

INTIMACY TRANSFORMED? A CRITICAL LOOK AT THE 'PURE RELATIONSHIP'

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Abstract It has recently been claimed that a particular form of intimacy, 'the pure relationship' is increasingly sought in personal life. For a couple, 'the pure relationship' involves opening out to each other, enjoying each other's unique qualities and sustaining trust through mutual disclosure. Anthony Giddens (1992) postulates a transformation of intimacy in all personal relationships with radical consequences for the gender order. Popular discourse supports the view that heterosexual couples are more equal and intimate. However, stories of everyday lives told to researchers paint a very qualified picture. Much of personal life remains structured by inequalities. Gendered struggles with the gap between cultural ideals and structural inequalities result in a range of creative identity and relationship-saving strategies. More, perhaps much more, creative energy goes into sustaining a sense of intimacy *despite* inequality than into a process of transformation. Moreover, the rhetoric of 'the pure relationship' may point people in the wrong direction both personally and politically. It feeds on and into a therapeutic discourse that individualises personal problems and down-grades sociological explanations. In practice, intimacy remains multi-dimensional and for the contenders for successful heterosexual equality, acts of practical love and care have been more important than a constant dynamic of mutual exploration of each other's selves.

Key words: couples, intimacy, marriage, parents, 'pure relationship', sex.

In describing late twentieth-century processes of social change, which involve a transformation in the nature of self-identity and intimacy, Giddens talks of the ascendancy of 'confluent love' and 'the pure relationship'. Confluent love is contingent on lovers opening themselves out to each other. The 'pure relationship', like the ideal-typical dyad, has no overarching structure to sustain it. Rather, its key sustaining dynamics are mutual self-disclosure and appreciation of each other's unique qualities.

A pure relationship is one in which external criteria have become dissolved: the relationship exists solely for whatever rewards that relationship can deliver. In the context of the pure relationship, trust can be mobilised only by a process of mutual disclosure

(Giddens 1991:6)

It [a pure relationship] refers to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfaction for each individual to stay within it.

(Giddens 1992:58)

The type of intimacy involved in 'the pure relationship' necessarily requires equality between the parties to the relationship, that is a shared sense of self-disclosure and contributing on an equal footing to the relationship.

Giddens claims that the trend towards 'the pure relationship' is paralleled by the emergence of a more responsive and creative form of sexuality which he calls 'plastic sexuality', referring to a heightened self-awareness of the plasticity of sexuality, a late twentieth-century freedom from any essential pre-given way of being sexual.

Sexuality has then become, as Luhmann might put it, a 'communicative code' rather than a phenomenon integrated with the wider exigencies of human existence. In sexual behaviour, a distinction has always been drawn between pleasure and procreation. When the new connections between sexuality and intimacy were formed, however, sexuality became much more completely separated from procreation than before. Sexuality became doubly constituted as a medium of self-realisation and as a prime means, as well as an expression, of intimacy.

(Giddens 1991:164)

While it is quite possible to have intensely intimate relationships which are not sexual and sexual relationships which are devoid of intimacy, Giddens suggests that preoccupation with the body and exploring sexual pleasure is increasingly part of both self-construction and 'the pure relationship'. For Giddens, a 'revolution in female sexual autonomy', that is in women finding sexual pleasure in ways which are not dictated by men, and 'the flourishing of homosexuality' (1992:28) are manifestations of 'plastic sexuality'. In 'confluent love' sexuality and intimacy are tied together 'as never before' (1992:84).

The underlying causal factors promoting the ascendancy of the pure relationship and plastic sexuality are the uncertainties and new social conditions created by reiterative processes of social change characteristic of late modernity. In combination they heighten the sense that individuals have of their own creativity and their own limitations in the business of producing their selves and their social world. These deep-rooted changes are detailed in Giddens's earlier work on the development of 'high modernity' (1990, 1991): globalisation, disembeddedness, enhanced sense of risk, dominance of experts and abstract systems, reflexivity. The pace of social change is such that traditions are more profoundly swept away than ever before (1994).

Where large areas of a person's life are no longer set by pre-existing patterns and habits, the individual is continually obliged to negotiate life-style options. Moreover – and this is crucial – such choices are not just 'external' or marginal aspects of the individual's attitudes, but define who the individual 'is'. In other words, life-style choices are constitutive of the reflexive narrative of self.

