationship becomes associated with ideas of what makes a parent, and with that, a level of confidence in parenting – from those who do not have that genetic relationship at any rate. This is not to say that all genetic parents feel confident in their parenthood (e.g. McLaughlin, 2014), rather perhaps that when parents lack confidence this appears compounded for the non-genetic ones. It may not be that non-genetic families are necessarily distressed at not being genetically related to their children, rather findings illustrate that they necessarily need to engage with the discourse of genetic thinking and navigate through it to stabilise their position as parents or neutralise the threat it poses.

**Family resemblances**

Conversations about family resemblances are an everyday, commonplace form of interaction within families and about families. Such conversations represent perhaps the most obvious dimension where genetic thinking and family practices meet. James, a parent by sperm donation, recalled:

Last Christmas, [my] parents were talking about how much So-and-so was like So-and-so and how much my brother’s kids were like him, and what they were up to, and I went, ‘Guys, can we just shut up’. Because that was really killing me (laughter). It was Christmas dinner and you know, I spoke out loud and just went, ‘Look, you know, our kid’s not going to be anything like me. This is really hurting. Let’s move on.’ And I think they needed to be a little bit more sensitive about that.

James had found it immensely difficult to cope with his inability to father a child genetically, and stated that he would have preferred to not have children had his wife not expressed such a deep desire for them. This conversation reminded him of this lack; meanwhile his family, on the other hand, was rehearsing the cultural idea that a reproductive relationship is expressed through likeness (Strathern, 1995); family resemblances are seen as undeniable proof of a genetic link.

There are three points emerging from James’s account that offer interesting insights into ‘resemblance talk’ and genetic thinking. First, it highlights that conversations about resemblances are ‘productive’: they ‘do’ something in and to families. They map out, confirm, or bring into question family belonging. What might seem an innocuous topic of conversation can also challenge family relationships (Becker, Butler, & Nachtigall, 2005)
or be suggestive of extramarital sexual liaisons (Mason, 2008). Such conversations are thus in and of themselves creative in the sense that they impact on family relationships: they produce (or disrupt) links and relationships (Nordqvist, 2010). James found the conversation hurtful because to him, it made him less connected. Other participants used this creative potency quite imaginatively as a way of shoring up their relationship with a child:

I think [our daughter] looks like she’s ours. … Certainly my family have commented like, ‘Oh my God, she really looked like you just now …’. I don’t know, but I recognise that it’s something that I foster and I recognise that … I take a small, you know, crumb and make a cake out of it. She’s my child and I like the physical evidence of it, you know. (Jenny, non-birth mother, lesbian sperm donation)

[Likeness] brings out the belonging if you know what I mean. … It’s lovely to be able to say, even if it isn’t true, ‘Oh, he’s just like his father’. (Joanne, paternal grandmother, heterosexual egg donation)

Creatively seeing and mapping family resemblances is a way of tapping into genetic thinking, using it strategically to construct connectedness; Howell (2003) indicates similar process in the context of adoption. Thus, resemblance talk is in itself constructive of resemblance and hence connections and relationships.

The second point to make is that the perceived presence or absence of family resemblances is highly emotionally charged. James’s account speaks volumes of the hurt associated with their professed absence, while in contrast, Jenny, another non-genetic parent, speaks of the pleasure of looking for, recognising, and others noticing physical similarities. As suggested by Edwards and Strathern (2000), people take pleasure in making connections; clearly their absence is associated with pain.

The third dimension that is brought to life is the role of talking and laughing in families as constitutive of family relationships. Davies (2011, 560ff.), in her study of children’s kinship, shows how talking and laughing are practices that in themselves ‘make family connections’. The way that people draw connections here is a way of having fun, but also perhaps of teasing each other, and indulging in a sense of fascination and mystery (Mason, 2008).

However, the relationship between genes and resemblances is not a straightforward one. Joanne, quoted above, offered interesting food for thought in this regard:

I think if the character of the child links with the family, [then] I don’t think that it [genetic origin] matters that much, if you see what I mean. I think I would have been very hurt if [my grandson] he’d … been very violent or something. … He wouldn’t have fitted in, [that] would have worried me somewhat I think.

