



Family Backgrounds Project

April 2006 to September 2008

About the project

Family Background in Everyday Lives explores the role of family background, and the way 'backgrounds' are imagined and described, in the inheritance, creation, and maintenance of family and interpersonal relationships. The research focus is the life trajectories and everyday experiences of couples who see themselves as having different family backgrounds.

Our methods

- Qualitative interviews
- Home visits
- Photo elicitation



- Analysis and discussion of participant-filmed and narrated special occasions (e.g. Christmas, New Year's Eve)
- Analysis of survey data from commissioned questions in a national survey

Findings and highlights

- The idea of 'family background' figures prominently in how people understand and experience their everyday personal relationships – past, present and those imagined for the future.
- Memories of childhood, of how and where one was brought up, and what one's family is 'like', can have a vivid presence in the present and an active role in interpersonal relationships. Even those parts of the past and of family background that have been consciously 'buried' or discarded can inform current family negotiations and family politics.
- Supposed similarities or differences in background are important and are part of how couples negotiate relationships with each other and with their wider families.
- Family background in our study rarely translated straightforwardly into discrete sociological variables like social class or ethnicity.

- Instead, when reflecting on differences or similarities between their own and their partner's backgrounds, many people bring into play an amalgam of factors and multi-sensory experiences including cultural tastes; emotional, interpersonal and inter-physical styles; order and disorder; interests and politics; family size, and relative comfort and happiness,
- Memory, identity, and the multi-sensory experience of difference are often most salient, and most noticeable, in everyday practices. For many couples, what they eat, where they go on holiday, how they clean their house, their spending habits, how organised they are, whether they are ebullient or quiet and contemplative in the company of others, and how well they get on with extended family, are cause for reflection and ongoing negotiation. As such, these practices can be a source of tension within relationships as well as axes around which people create a sense of being a couple, of being similar or strong despite differences.



- Celebratory occasions such as Christmas frequently bring differences in family background into sharp relief. These occasions may involve the physical co-presence of family members who 'represent' differences in background, but also they entail and engender stories and narratives of what different sides or parts of families are like, as well as what the occasions are meant to symbolise and how they should proceed.

See the Family Background pages of our website for outputs and publications.

Research Team

Stewart Muir (researcher), Jennifer Mason (project leader), Carol Smart.

www.reallifemethods.ac.uk/background

reallifemethods@manchester.ac.uk

0161 275 0265