

## Researching family life and consumption: epistemological challenges and advances

### *Introduction*

While the family is a well-established topic and well-trodden ground in consumer research, there has been surprisingly little reflection on the epistemological challenges and advancements related to researching family life in consumer research. Researching family is a complex task, not least, as families are often part of the inner sanctum for most people, including researchers. Independently of whether family secrets are well guarded or not, there are several issues to consider when embarking on a family research journey including the politics of representation, power, vulnerability, risk, fairness, protection and trust. Opening up family life to an external gaze implies producing moral accounts of ordinary and extraordinary moments and such accounts are later tailored into academic accounts. The complexity of such tailoring is often underestimated and it is important to recognize that researchers and their audiences (including reviewers, editors and the broader academic community) are not immune to moral and moralizing discourses of family life. Doucet (2011, p. 89) reminds us how “particular methods produce particular social realities” and as such methodologies and methods are implicated in reproducing certain moral discourses of family life. As studying family is in itself a practice of displaying family (Finch, 2007) reflecting on this practice requires that “sustained attention is paid to the methods we use in family research” (Doucet, 2011, p. 89) and the role of the researcher and their audience in adopting and assessing such methods.

The idea of this special issue began with our own interest in studying family life and experimenting with interpretive methods and evolved over the years with fruitful exchanges with colleagues during roundtable discussions on feminist methodologies, special sessions on family and consumption and seminars on reflexivity. One of the starting considerations that drove us to put together the special issue was the limited reflections on the methodological peculiarities of studying families and their implications for the epistemological journey undertaken by researchers. Reflections on our own failures, epiphanies and intuitions in studying family life, as well as more theoretical elaborations of our positioning(s) in the process of knowledge production are part of our everyday life as researchers. However, they are rarely shared outside the research team. When published, they are often limited to footnotes or confined in methodological journals, which some researchers are discouraged to consider as “suitable” options for publications by their institutions. In this special issue, we advocate for a space in which the peculiarities of studying family life and consumption are recognized and openly acknowledged. While there are many methodological considerations to be made for interpretive works in general, there are also more specific ones related to family and consumption and how we, the researchers, operate within this specificity. Through this special issue, we want to highlight the importance of exploring methodological and epistemological complexities and we do so by starting with discussing three key terms: family, consumption and the researcher. As a way of introducing the papers in the special issue, we explore the meanings of these terms and to extend the direction of travel beyond this special issue we end the introduction by advocating for a *located* reflexivity. Inspired by Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2017) we conceptualize this as being at the intersection between what is constructed (family), the constructing subject (the researcher) and the context of the study (consumption understood at micro, meso and/or macro levels).



*Challenging and changing definitions*

*Families.* There is no one definition of “family” because understandings vary according to the time, geographical location, culture and the purpose of the definition. The term often invokes blood ties, as well as living arrangements, care, emotions, family practices and affect (Chambers, 2012). One’s own experiences of family life also influence perceptions of what families are like, and this is something that researchers need to reflect upon when going into the intimate space of others’ families.

As a concept, the family has been criticized for having strong normative and functionalist connotations, and questions about whether it should be superseded with other terms such as personal life, intimacy and kinship have been an engaging source of discussion (Smart, 2007; Gabb and Silva, 2011; Edwards and Gillies, 2012; Morgan, 2019). However, despite uncomfortableness with some usages and connotations imbued in the term “family”, for many, it has proved too difficult to move away from the term and replace it completely with concepts such as “personal life”, for both intellectual and political reasons (Edwards, 2019). It has been highlighted that moving away from the term “family” in academic spheres seemed contradictory at a time where “family life was under an ever-intensifying spotlight in political discussion, subject to judgement and explicitly focused on as a designated area of policy intervention and sanction” (Edwards, 2019, p. 7). Many scholars have retained the term but sought to use it in a way that does not fixate families in time and space, e.g. using families as a verb and speaking of “family lives” rather than “the family” – these debates and different positions are well-summarized in Edwards and Gillies (2012). Feminist scholarship has been an important part of the use of the term “family” with increased reflexivity and political awareness (Gabb and Silva, 2011).