(Giddens 1992:75)

The phrase 'narrative of the self' emphasises the ongoing process of self-construction. In the social conditions of the late twentieth century personal

relationships are the key site in which men and women find 'forms of self exploration and moral construction' (Giddens 1992:144). A successful pure relationship recreates psychological stability by resonating with the ontological security and basic trust of others which is developed in an untraumatised and successful childhood and which derives from the trust placed by children in their 'caretakers' (Giddens 1991:186). But at the same time, 'pure relationships' necessarily contain the internal tension of attempting to reconcile mutual trust and commitment with the knowledge that the relationship is voluntary and only 'good until further notice'. For Giddens such tension and consequent fragility is an inherent aspect of the more profound potential for openness and intimacy rather than a symptom of general *malaise*. In his optimism, Giddens draws selectively from psychological theory, setting aside accounts which emphasise the inevitability of inner conflict, self-discontent and disappointment in relationships (Craib 1994, 1997).

One of the tantalising aspects of Giddens's work is this optimism. He frequently suggests that a more profound equality between men and women is emerging through the transformation of intimacy. More general claims are also made concerning the potential for radical and positive social change through personal life.

Yet the radicalising possibilities of the transformation of intimacy are very real. Some have claimed that intimacy can be oppressive, and clearly this may be so if it is regarded as a demand for constant emotional closeness. Seen, however, as a transactional negotiation of personal ties by equals, it appears in a completely different light. Intimacy implies a wholesale democratising of the interpersonal domain, in a manner fully compatible with democracy in the public sphere. There are further implications as well. The transformation of intimacy might be a subversive influence upon modern institutions as a whole. For a social world in which emotional fulfilment replaced the maximising of economic growth would be very different from that which we know at present.

(Giddens 1992:3)

I wish to begin with some brief critical observations concerning his optimism about a new impetus towards gender equality and democratisation of personal life, before going on to a more detailed consideration of relevant empirical work.

Critical Issues

Giddens presents the trends he is identifying as relatively recent. Yet the idea that how personal life is conducted is more intensely intimate, individualised or personalised than ever before, is a long-running theme. For example, eighteenth-century philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment saw intimate friendship as a 'modern' pattern emerging in their time (Silver 1997). Adam Smith believed that, prior to the development of the impersonal markets of

commercial society and the impersonal administration of legal-rational bureaucracies, all friendships tended to have the character of necessity. It was only with the separation of commercial relations and personal life that friendship could become a matter of sympathy and affection devoid of calculation of interest. In more recent sociological writing about marriage and the family, the themes of growing intimacy, privacy and equality date back to at least the 1940s (Burgess and Locke 1945) and are part of the orthodox account of how the 'modern family' developed (Jamieson 1987). In the 1960s Peter Berger and Hans Kellner (1964) laid out theoretically the claim that an intense dialogue between marriage partners (or members of co-resident couples) functions to create a stable sense of the self, screening off a sense of chaos, despite the fragility of a socially constructed world. This prefigured a key strand of Giddens's argument by over twenty years. Giddens is, of course, not the only recent theorist to claim a distinctive late twentieth-century twist. Ulrich Beck (1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995), for example, has produced a comparable account. The sociological literature of the 1950s–70s, like the more recent contributions, engaged with popular debate about the demise of the family. However, eagerness to counter simplistic negative accounts sometimes resulted in over-simplification, underplaying how continued structural inequalities shaped personal life, insufficiently unravelling causality and timing (Harris 1983), failing to distinguish the experiences of lived lives from views of how they should be lived (Coontz 1992; Finch and Summerfield 1991; Morgan 1991, 1992; Skolnick 1991). All of these issues re-emerge as problems in Giddens's account.

David Morgan (1991, 1992, 1996) has analysed how the twentieth-century story of change in family and marriage 'from institution to relationship', became an ideological simplification of social change particularly promoted by professionals with a vested interest in marital and relationship problems. As Morgan notes, ideological constructions are nevertheless consequential. However, the nature of the fit between the ideological story and everyday relationships is not simple. It is possible, for example, for the discourse of 'relationship experts' to infuse everyday talk while other factors modify the parameters of everyday practice. Such issues are not fully explored in *The Transformation of Intimacy*. Despite reference to the reflexive interrelationship between his work, popular culture and therapeutic discourse, Giddens draws relatively uncritically on therapeutic literature, as documents about and symptoms of personal and social change (Giddens 1992:86). Not surprisingly, his account of 'the pure relationship' fits well with a therapeutic discourse that assumes the value of self-disclosure in therapy and in the relationships which therapy hopes to cure.