Perhaps rather than understanding resemblances as a proxy for genetic relationships in families, genes should be understood as a proxy for resemblances. In other words, the presence of genes is taken to allow for family connections to be affirmed, but it is the resemblances, not the genes, that construct connectedness. Resemblance talk does not necessarily reflect a ‘given’ relationship, but rather creates it ‘as given’. Hence it is shaped by genetic thinking without being reducible to it.
Lay understandings about how genetic traits are being transmitted or ‘passed on’ down the generations have been explored in medical contexts (e.g. McLaughlin & Clavering, 2011), however their place in everyday life is less well researched. Finch and Mason (2000) have studied how things and money are ‘passed on’ in families, but added to that, there is the dimension of how families theorise about how abilities, resemblances and ways of being travel down the generations. Such thinking often emerged in my interviews in the context of parents talking about their own hopes and dreams for who their children would be and become. Fiona, for example, spoke of how her reaction to being infertile was shaped by her imagining her future child:

If you want children, you have this image of what your child’s going to look like. And of course I always used to say ‘oh, if it’s a girl she’ll be wonderful. She’ll have your green eyes and long legs’ … and ‘she’ll be feisty’ because you know I’ve got a feisty background. … You know, you do grieve [when you realise you are infertile]. I did grieve for that child that I wasn’t going to have.

Fiona’s story provides important insight into how a discourse of family resemblances entangled with genetic thinking is an important dimension of imagining and perceiving a family future (see also Smart, 2007). Following Strathern (1995), reproduction as it is culturally understood is the process of bringing into the world a copy of that which has gone before. Fiona’s account highlights how family resemblances and genetic thinking interlink with ideas about the production of a copy, and also how the perceived failure to pass on particular family traits produces powerful feelings, even grief. Genes are given overwhelming and deterministic importance and, at that moment, Fiona did not reflect on the parents’ social impact on their children (e.g. being feisty).

Cara and her husband already had one genetically related child when the husband contracted a disease that rendered him infertile, so they conceived their second using sperm donation. These children were young adults at the time of the interview and so Cara was able to reflect on her feelings about the people her children had grown up to become over the years. The following remark emerged in the context of Cara discussing her daughter and non-genetic parenthood:

We were both at [prestigious University], we’ve got friends who were both at [this University], they’ve got a sort of like genius pair of children. One’s going to [prestigious University], one’s gone to [prestigious University]. And our kids have not quite done the academic bit in either case. And I always wonder whether, if we’d had another [genetic] one, whether they would have been sort of, you know, of an exceptional academic standard. … But you know, [son] hasn’t been as academic, so that’s been a bit of a disappointment, and I don’t think [daughter] is going to be as academic either. So I’ve always found that a little bit sad. I’ve always assumed well, is it because- I don’t know. But I see these other friends of ours who we were there with and their children the same ages and one’s definitely gonna go on and be quite a star, definitely. And the other one’s a great, you know, [scientist] already. I feel faintly embarrassed. So it’s in that sort of side of things it makes you wonder.

Who children might become is associated with particular hopes and aspirations that are mapped onto the mother and father’s lives, echoing wider ideas of (middle) classed
notions of heredity and the replication of social worth, respectability and intellect (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003, Rose, 1989). These hopes and aspirations produce powerful feelings: pride, disappointment and embarrassment. Edwards (2005) notes that English kinship stipulates that a child’s ‘make-up’ consists of what is ‘passed down’ from its parents, both socially and biologically. Cara draws on such thinking in saying that because both she and her partner were successful academically, there is reason to hope any offspring of theirs should or could to be too.

There is an interesting asymmetrical and complex entanglement of being, personhood and genetic thinking embedded in these remarks and the extract is suggestive of how genetic reproduction underpins beliefs about personhood and personality. Both children are different (from their parents), but it is the donor conceived daughter that causes Cara pause for thought. Edwards (2005) argues that cultural ideas stipulate that a child might be genetically related to the parent, but how he or she ‘turns out’ is never predictable: identities are understood to be unique, lumpy and idiosyncratic. Cara’s son being different from Cara and her partner is seemingly encompassed by kinship thinking that goes something like: ‘there was an opportunity here for a copy of the parents to be produced, but it didn’t quite come to fruition’. The donor conceived daughter, however, is not conceptualised as such an opportunity: the chance to produce a copy in this case was seemingly never really there. Another’s genes were involved. Hence the lingering questions about how another genetic child might have ‘turned out’.

