

Feminist Theory and Research on Family Relationships: Pluralism and Complexity

Katherine R. Allen¹ · Ana L. Jaramillo-Sierra²

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Abstract Feminist perspectives on family relationships begin with the critique of the idealized template of the White, middle class, heterosexually married couple and their dependent children. Feminist scholars take family diversity and complexity as their starting point, by emphasizing how power infuses all of family relationships, from the local to the global scale. As the main location for caring and productive labor, families are the primary unit for providing gendered socialization and distributing power across the generations. In this issue and two subsequent issues of *Sex Roles*, we have collected theoretical and empirical articles that include critical analyses, case studies, quantitative studies, and qualitative studies that focus on a wide array of substantive topics in the examination of families. These topics include variations in marital and intimate partnerships and dissolution; motherhood and fatherhood in relation to ideology and practice; intergenerational parent–child relationships and socialization practices; and paid and unpaid labor. All of the articles across the three issues are guided by a type of feminist theory (e.g., gender theory; intersectional theory; Black feminist theory; globalization theory; queer theory) and many incorporate multiple theoretical perspectives, including mainstream social and behavioral science theories. Another feature of the collection is the authors' insistence on conducting research that makes a difference in the lives of the individuals and families they study, thereby generating a wealth of practical strategies for

relevant future research and empowering social change. In this introduction, we specifically address the first six articles in the special collection on feminist perspectives on family relationships.

Keywords Families · Family relationships · Feminist research · Feminist theory · Intersectionality

Introduction

In a series of three special issues, we bring together a collection of recent empirical and theoretical works on feminism and family relationships with a focus on theoretical, methodological, disciplinary, intersectional, and international diversity. Guided by a feminist framework that appreciates and promotes scholarship developed through a variety of theories and research methods (Allen et al. 2009; Baber 2004; De Reus et al. 2005; Dill et al. 2007; Hermann and Stewart 1994; Osmond and Thorne 1993; Walker 2000), we encouraged submissions by scholars across different social and behavioral science disciplines (e.g., anthropology, communications, family studies, psychology, social work, sociology). In addition, acknowledging the need to understand gender relations and families beyond the U.S. and other Western cultural standards in developed countries (Ferree 2010; Few-Demo 2014; Mahalingam et al. 2009; Patil 2013), we circulated our call for manuscripts among scholars working in different world regions and actively encouraged international scholars to share their work with us.

In planning and editing this collection regarding feminist perspectives on family relationships, we addressed the following questions: How are feminist researchers from different disciplines and geographical locations contributing to the understanding of family and kinship relationships? From a

✉ Katherine R. Allen
kallen@vt.edu

¹ Department of Human Development, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA 24061, USA

² Departamento de Psicología, Universidad de Los Andes, Bogota, Colombia

feminist perspective, what are recent and relevant findings on family processes and structures as well as the relations between families and other social contexts (such as the workplace, the media, and the global economy)? What are the enduring issues that comprise feminist scholarship on families, and how do these issues intersect with feminist activism for personal, social, and political change?

In total, this collection consists of 20 original theoretical or empirical papers, appearing in three issues of *Sex Roles*, that reflect interdisciplinary, international, and intersectional research and theory on families from various feminist perspectives. Before describing the diverse nature of the articles in the entire collection and in this issue specifically, we locate the feminist study of families in historical and contemporary perspectives.

Feminist Scholarship on Families

Feminist work in the social and behavioral sciences conceives research, theory development, and activism as integral to what feminist scholars do; these are not mutually exclusive, nor dispassionate, endeavors (Baber and Allen 1992; Crawford and Kimmel 1999; Freedman 2002; Gergen 2001; Risman 2004; Thompson and Walker 1995). Feminist scholars ground their work in the real world of power and oppression. They explicitly acknowledge a moral, political, and passionate commitment to creating new knowledge about how gender, as a primary axis of power, operates in individual identity, interpersonal and kinship relationships, and broader social structures (Tronto 2006). The point of feminist scholarship and activism is to draw attention to the dialectics of oppression and privilege and to spark empowering strategies, both individually and collectively, to change such disempowering conditions (Acker et al. 1983; Allen 2000; Lather 1991). Thus, feminist perspectives on families are not neutral; feminism problematizes gender and its intersections with other social locations and says, despite all the personal, academic, and political obstacles, we can, and should, try to do it better (Harding 1998; Sprague 2005; Walker 2009). As Stanley (1990) succinctly states, “the point is to change the world, not only to study it” (p. 15).