In contrast, many academic and popular commentators express concern over individualism 'going too far' and critique the individualising tendencies of therapy for distorting recognition of social problems and mitigating against collective resistance. Giddens explicitly counters Foucault's discussion of

therapy as a mechanism of extending subtle forms of regulation and control (Giddens 1992:28–34). In the process, Giddens also silently lays aside accounts such as those of Christopher Lasch (1977) and Bauman (1990) which focus on the negativity of dependency on experts for self-direction, self-creativity and unmediated social interaction. Bauman (1991:205) refers to Richard Sennett's (1977) concept of 'destructive *gemeinschaft*' in asserting that damage is caused to social cohesion by the psychological burdens of incitements to mutual disclosure. There are other earlier warnings in the sociological literature. Georg Simmel (Wolff 1950) argued that total lack of secrets could bankrupt a relationship as there was nothing left to wonder about. In claiming openness as a constructive process, Giddens interleaves his analysis of late modernity with a rather unpacked psychological theory. It is the ontological security of childhood that provides the self-resources for a subsequent creative process of self-disclosure. The starting premise is that a wide range of social circumstances in childhood, anything more caring than suffering violent, sexually abusive or highly neglectful parents, will create the necessary psychological conditions for 'generalised trust' in others and ontological security. This leaves an under-explained biographical contrast between an easily acquired secure sense of self in childhood and an adult who only just escapes doubts about self-authenticity by working hard on a narrative of the self and fragile personal relationships. Given the emphasis Giddens places on the fragility of personal life in a highly self-reflexive late modernity, the exempting of the parent–child relationship from fragility involves resort to a psychology divorced from his own sociological analysis.

The contribution of therapeutic discourse to damaging gender stereotypes is also unremarked, reflecting a more general underplaying of structures of gender inequality in *The Transformation of Intimacy*. Feminist work has documented how women carrying the burdens of systematic gender inequality have been recast by medical and therapeutic experts as pathological individuals (recent accounts are given by Busfield 1996; Dobash and Dobash 1992). Morgan has recently warned that the continued theoretical focus on the relational character of heterosexual partnerships can obscure persisting and institutionalised gender inequalities (1996:77–8). While drawing on particular pieces of feminist work, there is no sustained discussion in *The Transformation of Intimacy* of the feminist scholarship that has subjected the interrelationships between 'private' and 'public', 'personal' and 'political' to intensive theorising and empirical exploration over the last decades. Yet debate concerning the resilience of gender inequality is centrally relevant to Giddens's case. This is far from a settled matter, but many key players in the debate would declare the undermining of male privilege through transformations in heterosexual intimacy theoretically unlikely. Some would claim the postulated change in heterosexual relationships unlikely in itself; those who accept the possibility are likely to doubt that radical transformation would necessarily follow. It is not clear, for example, that change in the quality of

heterosexual relationships would shatter the interconnection of gendered labour markets, gendered distributions of income and wealth, and gendered divisions of domestic labour.

Most theorists who remain committed to the term 'patriarchy' would see difficulties, although not all are as definitive as Christine Delphy and Diana Leonard in the following advice: 'It may be that the family and heterosexuality are not the place to start when trying to change gender relations' (1992:266). Moreover, it should be noted that many leading theorists of gender and power can envisage gender equality within a heterosexual personal life within and despite patriarchal arrangements. 'Further, if we see patriarchy as referring to properties of a system as a whole rather than to the individual actors who make up the system, it may be possible to find at the more individual or interpersonal level, examples of non-patriarchal [non-oppressive] yet gendered practices' (Morgan 1996:91). Theorists who prefer speaking in terms of 'doing gender' and different 'gender regimes' to deploying the concept of 'patriarchy' willingly acknowledge the possibility of gender equality in one setting without necessary transformation of another (Connell 1987, 1995). The actual impact of changes within domestic and interpersonal relations on the wider structuring of gender relationships is an empirical matter (Morgan 1996:80). There is no weighing of either theoretical or empirical states of play by Giddens and *The Transformation of Intimacy* seems strangely cut off from both the wealth of relevant feminist research and his own earlier discussions of the interrelationships of structure and action.