These findings sit within much broader discourses about how people ‘turn out’ that also stipulate that a person’s genetic inheritance forms their character and personality. In its most damaging forms, such thinking about ‘genes’, or previously ‘blood’, has been associated with cultural idioms such as ‘bad blood’ and ‘blood will out’; once very powerful perceptions of determining a child’s character as tainted and ‘spoiled’ by its biological parentage. Current reincarnations of such thinking, as well as their relationship to the past, raise important questions in need of further exploration.

**Accountability and responsibility**

In this fifth and final section, I address the idea of accountability and how it links in with ideas about the moral significance of responsibility in families (Finch & Mason, 1993; Smart & Neale, 1998). Wendy, the genetic maternal grandmother of a child born through sperm donation, pondered on the significance of being genetically related to one’s grandchildren:

I honestly don’t know whether it would have mattered to me or not [being a non-genetic grandparent]. I don’t think it would, not in the baby stage. I think when it gets to the children stage, one tends to love one’s own children and perhaps not everybody else’s because, for whatever reason, children can be very irritating. So I think I can understand why there could be difficulties later on with grandparents that are not genetically connected because you haven’t got that bond. I mean if it is your own, if you are genetically connected, I think you always feel a certain responsibility to how that child has turned out, you know.

Wendy speaks to ideas that genetic relationships translate into a special ‘bond’, a sort of social ‘glue’ that keeps family relationships intact when it might be tempting to let them go. The popular belief that genetic kinship is ‘fixed’ and non-elective (Mason, 2008)
frames Wendy’s account. Genetic relationships are acted upon as ‘strong kinship’, whereas non-genetic kinship is understood as (and so become) less durable (see also Nordqvist, 2015). This idea is combined with the idea of accountability for one’s genetic relatives (see also Mason, May, & Clarke, 2007); Wendy rehearses a discourse that she, in some way, is implicated in and therefore responsible for the way genetic grandchildren ‘turn out’, and hence she has to ‘bear’ the relationship.

Theresa had become a genetic grandmother of two children conceived using lesbian sperm donation. She found out that her daughter, the birth mother, had donated eggs, and this gave rise to questions for Theresa herself:

[My daughter] said ‘I had IVF I donated my eggs’. It was like a bang in my head. Why? Because it is a part of her, it is a part of me, it’s family. … A real egg is something from yourself you’re giving to somebody you don’t know. You don’t know how it is going to be brought up. … I said [to my daughter] ‘It is you, your genes are in it. It’s yours- can be [children that] look like you’. … It’s horrible. I dream about it. … I said ‘oh my God there are some little children I am the grandmother and I even don’t know’. That feels very hard.

Edwards (2000) argues that responsibilities travel with genetic relationships, and the failure to claim responsibility is deemed problematic. Theresa’s account echoes such thinking; she feels herself to have a role in making sure that any offspring genetically related to her are well taken care of (see also Mason et al., 2007). Egg donation has frustrated this responsibility. It appears that she feels it would have partially been fulfilled had her daughter donated to someone she knew would be good parents; the anonymity of the donation adds difficulty as she cannot shoulder her moral responsibility. She is prevented from becoming the grandmother she thinks she is.

The accounts of Wendy and Theresa illustrate how significant issues around accountability and responsibility are in families, and how they are ‘worked at’ and ‘worked out’ with reference to genetic thinking. Families are not self-evident groups, but come into being through a process of drawing boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (Nordqvist, 2014a; Rosser & Harris, 1965): family members need to be conceived of as such in order to be included in the family (McLaughlin, 2014). Genetic thinking is pertinent in that context. Theresa’s account (above) is illustrative of how family boundaries are drawn (and contested), and how genetic thinking operates as a central element in working out who is family, how they are family, and what responsibilities they have (Edwards & Strathern, 2000). Her claim to responsible grandmotherhood was based on genetic thinking: it mattered and had caused much friction between her and her daughter.