Another core feature of feminist scholarship on family relationships is reflexive practice, which is a strategy for ensuring transparency and accountability in our descriptions and analyses of the lives of others, as well as our own (Wise and Stanley 2006). Utilizing a reflexive and critical consciousness helps to promote a mutual relationship between scholars and those they study in ways that give voice to individuals and families in research studies. It also acknowledges the partiality of the knowledge we create and disseminate and allows researchers to scrutinize their own biases, values, and commitments (Allen 2000; Collins 1990; Hesse-Biber and Piatelli 2007; Krieger 1996; Smith 1987).

In feminist family scholarship, four core elements differentiate feminist approaches from non-feminist ones. First, gender is the central axis of analysis, where gender is conceptualized as a system of power differences between men and women, with most men having more power than most women. Second, gender inequality is socially and culturally constructed, and therefore can be changed. Third, gender inequality is unfair and damaging. Finally, feminists should work towards social change to undo gender inequality and the ways in which it affects individuals, families, and societies (Chafetz 2004; Ferree 1990; Few-Demo et al. 2014; Walker 1999). Thus, equally important to feminist scholarship is attention to the applicability of knowledge to change social conditions and advocate for fair and respectful arrangements between women and men in families, dismantling the social stratifications of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age, and the like, which are the primary ways in which disadvantage and oppression are structured.

In addition to these core feminist elements, feminist scholarship has been critiqued, informed, and changed by the challenges of how gender intersects with other systems of oppression, that is, an intersectional approach (Few 2007; McCall 2005; Shields 2010), and how gender and its intersections differ across national borders, that is, an international, transterritorial approach (Patil 2013). Ferree (2010) indicates that the two most important theoretical developments in gender theory are the understandings of gender as a multilayered experience, and the understandings of multiple and intersecting power relations. Regarding the first, we now understand that gender happens, influences, and interacts at multiple social levels—that is, both at the micro-contexts where individuals make choices in daily life about themselves and their significant relationships, and at the macro-contexts where institutions, politics, and economics set limits to relationships and individuals. Regarding the second major development, we also understand that individuals participate in multiple and intersecting power relations by their location in society (locational intersectionality) or their participation in particular processes, struggles, and conflicts (relational intersectionality). Therefore, in selecting the manuscripts for this collection, we incorporated works that displayed an understanding of gender relations that account for both social structure and human agency (Risman 2004), as well as multiple and intersecting power relations, such as those determined by race, class, sexual orientation, and geographic location.

Feminist Theoretical Approaches to Studying Families

A feminist approach to the study of family relationships applies the principles and practices of feminist scholarship to examine family structures and family processes in diverse contexts. Feminist perspectives on families question the very concept of *family* and demonstrate that both the scholarly and

the public view of family reflect an uncritical and functionalist idea of “The Family” (Thorne 1982, p. 4). This functionalist definition of family holds that mother, father, and children have normative and essentially different roles according to generation (e.g., being a grandparent or parent) and gender (e.g., being a mother or a father, or a daughter or a son). Smith (1993) identified this family template as the Standard North American Family (SNAF), and the SNAF concept appears in many of the articles in this special collection. Feminist family scholarship questions the validity, prevalence, and permanence of such normative roles that only reflect an idealization of the global North (Patil 2013): the ambitions of White, middle-class, heterosexual, married, Protestant Americans (Allen et al. 2013; Coontz 2015). On the contrary, feminism promotes an inclusive concept of family. Thus, feminist family scholars study different family structures (e.g., single-parent headed families, divorced and re-married families, three-generation and extended families), legal and fictive kin ties (e.g., birth, marriage, adoption, step, chosen relationships), and both same-sex and opposite-sex couples. Feminists see families as complex, where love, care, and conflict co-mingle, and members have ambivalent and contradictory emotions about one other. Simultaneously, feminist family scholars see families as enduring with a tremendous capacity to respond proactively to challenges and interventions and therefore, to transform and thrive.

Feminist theory has encouraged family scholars to think about gender as central to their understanding of family structures and processes. In a content analysis of empirical articles published in journals with a primary focus on families, Wills and Risman (2006) found that 26 % of the articles published between 1992 and 2002 included gender in some way. These findings suggest an increased awareness among family scholars of gender as a factor, variable, or phenomenon influencing families. However, on the down side, Wills and Risman interpreted that only 6 % of the articles they examined included an explicit feminist perspective that considered gender as a relational process, socially and culturally constructed, and embedded in institutional, relational, and individual dynamics.