Sociologists were among the first social scientists to recognize the need for a more fluid and contextual definition of families; one that recognizes their changing status. Among the most important contributions to contemporary studies of family life and consumption is the term “family practices” by Morgan (1996). The term conveys moving away from a focus on family form, that is how families may look externally (e.g. lone parent, nuclear families). Morgan’s intervention in the late 1990s followed an intensive period of political debate in the UK, concerns about the costs and funding of a rising number of lone-parent families and a campaign to go “back to basics” by the Conservatives – a desire to return to the nuclear family. Locating Morgan’s advancement of the concept in a specific political climate is not a passing detail, as it shows how our own investigations always have to confront how theoretical and methodological classifications, framings and labellings are ideologically loaded. In fact, viewing families as a verb (doing family) implies rejecting an essentialist notion of family based on an ideological model of the nuclear family. Here the composition of a family becomes less relevant than understanding what and how people do family together. Indeed, doing family implies that small moments of everyday life can form a theoretical and methodological focus for building up a picture of what a family is (Morgan, 2011).

The concept of “doing family” has become one of the most central in studying consumption practices in the household, showing how individual, dual and collective identities follow from mundane and taken-for-granted practices (Kerrane *et al.*, 2014; O’Malley and Prothero, 2006). Looking at policies and how the legal framework through which family life has been conceptualized and shaped might be a way of bringing to light the macro aspects in which consumption practices are formed. The ways in which policymakers legislate and think about family life have repercussions for family practices, relationships and identities. Take, for example, the one-child policy in China which has influenced and accentuated the consumption practices of young consumers and their families (McNeal *et al.*, 2006; Lindridge and Wang, 2008; Cappellini and Yen, 2013). Another

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example is Sweden's parental leave policy from 1974 that encourages parents to share childcare equally. When sharing was optional not many fathers took advantage of the opportunity to care for their children. It was not until the state introduced earmarked quotas for each parent or else the quotas would be lost, that fathers started taking leave at the quota level. Over the years, their share of parental leave has risen above the quota level (Brandt and Kvande, 2013). Today involved fatherhood is what is expected from progressive Swedish men and displays a context steering away from traditional gender ideals in ways that also are manifest in consumption (Molander, 2020). Legal definitions of family and consequently policies framing family life have changed over time in some parts of the world reflecting altering social norms and activism. In England and Wales, for example, same-sex couples have received increased legal recognition including the Civil Partnerships Act of 2004 and the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act of 2014. As a result of an ongoing campaign, civil partnerships were extended in 2019 to include two people who are not of the same sex. This can be seen as providing some legal protection such as inheritance rights, without replicating the patriarchal connotations connected to marriage (BBC News, 2019). The changing legal and social contexts in which families are situated provides an important background to the research that happens with, on and for families, as well as how consumption decisions are framed.

*Consumption.* One of the most cited texts used to frame the origin of contemporary understanding of ordinary consumption and materiality is Douglas and Isherwood's (1979) *The world of goods: towards an anthropology of consumption*, in which they eloquently put it that "instead of supposing that goods are primarily needed for subsistence plus competitive display, let us assume that they are needed for making visible and stable the categories of culture" (59). This sentence has been used many times by interpretive scholars to defend the importance of their studies on routinized and taken-for-granted forms of consumption, later described as "ordinary consumption" (Gronow and Warde, 2001). This line is still very relevant today in reminding us that studying consumption and its materiality offers the opportunity to access processes in which relations are formed, subjectivities are shaped and reshaped and ideals are normalized. However, the assumptions that consumption simply reflects and stabilizes (*making visible and stable*) categories of culture, which are formed "elsewhere" have been successfully disputed. Today it is recognized that consumption has a transformative role in shaping culture (Warde, 2015). Studies on families and consumption are particularly influential in showing the transformative role of consumption practices. They have done so by looking at *what family members do through consumption* and also *what consumption does to families* (see, for example, Lindsay and Maher, 2013; O'Malley and Prothero, 2006).