For obvious epistemological and methodological reasons, in examining the empirical evidence of how personal lives are conducted there is no possibility of verifying or disproving Giddens's broad-sweep account. The aim of this paper is necessarily a more modest one of looking for signs concerning the nature of intimacy as it is constructed in everyday relationships and considering how well proximities to and divergences from 'pure relationships' sit with his understanding of social change. In what follows, I mainly focus on research literature that deals with heterosexual couple relationships, as they are the most heavily researched by the key players in the argument. A more general review of personal relationships (Jamieson 1998) suggests that intimacy has more than one dimension, that diversity in the make-up of intimacy is considerable even within one category of relationship such as friendships or mother-child relationships. Moreover, personal interactions, even those of friendships, the least structured of intimate relationships, often reinforce gender, class and ethnic divisions rather than democratise personal life (Allan 1989; Griffiths 1995; Hey 1997; Thorne 1993). Personal relationships are not typically shaped in whatever way gives pleasure without the taint of practical, economic and other material circumstances. Few relationships, even friendships, are mainly simply about mutual appreciation, knowing and understanding.

Couple Relationships

Giddens intimates potential radical shifts in heterosexual practices. If 'pure relationships' are indeed becoming more common, equalisation in men and women's interest in and experience of sex and intimacy can be anticipated. Similarly the ascendancy of 'plastic sexuality' will mean greater sexual experimentation and hence an increase in the diversity of sexual practice.

There has undoubtedly been a significant shift in public discourse about sex and sexuality that appears to acknowledge gender equality and show greater tolerance of diversity in sexual practices (Weeks 1995). Greater acceptance of gender equality is typified by the shift in magazines aimed at women and girls. Where once their content retained a coy silence on sex and a strong emphasis on romance, readers now receive acceptance or encouragement of active sexuality and sexual desire (McRobbie 1991, 1994, 1996). However, as Jackson and Scott note, the messages of public discourse remain mixed, reasserting as often as challenging the boundaries of conventional femininity. Incitements to active female sexuality have not undermined the dominant view of 'real sex' as coitus ending in ejaculation. Moreover, 'women and girls are positioned as sexual carers who do the emotional work and police their own emotions to ensure that they do not place excessive demands on men' (Jackson and Scott 1997:567).

Sexual behaviours, their meanings and significance are notoriously difficult to investigate. Only partial insight can be gleaned from the behavioural measures which surveys offer, such as incidence of 'mutual orgasm'. However, relevant indicators can be found in recent large-scale surveys published in Britain and the United States (Wellings *et al.* 1994; Lauman *et al.* 1994). There is modest evidence of departures from conventional forms of sexual activity and of the more varied sexual repertoire implied by 'plastic sexuality.' The British survey found high levels of 'non-penetrative' sex and the US survey of 'oral sex', although it is not possible to know about the meanings and inter-personal dynamics behind these activities. However, there was no clear evidence of gender convergence in sexual behaviour but rather a rediscovery of patterns of gender difference, which appear to have only modestly moderated since Kinsey (1948, 1953). On all measures of sexual activity investigated, ranging from questions on thinking about sex and masturbating (asked only in the United States) to questions on number and type of partners and forms of sexual activity engaged in with them, more men are sexually active than women. The US survey revealed that men are still more likely to experience orgasm during sex than women and the British survey that men think orgasm is more essential to sexual satisfaction than women. Nevertheless, there is some evidence of gender convergence in expectations and ideas about sex. When responding to attitude questions in surveys men and women often say very similar things about the meaning and significance

of sexual behaviour in a couple-relationship. For example, in the British survey, most men and women think that 'companionship and affection are more important than sex in a marriage'.