The findings by Wills and Risman (2006) are consistent with claims by Ferree (2010) and Walker (2009) who demonstrate an optimistic but cautious perspective in reviewing the impact of feminist and gender theories on family scholarship in the last decades. Ferree identified a number of studies using a contemporary, relational, and non-essentialist understanding of gender, as in Jacobs and Gerson’s (2004) study of the circuit of care through the family, workplace, caregiving centers, and country’s policies for work and care. However, both Ferree’s and Walker’s revisions suggested gender theory, understood in relational and political terms, has yet to become central in mainstream family research. Some progress has been made, but much more work is still needed to reactivate the stalled gender revolution (England 2010). We hope that the articles

published in this collection will contribute to the infusion of feminist theory in the study of families from different disciplinary perspectives.

Feminist Methodological Approaches to Studying Families

Feminism has influenced research in family scholarship by contributing to reflections on methodologies. Although feminist research embraces diverse methodologies, it privileges those that take into account participants’ individual experiences and promote an egalitarian relationship between researchers and participants (Baber 2004). Feminists have championed and defended in-depth qualitative methodologies as valid approaches to research on families and family processes. They have validated and advanced the use of qualitative methodologies such as phenomenology and grounded theory among family scholars, setting quality standards that give way to scientific publications in mainstream journals in the social and behavioral sciences (Goldberg and Allen 2015).

Feminists have also engaged in advancing quantitative research methods, for example, groundbreaking research on wife abuse (Yllo and Bograd 1988), and more recently, intersectionality (Ferree 2010; McCall 2005; Shields 2010). Quantitative methodologies that collect specific data from large samples of the population can be used to test our understandings based on gender and other related social and behavioral theories, to better understand how gender shapes families and their contexts (Chafetz 2004). Furthermore, these methods allow for comparisons between individuals according to their gender, race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic level, and other characteristics that describe specific social locations, thus providing tools to identify how different intersections are associated with different family processes and individual experiences (Chafetz 2004).

Although feminism has contributed a great deal to the study of families and family processes overall, feminism’s impact on empirical research on families has been less influential. Thus, many scholars continue to interpret their findings of families using the traditional and functionalist concept of “The Family” (Thorne 1982, p. 4) as the standard against which all families are compared. By the same token, gender continues to be peripheral to many of the mainstream studies of families, and in the cases when it is considered central it is mostly conceptualized from a difference perspective that conceives men and women as essentially different from each other (Walker 2009). Finally, researchers and journals are still resistant to developing and publishing qualitative studies as there are still doubts of their scientific value (Walker 2009), though some progress has been made (Goldberg and Allen 2015). Considering these challenges, this special issue is an effort to make visible recent studies on family relationships that place gender in the center of analysis,

understand gender as relational and political, and include multiple inquiry methodologies.

The Special Collection on Feminist Perspectives on Family Relationships

The tenets of current feminist scholarship are well represented in the articles across the total collection of papers. The authors included in this collection demonstrate the contribution of incorporating interdisciplinary, international, and intersectional feminist perspectives into research and theorizing about families. Next, we examine themes in the larger collection of articles, before turning to the six papers published in this particular issue.

Interdisciplinarity, Intersectionality, and Internationality

Regarding interdisciplinarity, authors of the papers across the three issues come from seven different social or behavioral science disciplines: human development and family studies; psychology; sociology; anthropology; public policy; communications; and social work. Internationally, authors hail from seven countries (Australia, Canada, Colombia, South Africa, Taiwan, United Kingdom, and United States), across six continents (Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, North America, and South America). Although most of the study samples are from the U.S., articles also feature samples from Canada, India, Maldives, and several European countries.

Considering the intersectional nature of social and geographical locations that is a key component of feminist thinking today, the collection as a whole includes a wide range of diversity, revealing the efforts that scholars are making to move beyond the U.S. nuclear family model. Although most of the samples and topics still predominately feature White, North American, heterosexual perspectives, the collection shows that progress toward greater inclusion is being made. After all, it is well documented that methodology lags behind theoretical advances in terms of implementing intersectionality theory into research practice (McCall 2005; Patil 2013). Taken together, the articles include samples of men, women, and children across the age spectrum, and several of the samples included in these articles encompass a broader range of racial and ethnic/religious groups, such as Latina, African American, Asian, Indian, and Muslim. Again, many of the studies rely on middle class samples exclusively, but some of the samples are representative of the countries from which they are derived, or explicitly incorporate the experiences of working class and lower income individuals and families. Finally, although most of the studies deal with heterosexual relationships, several feature or include lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals and relationships.