Looking at consumption practices has allowed researchers to grasp the process(es) through which individual identities are constructed via acquisition, appropriation and disposal of objects and brands (Burningham *et al.*, 2014). Unpacking such processes has brought to light how uncertainties and anxieties are not always overcome by products and brands but can be exacerbated by the marketplace. From the seminal work on everyday shopping by Miller (1998) to more recent studies, we understand how the notion of "good" parent cannot be fully understood without looking at the teleoaffective dimensions of the practice of feeding children with "good" food (Cappellini and Parsons, 2012; Cairns *et al.*, 2019; Molander, 2019; Molander and Hartmann, 2018; Szabo, 2014). However, the notion of "good" food is constantly changing in the marketplace just as "good mothering" is a moving target that cannot be fully achieved without constant learning from the market and one's contemporaries how to consume (Harman and Cappellini, 2015). Doing a family is also a matter of displaying what is "good" to specific others and in specific contexts. As Finch

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(2007) highlights, displays are orientated towards different audiences: they could be oriented to external audiences such as the school or professionals with an interest in family life but also to the child, the partner, the extended family and even to the self to show that one is a good parent. As extensively discussed in the literature, displaying and being on display implies being accountable and judged in relation to moralized and normalized ideals, ideas and moral standards around how a good family should be and look like. Deviating from such standards means that families lay themselves open to potential criticism about issues such as too much consumption, too much display of consumption or about the wrong kind of consumption – all of which are often linked to classed and gendered generalizations. For example, recent media attention has focused on the purchase of so-called “Sassy Mom” T-shirts with slogans such as “This mom runs on coffee, wine and Amazon Prime” implying that buying goods from Amazon Prime and displaying this through the display of sloganed T-shirts and coasters, is shorthand for lazy mothering – mothering with less care than “Pinterest Moms” (Tolentino, 2019- see Southerton *et al.*, 2020 for discussion). This reminds us of unhelpful juxtapositions drawn in the sphere of food work between the figure of the “MacDonalds Mom” and that of the “Organic Mom” (Cairns *et al.*, 2019).

The notion of the display brings to light the more ideological aspects of consumption, as displaying family is located in a specific context, a moment and place in time, in which marketplace ideologies re-define what is proper and legitimate. As such consumption is not simply something that families do, but consumption shapes family life, subjectivities and relations. Socio-historical studies on meals, for example, show us how meals have been significantly modified over time because of the influence of marketplace offer of new products and brands, the powerful influence of branding in our practices and changes in people’s working lives. Take, for example, breakfast, a family occasion, which has received little attention. It is one of the most modified eating occasions, which from a collective eating experience is today mainly an individual snack, which has been reshaped almost globally with the introduction of convenient and branded items (Green, 2007; Pirani *et al.*, 2018). Other socio-historical works on advertising have studied how advertising has reshaped the way family life has been framed in the marketplace over time. Images of the “good mother” and the “providing father” have been subject to continuities and discontinuities with the very notion of the nuclear family and its patriarchal connotations (Gentry and Harrison, 2010; Lindridge *et al.*, 2016; Marshall *et al.*, 2014a, 2014b). These studies have also shown how marketplace discourses have clear classed and racial dimensions and as such, some family life is considered “proper” while others are marginalized, silenced and sanctioned.

*The researcher.* Having considered definitions of families and consumption, we now turn our attention to the researcher who emerges as a complex combination of personal characteristics, roles, paradigms, group membership, practices and tools, including the status and power this combination brings and which affect the research process in various ways. Rather than trying to eliminate the impact of the researcher, it is key to reflect on how the complex combination may play out (Jordan, 2006; Denzin, 2000). Indeed, one of the most important practices for a researcher is to engage in self-reflection which includes understanding how one is perceived by others in the field and the relationships that develop, as well as how these relationships influence the data collection and analysis. Several studies have, for example, pointed to how personal characteristics and group belonging such as gender influence the negotiations and power structures in the family research situation (Arendell, 1997; Day *et al.*, 2005; Doucet, 2011). In the articles presented in this special issue, we learn how sexual orientation (Khanijou and Pirani, 2020) and age (Grønhoj and Gram, 2020) can complicate the research situation if the researcher is perceived as too much of an

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outsider by the family members in question but also there is a perception that distance and critical analysis may get lost if being too much of an insider (Nash *et al.*, 2020).