However, in-depth interview studies continue to uncover a persistent, tenacious and phallogocentric view of heterosexual sex as something that men do to women. It is conclusively documented that the early sexual experiences of most young people involve neither the negotiation of mutual pleasure nor a fusion of sex and emotional intimacy (Holland *et al.* 1991, 1993, 1994, 1998; Thomson and Scott 1991; Tolman 1994; Wight 1994, 1996). Evidence of mutual sexual pleasure, equality and deep intimacy among older heterosexuals is outweighed by sex and gender trouble. In their study of long-term couples, Jean Duncombe and Dennis Marsden (1993, 1995, 1996) find women complaining about lack of intimacy and men about lack of sex. It seems that men are more emotionally withdrawn from the relationship than women and men derive more pleasure from sex in the relationship (see also Mansfield and Collard 1988; Thompson and Walker 1989). Robert Connell's (1995) biographical explorations of masculinities indicate persistent difficulties in reconciling equality, intimacy and sexuality even among 'new men' and 'gay men'.

The *Transformation of Intimacy* raises the possibility of equality and intimacy in personal life democratising gender relationships more generally. However, empirical work on heterosexual couples routinely continues to find that men exercise more power than women in the partnerships: for example, having more choice concerning opting in and out of domestic work and child care (Brannen and Moss 1991), and exercising more control of money (Morris 1990; Pahl 1989; Vogler 1994). But at the same time, research continues to find couples exhibiting such inequalities who collaboratively generate a sense of caring, intimate, equal relationships. This was eloquently demonstrated by Kathryn Backett (1982) in the 1970s and her findings continue to be echoed in much more recent work. Couples' carefully constructed sense of each other as good, mutually caring partners, despite unequal sacrifice for their common good, diverges considerably from the 'pure relationship'.

Research suggests that the ways in which couples generate a sense of themselves and their partners as mutually caring often reproduce gender inequality – the creativity and intimacy of couples is not yet typically harnessed to gender transformation. Many couples refer to gendering (i.e. underpinning gender difference) structural factors – the vagaries of employment including men and women's different earnings and prospects in the labour market, the incompatibility of combining the demands of childrearing and full-time employment – as if a traditional division of labour adopted because of such structures beyond their control were therefore exempted from any possible inequality. Many also deploy a variety of gendering but apparently gender neutral devices to maintain a counterfactual sense of equality ('she happens to be better at cooking,' 'he doesn't enjoy cooking as much').

Others continue to make explicit reference to traditional beliefs about manhood and womanhood, sometimes disavowing that this is how life should always be organised, but accepting that it works for them (for example, 'It's how I/he/she was brought up' – see other examples in Brannen and Moss 1991; Hochschild 1990; Mansfield and Collard 1988). This is not to deny the significance of a sense of equality for a sense of intimacy among many couples. There is a general taken-for-granted assumption that a good relationship will be equal and intimate. Rather it is to suggest that creative energy is deployed in disguising inequality, not in undermining it (Bittman and Lovejoy 1993).

Mutual self-disclosure is the basis of intimacy in 'the pure relationship', but empirical evidence suggests this is not the sole or necessarily the ascendant type of intimacy between couples. Love and care expressed through actions is a very different dimension of intimacy from 'knowing', the mutual disclosure of the 'pure relationship', but it continues to loom large in how many couples view their relationship. For couples who live together, the time, money and effort each devotes to their household often symbolises love and care for each other. A common traditional rhetoric which couples can and have drawn on when overlooking everyday differences in power and privilege is the visualisation of their relationship in terms of complementary gifts – the man's wage as his expression of care for his partner and his family, and the woman's matching gift of housework as expressing her tender loving care (Cheal 1988; Morgan 1991). Many dual-worker households continue to use a slightly modified version of this theme by talking down the woman's wage as supplementary rather than the main earnings and talking up the man's typically relatively limited contributions to domestic work (Brannen and Moss 1991; Hochschild 1990). Tactics also include minimising the significance of men's lack of practical involvement in the household or child care and maximising the significance of their role as an emotional support (although discontent is then the consequence when emotional support is perceived as weak). Expressions of interest, concern and reassurance, 'emotional work', can compensate for a lack of practical assistance. Visualising their relationship as rebalanced in these ways centres on an intimacy that is somewhat removed from the 'pure relationship'. Love and care as expressed by a more practical doing and giving is as much the crux of their relationship, as a process of mutually discovering and enjoying each other.