Substantive Pluralism

The papers in this special collection also cover a variety of topics that comprise the broader array of scholarship on families. As noted above, studies of families are characterized by their attention to gender and generation. Key among these are studies that focus on parenthood, partnership, kinship, households, and the nature of intra- and inter-generational ties. The papers in these three issues cover mainstream topics such as marriage, divorce, motherhood, fatherhood, parent–child relationships, adoption, work–family interface, housework, fictive kinship, and family violence, but they also advance the coverage of these topics by problematizing how these issues are seen more deeply by an explicit feminist lens. For example, how do power relations within and between families and their multiple contexts of interaction shift when individuals migrate from one geographical region to another (Mahler et al. 2015)? How do one's own and one's partner's emotion work influence relationship quality for men and women in couple relationships (Curran et al. 2015)? How is the ideology of the traditional family used to justify racist and anti-feminist views in the context of the proliferation of cyber communities (Bjork-James 2015)?

Theoretical Pluralism

There are many types of feminist theories and epistemologies used in this collection of articles, as each disciplinary, intersectional, and cultural context has developed or requires various lenses for analysis and interpretation. There are three types of explicitly feminist frameworks used in the articles across the whole collection. First, most of the authors incorporate gender theory as the primary way of applying a feminist framework. As noted above, gender theory offers a multi-layered and dynamic approach to examining gender as a system of social stratifications (as opposed to a static role); gender is not a *property* of an individual, but an *inequality* that is infused in multiple social institutions (Ferree 1990, 2010; Risman 2004). Second, feminist intersectionality theory can also be found in authors' use of Black feminist theory, queer theory, cyber feminist theory, and feminist globalization theory, where authors explicitly link critical components of gender, sexual orientation, race, class, nationality, and the like in order to examine how power is constructed and exercised when considering multiple layers of inequality. Third, several of the authors take a feminist social constructionist theoretical approach to examine the meaning that individuals make of how their gendered experiences shape and are shaped by the broader forces in their lives. Of note is that authors often pair several versions of feminist theorizing together. For example, in the current issue, Goldberg et al. (2014) utilize a feminist intersectional perspective and a feminist social constructionist

perspective to examine the way that adoptive mothers (both heterosexual and lesbian) make sense of how their gender, sexual orientation, and family contexts shape their experiences of ending their intimate partnerships.

In addition to these predominant ways of conceptualizing feminist theory used to study family relationships, other articles have included classic or mainstream sociological and psychological frameworks in combination with a feminist perspective. For example, Tasker and Delvoye (2015), in this issue, combined gender theory, queer theory, and life course theory to examine bisexual motherhood. The use of life course theory, with its focus on temporal distinctions, linked lives, and social-historical events and transitions, is an excellent example of pairing more politicized theories (e.g., gender; queer) with major perspectives that purport neutrality (e.g., life course). In another example, Fulcher et al. (2015) combine gender theory with social cognitive theory, which is a widely used psychological theory derived from a learning or behavioral perspective, to examine emerging adults' plans for how they conceptualize the breadwinner/caregiver model in their own future families. These two examples in the current issue provide a bridge between the theories that reflect scientific objectivism (e.g., life course; social cognitive) and feminist theories that take a decidedly politicized theoretical stance. Perhaps one of the enduring features of feminist theorizing about families is how to combine objectivist and subjectivist theories to examine the complexity of family relationships.

Methodological Pluralism

Regarding methodologies, the studies in this collection use a wide array of critical, quantitative, and qualitative methods and analyses, and often include longitudinal data. In the first methodological type, critical analyses, papers examine a particular theoretical or methodological issue in depth, and then illustrate how to apply it by use of a case study exemplar. For example, in this issue, Mahler et al. (2015) provide a critical analysis of intersectionality theory, and use a case study of a transnational family (India-U.S.) as a blueprint for providing thicker descriptions of how to do intersectional analyses simultaneously across scales, from the individual level to the global level. Also in this issue, Bjork-James (2015) provides a critical analysis of the value of using ethnographic methodologies on the Internet for feminist research. The case study she uses to illustrate the utility of this methodology is a multi-year examination of chat room conversations among women (as indicated by their online avatars) associated with a White Nationalist organization, Stormfront.

Qualitative studies in the collection typically include face-to-face or on-line semi-structured in-depth interviews, along with some type of grounded theory thematic analysis. In the current issue, Tasker and Delvoye (2015) bring attention to a

topic of growing interest: that of bisexual motherhood. They conducted extensive in-depth interviews with seven bisexual women in either lesbian or heterosexual relationships from the U.K. and Ireland regarding their perspectives as mothers. As well, Goldberg et al. (2014) examined the relationship dissolution experiences of adoptive mothers, who differ by sexual orientation: either lesbian or heterosexual. Their data are derived from a longitudinal study using telephone interviews with participants throughout the U.S.