Conclusions

The contribution of this article lies in its suggestion that genetic thinking shapes everyday family life, and its analysis of when and how genetic thinking is rendered meaningful. To conclude, I reflect on three dimensions related to this argument.

The first notable dimension to highlight is simple but important: that genetic thinking is a salient aspect of contemporary family life. Whereas the sociological gaze has shifted from the structural family (‘being’ family) to family as ‘a set of activities’ (‘doing family’),
culturally speaking, structure-based genetic family discourse still holds strong. The accounts of the men and women who took part in our study bear witness to the importance of ‘being’ family, and of being ‘seen to be’ family. It would appear that although the social and legal context increasingly acknowledges social family relationships, genetic thinking operates as a conservative element maintaining ideas of what ‘proper families’ look like. Arguably, bringing this into focus is vital within a contemporary sociology of intimacy.

More broadly speaking, there is also a need to seek to more fully account for the relationship between discourse and practice in family life, and this is my second point. The data in this article are suggestive of there being an intriguing and intimate relationship between (genetic) discourse and family practice, but without them necessarily collapsing into one another. Genes do not ‘speak for themselves’, but rather genetic connections are rendered meaningful and so become meaningful. For example, genetic relationality translates into principles of thinking that guide people’s actions and conversations (being a good father; looking alike or feeling responsible). Genetic connections are desirable, but the analysis of family resemblances or everyday family living shows that genetic thinking operates as a proxy for social connectedness and belonging together. In other words, it is not the genetic relationship as such that matters, but seemingly the way that it is perceived to generate possibilities that are socially desirable: connections, resemblances, particular desirable traits being passed on, and ‘proper’ incontestable parenthood. I would argue that they are desirable because they aid people in understanding, and cementing, their relational world.

Building on this analysis, it would then appear that family practice and family thinking are intimately interlinked and co-produced. At times, ‘thinking’ seemingly proceeds and shapes what families ‘do’: the decision to prioritise ‘father-and-daughter time’ was directly linked to the potential ‘lack’ inherent in non-genetic parenthood. But there is also evidence to suggest that ‘thinking’ and ‘doing’ operate in a feedback loop where the relationship between the two is intensely intimate, mutually reinforcing and cannot easily be ordered. This happens, for example, in conversations (talking, laughing) about family resemblances (genetic thinking, passing on, traits, qualities). Consequently, it is important to explore more in-depth and theoretically the relationship between family practice and family discourse. I do not argue that we leave a focus on family as sets of activities behind, rather that we develop a sociological gaze more sensitive to the relationship between activities and the feelings, imaginations, dreams or claims with which they are entwined. The concept ‘family practices’ does not intrinsically preclude attention to discourse or ideology, but questions arise about if and how it can usefully be developed to better capture those elements.

My third concluding comment refers back to the introduction of this article and how the study contributes to existing work exploring families and relationships. Having explored some of the different reincarnations of ‘genetic normativity’ – the expectation that children are their parents’ genetic offspring – at play, the article identified five ways in which values, assumptions and ideas surface and interlink with everyday moralities, practices, habits and relationalities. No doubt there are more. How do these and other elements play out in specific, varied and nuanced ways in different contexts? What would we discover, for example, about accountability, daily family life and resemblance talk, if we explored the genetic thinking of genetic mothers? How would that compare to
genetic fathers? How does genetic thinking figure in everyday heterosexuality, marriage and same sex relationships? Questions also emerge on a broader level: How might sociologists explain the continued importance of genetic thinking alongside family formations becoming increasingly diverse? How is the emphasis on ‘being’ family managed and understood in families that fit with, and those that diverge from, the ideal of the heterosexual genetic nuclear family? How might new scientific knowledge, such as epigenetics, interact, shape and be shaped by everyday life? It is my argument that it is timely and important to debate the sociological implications of the ways in which genetic thinking is rendered meaningful in contemporary family life.

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