Couples who achieve a more objective equality are not necessarily any closer to a 'pure relationship'. Empirical research identifies a minority of couples who make painstaking efforts to achieve relatively equal contributions to a joint project of a household. In an Australian study, Goodnow and Bowes (1994) discuss heterosexual couples who have been recruited *because* they do things differently. However, unlike a number of other studies they are not recruited through feminist networks (Haas 1982; Kimball 1983; VanEvery 1995). For these couples, the supposedly gender neutral 'circumstances', 'competencies' and 'preferences' (Mansfield and Collard 1988)

that others use to justify unequal divisions of labour were not good enough reasons if they then produce a situation in which men systematically have more privileges such as free time. Goodnow and Bowes suggest that their respondents were not of a wholly different mind set from more traditional couples but rather that they focused on the same dimensions of love and care. It was not their assumption that a loving couple would mutually care for each other in practical ways which was distinctive but their thorough analysis of the who, when, where and why of how this was done fairly. This was initiated in the name of fairness towards each other without necessarily adopting any feminist rhetoric, although women had typically prompted the process. These women had talked their way out of co-operating in an enterprise of covering over the gap between an ideal of equality and making more effort in practice to sustain their joint project. The thoroughness of establishing basic principles of fairness ruled out many of the tactics that might otherwise have justified gendered patterns. By the time of interview couples were settled into 'doing things differently', but conflict had often been the initial consequence.

The fact that researchers have identified heterosexual relationships that seem equal and unexploitative does not necessarily make these couples the vanguard of the future but even supposing they are, then something rather different is going on for them than 'the pure relationship'. The couples have applied reflexive awareness of the malleability of the world and themselves to creating a framework of rules. The dialogue that they engage in, reworking what is fair and what is not, is a practical as well as political, sociological and philosophical piece of personal engagement. Any consequent politicisation and personal empowerment has not stemmed only from a preoccupation with their own relationship but a more general engagement with the world. While starting from their own situation, their rules of fairness seek universal principles and are not tied to or derived from knowledge of each other's unique qualities. In focusing intense dialogue on practical arrangements and abstract rules, the couple creates projects that inevitably add to the institutionalised framework over and above their relationship. Hence they stand outside of the ideal-typical pure relationship which seeks to bracket off distractions from the intensity of the relationship itself.

Giddens suggests that high rates of dissolution among couples reflect the fragility of the 'pure relationships', which require the psychological balancing act of sustaining mutual trust while knowing the relationship is only 'good until further notice'. However, it seems more plausible to see the fragility of heterosexual couples as a consequence of the tension between strengthening cultural emphasis on intimacy, equality and mutuality in relationships and the structural supports of gender inequalities, which make these ideals difficult to attain. Studies such as Brannen and Moss (1991), Hochschild (1990) and Mansfield and Collard (1988) document how collaborative effort can produce

a sense of being equal and intimate, in spite of inequalities. What is important is not an intense process of mutual self-disclosure and exploration but a shared repertoire of cover stories, taboos and self-dishonesty. However, inequalities and asymmetries in parenting, domestic divisions of labour and 'emotion work' sometimes breed simmering discontent which defies the desire to feel equal and intimate. Drawing on Hochschild's work, Duncombe and Marsden (1993) talk of women 'deep acting' in order to maintain a sense that their relationship is 'ever so happy', but sometimes 'deep acting' gives way to more critically aware and cynical 'shallow acting'. Diane Vaughan (1986) suggests that uncoupling begins with a secret, one partner's unspoken but nurtured feeling of discomfort with the relationship. She theorises the process of uncoupling as the converse of constructing a sense of self and shared worldview through the marriage dialogue described by Berger and Kellner (1964). Interestingly, her respondents' stories of uncoupling show that while the disaffected partner withdraws from the relationship, the other partner often has no sense of loss until the secret is dramatically announced. Couples did not seem to be seeking to inhabit 'pure relationships' in any of these studies but rather relationships which were intended to last, which couples worked to institutionalise *and* wanted to feel equal and intimate.