Ideally, the relationship between the researcher and participants is equal, but this is seldom the case. Instead, it is complicated by the often-favourable position of the researcher by virtue of their control of the research process (Oakley, 1981). Additionally, demographic characteristics may be part of the picture. For example, a female researcher whose gender constitutes the caring norm is potentially viewed as having particular insights when studying families (Doucet, 2011). The researcher needs to negotiate their role in the research setting, weighing what can be seen as acceptable research practice with what is comfortable for all involved (Jordan, 2006). These negotiations are, however, never in total control of the researcher but co-constructed together with research participants. Oakley's (2016) reflections on her previous works on feminist interviews highlight how some of the taken-for-granted assumptions of the powerful position of the researcher/s over the researched and the vulnerability of the interviewees might be reconsidered. For example, she highlights the "dependence of researchers on what research participants are willing to contribute from the memories and stories of their lives" and refers to this as a "gift relationship" (Oakley, 2016). Within the same family, the researcher's roles can glide between being an unthreatening novice whose incompetence is socially acceptable (Jordan, 2006), a trusted person who has invested their personal identity in the research relationship and thereby enhanced the bonds through feelings of reciprocity (Oakley, 1981) as well as a catalyst triggering revealing events, situations and relationships (Maxwell *et al.*, 2013).

The researcher is furthermore defined by the paradigms used, and this also requires reflection. In their book on methodology Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2017, p. 269) consider the ways in which the theoretical, cultural and political involvement of the researcher affects interaction with whatever is being researched. Reflecting on paradigms means being able to break away from one's frame of reference and to look at what it is not capable of saying, and to instead consider the multiple voices that may exist within the same narrative. One of the articles in this special issue presents this type of reflexivity via a listening guide (Hutton and Lystor, 2020) that offers an analytical model to parse out the polyphonic voices located within the private sphere. The practices involved in the research process depends on the paradigms in question but usually involves identifying a research problem, locating, generating and analyzing the data needed to solve the problem and finally writing up a research narrative recounting the route. Accounts of such a rich and complex process are often reduced to a few lines of a methodology section in published work. In our special issue, Nash, O'Malley and Patterson (2020) provide a fuller account by elaborating on the different stages within their research via a hands-on guide to and critical reflection on insider family ethnography.

In qualitative research, the researcher is often considered the most important tool in the process. Still, there are also several external tools at the researcher's disposal to assist with learning about the research topic in question, not least via various social media platforms and digital devices in general that have made people fairly used to participating and communicating in this way (O'Connor and Madge, 2003; Rohani *et al.*, 2014). External tools can in some ways be seen as extensions of the researcher (Frers, 2009) and they can also give access to places and accounts that the researcher is not normally given access to (Allen, 2011). These types of additional affordances are elaborated upon in one of the articles in this special issue discussing how selfie sticks can extend the way visual methods can be used when studying contemporary family practices. Indeed, various types of research tools can complement the researcher by taking on characteristics that the researcher cannot. This also includes tools allowing the researcher to access potential participants, as well as tools to



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transcribe and assist with data analysis and writing. Overall, whether it relates to personal characteristics, group belonging, roles, paradigms, practices or tools, the researcher needs to factor in the ways they become temporary components of the systems they study (Jordan, 2006). In family consumption research this means entering into the life-world of the family and gaining a deeper understanding of the consumption context. By so-doing, and attending to our responses, we may also learn more about ourselves as researchers, consumers and family members. After our attempt to illustrate the challenging and changing definitions of each of the three central spheres, it is now time to consider how they interconnect with help of the concept of located reflexivity.