This collection on feminist research on families also includes a variety of quantitative methodologies. These methods range from online surveys, inventories, home interviews, and demographic analyses, all of which utilize sophisticated statistical analyses. In the current issue, Curran et al. (2015) employed a 7-day diary study and multilevel modeling to examine how men and women (from 74 couples) do emotion work within their relationships. Also in this issue, Fulcher et al. (2015) utilized the survey responses of 586 undergraduate students from three different types of universities regarding their perceptions of the relevance of the homemaker-breadwinner family model for their own future family life plans.

The First Issue of the Collection

This first issue of the collection on feminism and family relationships, therefore, reflects the substantive, theoretical, and methodological pluralism that we intended to capture as we envisioned this project. This first issue is comprised of six articles on family relationships on six different topics, from six different feminist perspectives, and using six different research methodologies.

Regarding substance, four of the six articles examine couple and family processes such as: adoptive parents' experiences after relationship dissolution (Goldberg et al. 2014), bisexual motherhood (Tasker and Delvoye 2015), emotion work in romantic relationships (Curran et al. 2015), and young adults' plans for the breadwinning-caregiving family model (Fulcher et al. 2015). The two remaining articles in this issue offer a theoretical or methodological tool for feminist studies of the family and provide a case study as an example of their innovation. Mahler et al. (2015) conceptualize intersectionality taking into account migration of families through different world regions, and provide a detailed case study of an Indian couple that migrated to the U.S., but actively retain their ties back home. Bjork-James (2015) analyzes the influence of White supremacy movements on gender arrangements in the family, integrating cyber feminist theory, new media technologies, and ethnographic fieldwork in the context of the Internet as a site for data collection.

Regarding theory, three of the articles in this first issue explicitly take on the challenge of intersectionality, by

attempting to either (a) theorize or provide methodological tools for a feminist intersectionality approach (Bjork-James 2015; Mahler et al. 2015), or (b) apply intersectionality in order to interpret empirical research findings (Goldberg et al. 2014). The other three articles in this first issue include other variations of feminist theory, such as gender theory (Curran et al. 2015; Fulcher et al. 2015) and queer theory (Tasker and Delvoye 2015). Regarding method, this first issue is also pluralistic, by including two critical case reviews (Bjork-James 2015; Mahler et al. 2015), two qualitative studies (Goldberg et al. 2014; Tasker and Delvoye 2015) and two quantitative studies (Curran et al. 2015; Fulcher et al. 2015).

Looking to the Future Issues

In the next two issues associated with feminist perspectives on family relationships, we again provide feminist exemplars of research and theorizing based on substantive, theoretical, and methodological pluralism. Look for more contributions that utilize critical analysis and quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Look for substantive topics on longitudinal quantitative and qualitative studies, respectively, of dual career working class families with children, and families with fathers, mothers, and children in which mothers travel for work. Other topics in the next two issues examine how motherhood and fatherhood are negotiated in the context of being a working or stay at home parent, and media portrayals of gender ideologies and behaviors. Articles will also include studies about how gay men navigate non-monogamy, and how marital ideologies play havoc on women and their bodies. Psycho-social issues such as the impact of parental gender ideology on children's gender role attitudes; how African American mothers provide racial socialization for their children; how gender ideologies affect marital and cohabiting intimate relationships; and intergenerational relationships among young adults and their parents will also be included. We look forward to demonstrating the ways that feminist research on families both challenges the status quo by critiquing gender roles, ideologies, practices, and stratifications, and also by providing insight as to how men, women, and children resist such beliefs and practices and work to change the world as they know it. Finally, in the subsequent issues, we include more examination of the clinical component of feminist research on families, with an emphasis on the transformations that come from facing down the impact and emotions of rigid gender roles and expectations, as revealed in diverse geographic locations and cultural contexts. Feminist praxis has a transformative effect, by opening hearts and minds in ways that induce change. Having identified the problems and challenges that exist, scholars and activists alike are motivated to implement their new knowledge into action. The family is the institutional structure in society where the foundation of our beliefs and

practices are laid down, and it is through intra-and inter-generational relationships that we experience and alter them.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge that the work of gathering this collection of articles from various disciplines proved challenging, as our scholarly perspective is in the lifespan human development and family studies field, where we study family relationships, structures, and interventions from birth to death (Allen et al. 2009). Our vision, then, in proposing and producing this issue was to keep “family” in feminist studies, and feminist perspectives in studies of families. In collaboration with the guidance of Editor-in-Chief Irene Frieze and Managing Editor Susan Dittrich, we hope readers will agree that the articles we have assembled here illuminate feminist perspectives on family relationships and spur new and empowering research on these established as well as emerging topics.

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