Same-sex couples, and particularly lesbians, are identified by Giddens as in the vanguard of developing 'pure relationships' and hence as having a high incidence of relationship breakdown. There is a body of work which suggests that same-sex couples, and particularly lesbians, tend to have and to see themselves as having more equal relationships than heterosexual couples (Dunne 1997; Kurdek 1993; Weeks, Donovan and Heaphy 1998; Weston 1991) and that, moreover, lesbian relationships are particularly characterised by high levels of intimacy and communication (Dunne 1997:201). However, the empirical evidence does not convince me that either lesbians or gay men typically have 'pure relationships', although Weeks and his colleagues sometime use the term. Some research indicates that lesbians are wary of treating their partner as the sole source of intimacy but rather carefully maintain a supportive network, a 'chosen family' of friends, ex-lovers and kin (Heaphy, Weeks and Donovan 1998; Weston 1991). Scrutiny of the 'ground rules' Christian gay couples construct reveals a range of practical devices to protect their relationship, including an understood tactical silence about casual sexual encounters outside the relationship (Yip 1997). As yet the evidence on which to assess the relative fragility of same-sex relationships is rather sparse and tends to stress similarities to heterosexuals rather than difference (Kurdek 1991). Moreover, there are reasons, other than 'the pure relationship', why same-sex relationships may be vulnerable to breakdown. It is clear that if same-sex couples do manage to securely maintain a long-term relationship they do so despite a wider social fabric, which is relatively hostile to its institutionalisation.

Couples and Parent-Child Relationships

The processes of having children and making a joint project of their upbringing create structures over and above a relationship and therefore necessarily detract from the purity of the 'pure relationship'. Giddens evades the contradiction he has set up theoretically between parenting and 'the pure relationship' through the assertion that parent-child relationships, like couple relationships, are tending towards 'the pure relationship'. However, he does not then lay claim to the full range of attributes of 'the pure relationship' in the case of parents and children. Unlike couple relationships, this apparently does not render parent-child relationships as fragile, as 'good until further notice', at least not before 'basic trust' and 'ontological security' have typically formed. The research literature suggests that having children can unbalance couples but not primarily because children detract from their pure relationship but as a consequence of gender inequalities becoming more extreme. Parenting is rarely a gender-neutral activity and often exacerbates inequalities in divisions of labour, free time, disposable income and other privileges. Mothers typically remain much more emotionally and practically involved with their children than fathers.

Unlike his discussion of couple relationships, which more strongly resonates with similar arguments elsewhere, Giddens's claims about 'pure relationships' between parents and children have had little take-up. While empirical research finds parents claiming they want to have closer relationships with their children than they had with their own parents, there is no clear evidence of a trend to democratic 'pure relationships' even among parents and teenage children. The search for a 'pure relationship' with children seems to be an unattainable ideal particularly pursued by white, middle-class mothers. Research into their mothering finds them stressing empathy, understanding and communication with older children (Brannen *et al.* 1994) and employing reasoning and pseudo-democracy with younger children (Walkerdine and Lucey 1989). Mutually intimate mother-child relationships are not necessarily the consequence, however.

Julia Brannen and her colleagues (1994) document the complex negotiations between London-based parents and their 15 and 16 year old children. While many fathers were rather shadowy figures in young men's and young women's lives, mothers typically worked hard at trying to maintain a good relationship with their children. However, what a good relationship meant varied by class and ethnicity. Mothers were generally confident that their teenage children knew they continued to love and care for them; but some talked of a 'good relationship' in terms which echoed 'the pure relationship', with particular emphasis on a deeper knowing and understanding of each other. White middle-class mothers were most likely to claim to be very close to their teenage child. They stressed empathy and understanding, being able to 'talk', having 'listened' and 'tried to understand'. However, teenagers did

not necessarily experience the practice of 'knowing' in this way. Middle-class mothers were more likely to be constantly on the lookout for information that would warn them of possible trouble. In doing so they were working against their cherished desire to really *know* their child. Knowing as a means of control interfered with knowing as a dimension of intimacy. What parents consider to be a 'confiding' relationship could be experienced by the teenager as one-sided pressure to make disclosures. Mothers who were attempting to retain some control over their teenager, while being like a friend and equal, could not conceal their precarious balancing act.