#### *Towards a located reflexivity*

Reflexivity has been amply discussed in consumer research and studies on family and consumption have greatly contributed to such a discussion. Reflexivity has been at the heart of consumer culture studies, whose epistemological foundation is referred to as the “interpretive turn” (Levy, 2005) and whose opposition to positivism is still considered the default ontological position (Sherry, 1991; Tadajewski, 2006). Influenced by the humanities and other social sciences, interpretive consumer research scholars studying family have long been arguing that the human experience of consumption is too complex to be framed under an over-simplistic positivist paradigm. Rather, it can only be understood by embracing complexity via methodologies and methods including such as feminist theory, grounded theory, discourse analysis and narrative theory (Goulding, 1998; Szmigin and Foxall, 2000; Catterall *et al.*, 2005; Shankar, 2009). This research has greatly contributed to an understanding of family and consumption and to broader debates on consumption by rebalancing the notions of “rational consumers”, “happy consumers” and lately “reasoned consumers”. Combining interpretive methodologies with theoretical concepts including self-sacrifice, sharing and parental devotion but also marginality and exclusion, these studies have shown the political implications of the interpretive turn (Bruce and Banister, 2019; Cappellini *et al.*, 2019; Hamilton, 2009; Hutton, 2019; Lindridge *et al.*, 2004). Indeed, they have shown the importance of reflexivity by bringing to light the varieties of injustice in the marketplace, particularly around experiences of exclusions and marginalities. In this special issue, two articles contribute to such theoretical debate on reflexivity. Hutton and Lystor (2020) advocate for a listening guide in which researchers move away from the theoretical pressure to provide a coherent narrative in which the story of participants is neatly arranged, arguably with the support of a ready-made theoretical framework. Instead, they propose to celebrate rather than silencing the multiple subjectivities of the participants. In this comprehensive narrative, the researcher’s role in listening is taken into account both theoretically and methodologically. Rogan *et al.* (2020), in turn, illustrate their adoption of a relational dialectical lens in which methodology and theoretical framework are both used for capturing the complexities of how family identities and relations emerge through conflicts and changes.

The aforementioned debate on the theoretical positions of interpretive research, prominent at the time of legitimising interpretivist research in business schools, has been gradually substituted by a consideration of practices and experience of researchers in their epistemological journeys. Perhaps, today there is a need to remake a more theoretical argument on reflexivity considering the influence of “big data” in studying everyday consumption patterns (Latzko-Toth *et al.*, 2017). When social reality is seen to be inter-subjectively composed, knowledge is, epistemologically, not approached from the standpoint of an external, objective position, but from the lived experience of the research co-participants (Tadajewski, 2006). Feminist researchers have been particularly vocal in

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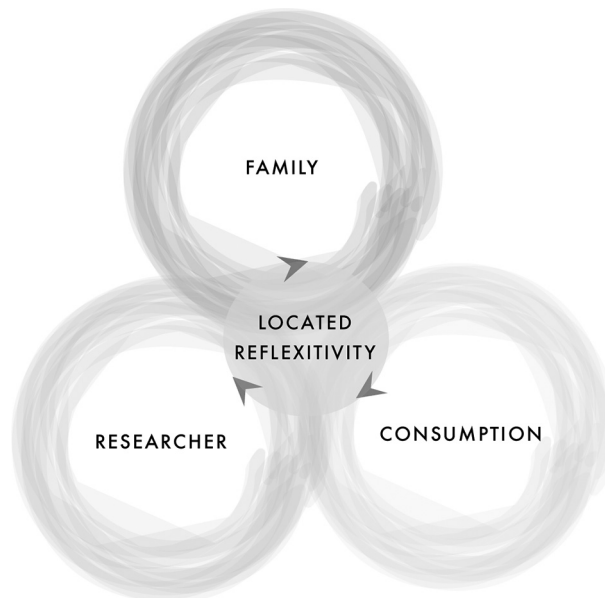
talking about the embodied experiences of conducting fieldwork and the overall writing process and authorship. They have questioned the nature of relationships and inequalities in the fieldwork and have problematized the notion of representing the experiences and voices of others and of themselves (Oakley, 1981; Okely, 1992; Callaway, 1992; Stanley and Wise, 1993; Harman *et al.*, 2020). However, most of the current reflections are related to adults' voices and children's voices are only now starting to get some attention (Kerrane *et al.*, 2012). In this special issue, Grønhoj and Gram (2020) provide a rich account of children's voices in their own research. Reflecting on children's agency, as well as family structure and power relationships, they provide valuable theoretical and empirical reflections, which problematize what it means to include children in family research. Considering power relationships and exploitation, the paper provides an up-to-date reflection on the challenges of including children's voices in our research. Feminist scholars in consumer studies have also pointed out how some qualitative methods can be exploitative of participants' feelings and emotions, and thus generate guilt in the researcher (Mamali, 2019). In this special issue, Khanijou and Pirani (2020) contribute a different perspective by looking at various ethical dilemmas encountered in their fieldwork to reveal how researchers' family backgrounds might be on display and questioned by participants and how their role of the observer can be manipulated during conflicts.

As Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton (2009) argued, reflexivity should be considered as emerging from the theoretical assumptions and frameworks adopted for analysing the data, as well as the more experiential aspects of conducting research, which is located in a specific time and space. Take, for example, the article by Marshall and Davis (2020) in this special issue, in which they demonstrate how fieldwork and the very notion of "data production" are influenced by contemporary consumption practices. The affordabilities of "new" materiality, in their case the selfie-stick, allow both participants and researchers to engage with the production and consumption of new images in which family is done but also displayed to a specific audience. Moving away from the fieldwork, institutional norms in academia can also be seen as affordabilities on what images and accounts we can produce as researchers moving across different contexts (for example, our own institution, national and international disciplinary norms). Nash *et al.* (2020) in this issue provide a vivid account of the journey that most of us undertake in embarking on a new project. From obtaining the ethical approval to data analysis, from "getting in the fieldwork" to writing up, they reflect on the apparently solitary journey in which the researcher is rarely alone but often confronted with the difficulties of moving across the aforementioned contexts.

In illustrating how the debates on reflexivity in consumer research have benefitted from the insights of the studies on family and consumption included this special issue, the idea of *located reflexivity* comes to the fore. By located reflexivity, we mean the specific methodological, ethical and method-related issues that become apparent in considering the specificity of the object of study, the researcher and the particular context of the study. Engaging with a located reflexivity implies conducting epistemological reflections on the way we frame our investigations on *what families do through consumption* but also *what consumption does to families*. Furthermore, these are not simply theoretical questions but they require us to consider more ethical ones including *what research does to families* and *how research experiences affect the researcher/s*. Put simply, a located reflexivity implies revisiting the often taken-for-granted methodological tools that we use for understanding consumption and family identities, relations and practices in a specific moment in time where marketplace ideologies also shape our inadvertently moral and moralizing views of family life. This may occur from different perspectives, including that of research participants, family members, researchers and the wider academic community. The located

reflexivity in focus here implies scrutinizing how we theoretically and methodologically conceptualize the very notion of family, consumption and our own position in this process of knowledge production for our own academic communities. Developing the ideas of [Alvesson and Sköldbberg \(2017\)](#) we conceptualize a located reflexivity as being at the intersection between the family (what is constructed), the family researcher (as a key constructing subject in the research process) and consumption understood at micro, meso and/or macro levels (the context of study). Looking at reflexivity as an intersection of these three interconnected and interacting spheres (see [Figure 1](#) below) provides a way to delve into the specificities of our field of research and of solving a possible theoretical impasse of concentrating our effort on only one of the three spheres.

To conclude, we contend that a *located reflexivity* can be viewed as emerging from the very nature of the enquiry, its object of study and the positioning of the researcher in the fieldwork and in the broader context of knowledge production. In the specific case of investigating family and consumption, talking about a located reflexivity implies assessing the epistemological and ontological peculiarities of studying the private and the very mundane, routinized and taken-for-granted aspects of domestic lives. A located reflexivity also implies considering the conditions in which the epistemological journey happens. It implies moving away from deeming researchers as solitary and heroic figures but taking into account the institutional and disciplinary norms, as well as the mechanisms of promotions which deeply impact how we conduct our investigations and where we publish. Recognizing the influence of context in which we do our research implies recognizing that research is shaped by others who are outside the research team. For example, reviewers are figures that from behind the scene often provide invaluable advice in developing authors' drafts. Aware of their crucial role, we have selected reviewers who have been fundamental in guiding us and the authors during the reviewing process. Some authors have also acted as reviewers together with other invaluable *ad hoc* reviewers whom we



**Figure 1.**  
Visual representation  
of located reflexivity



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**Further reading**

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