Clearly the ideal of the involved and sensitive father has grown in stature in recent years, but research continues to find many men who are content to be providers and background figures (Bjornberg 1992; Brannen and O'Brien 1995; Busfield 1987; Lewis and O'Brien 1987; Russell 1983). The statistics continue to show that many non-custodial fathers lose touch with their children; research indicates that cumulatively, by the end of the second post-divorce year, about half of fathers have faded out of regular contact (Cherlin 1992; Cherlin and Furstenberg 1988). Nevertheless, the ideal of the involved father and equality in mothering and fathering can be highly consequential. For example, Bren Neale and Carol Smart (1997) have found fathers claiming their right to custody of their children following divorce on the grounds that 'everybody's talking about new age man'. Their study revealed that men's interest in custody sometimes reflects a combative approach to their wives rather than their prior relationship with their children. Moreover, men used ideas of gender equality to do their wife down, claiming that because women in general have equality then their wife should forfeit any special claim to children even if she had been a full-time wife and mother. This is a good empirical demonstration of how the ideals of equality and intimacy can feed into consequences that are a negation of 'the pure relationship'.

The significant dimension of intimacy in many parent-child relationships may not be being close by 'knowing' and talking to each other. A sense of unconditional love, trust and acceptance may be sustained with caring actions and relatively few words. Studies suggest that a good relationship between some parents and their growing-up children requires increasing silence on the part of the parents rather than an intense dialogue of mutual disclosure. Just as in couple relationships, silence need not mean an absence of care.

Conclusion

Giddens's work suggests a radical transformation of intimacy is under way with potentially profound consequences for gender politics and the wider social fabric. In order to keep faith with the argument, the much messier and less optimistic picture provided by empirical research has to be seen as the flux and confusion of an uneven transition. Indeed, some commentators seem

prepared to give this benefit of the doubt (Weeks 1995). However, this is a generosity that I balk at on political and theoretical as well as empirical grounds.

Extolling the values of mutual self-disclosure and 'the pure relationship' feeds into a therapeutic discourse that has sometimes been the antithesis of empowering for women and gays. While in *The Transformation of Intimacy* women are treated as the vanguard of the new intimacy, as Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott note 'we should be wary of valorising what is symptomatic of subordination however tempting it might be to deride men's emotional incompetence' (1997:568). At the same time as treating women as the vanguard of social change, the book eschews any systematic review of feminist scholarship. It is important to note that feminist-informed work of the last few decades has not typically concluded that if sufficient men and women can live together as equals and intimates then how other institutions, work-places, the state, the street, and the like, 'do gender' will automatically radically unravel. If anything, the causal arrows point in the other direction to the ways in which efforts within personal life are constantly countered elsewhere. Giddens refers to the diffusion of change from the personal to other arenas without offering a developed sociological explanation of the intervening mechanisms. Ironically, this gives credence to the popular psychology of changing the world by transforming your inner self at the expense of more sociological accounts of social change.

Theoretically, the pure relationship seems to be a near impossibility for domestic partnerships and parent-child relationships that are necessarily embroiled in financial and material matters over and above the relationship. When adults share responsibility for physical space, money and material things, how these are managed cannot but become both symbolic of and reflexively constitutive of the relationship itself. Matters ranging from who last cleaned the toilet to how the insurance claim was spent become means of communicating care or neglect, equality or hierarchy, unity or division. Actions can speak louder than words and perhaps the important words, if men and women are to live together as equals, may be sorting out fair ways to get things done rather than purer forms of mutual self-disclosure.

The current state of play in gender politics remains a matter of debate. No theorist believes that what is happening in everyday gender play can be simply read off from the volume of talk about gender equality and heterosexual or homosexual intimacy. Ideals of equality and intimacy between men and women have been part of public discourse for decades, albeit that the themes have become louder and more diverse, for example, inciting men to become more emotionally expressive, more considerate lovers, communicative partners and sensitive fathers. Unquestionably, this barrage is consequential and must be associated with other changes that are in some sense in this direction. Yet, it is perfectly possible that widely disseminated ideals are, nevertheless, not widely or radically experienced lived realities of the present, nor will they

be of the future. Although the evidence suggests most individuals now approach couple relationships with expectations which include mutual emotional support and treating each other like equals, this tells us relatively little concerning how people actually behave towards each other. Empirically, intimacy and inequality continue to coexist in many personal lives. Personal relationships remain highly gendered. Men and women routinely both invoke gender stereotypes or turn a convenient blind eye to gendering processes when making sense of themselves as lovers, partners, mothers, fathers and friends. While agreeing with Giddens's rejection of the more pessimistic account of personal life at the century's end, I note that the creative energies of many social actors are still engaged in coping with or actively sustaining old inequalities rather than transforming them.

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