

FAMILIES IN MOTION

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FAMILIES IN MOTION: EBBING AND FLOWING THROUGH SPACE AND TIME

EDITED BY

Lesley Murray

University of Brighton, UK

Liz McDonnell

University of Sussex, UK

Tamsin Hinton-Smith

University of Sussex, UK

Nuno Ferreira

University of Sussex, UK

Katie Walsh

University of Sussex, UK



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Contents

Lists of Figures and Tables	vii
List of Contributors	ix
Chapter 1 Introduction: Family and Families in Motion <i>Lesley Murray, Liz McDonnell, Katie Walsh, Nuno Ferreira and Tamsin Hinton-Smith</i>	 1
Part I Moving Through Separation and Connection	
Chapter 2 Travelling Feelings: Narratives of Sustaining Love in Two Case Studies with Fathers in Family Separations <i>Alexandra Macht</i>	 19
Chapter 3 ‘Clinging On’: Prison and the Changing Landscape of a Family <i>Marie Anne Hutton</i>	 39
Chapter 4 ‘Living Together Apart’ as Families in Motion <i>Liz McDonnell, Lesley Murray, Tamsin Hinton-Smith and Nuno Ferreira</i>	 57
Chapter 5 Children Negotiating their Place Through Space in Multi-local, Joint Physical Custody Arrangements <i>Laura Merla and Bérengère Nobels</i>	 79
Part II Uneven Motions and Resistance	
Chapter 6 The Roles of ICTs in Sustaining the Mobilities of Transnational Families <i>Sondra Cuban</i>	 99

Chapter 7 Through the Magnifying Glass: Performing Intergenerational Relatedness on Ritualised Occasions <i>Bella Marckmann</i>	117
Chapter 8 Jumping Through Hoops: Families' Experiences of Pre-birth Child Protection <i>Ariane Critchley</i>	135
Chapter 9 Families and Flow: The Temporalities of Everyday Family Practices <i>Clare Holdsworth</i>	155
Part III Traces and Potentialities	
Chapter 10 Losing a Father in an Ex-industrial Landscape: A Researcher's Emotional Geography <i>Lisa Taylor</i>	177
Chapter 11 Children in Motion: Everyday Life Across Two Homes <i>Rakel Berman</i>	195
Chapter 12 Families On-foot: Assembling Motherhood and Childhood Through Care <i>Susannah Clement</i>	215
Chapter 13 (Re)Displaying Family: Relational Agency of Care-experienced Young People Embarking on Parenthood <i>Caroline Cresswell</i>	233
Chapter 14 Moving to be a Family: The New Migration of Italian Women in Morocco <i>Maria Giovanna Cassa</i>	249
Index	267

Lists of Figures and Tables

Figures

Fig 2.1	Relationship Status of Participants	21
Fig 5.1	Socio-spatial Network Game Representing the Various Life Spaces of Coralie	85
Fig 5.2	Emotion Map Representing Marie’s Mother’s House	85
Fig 10.1	Undeveloped land where carpet mill once stood, 2016	180
Fig 10.2	The trace of the entrance to the mechanics shop, 2016	191

Tables

Table 3.1	‘Visits Hall’ Allowances	44
Table 7.1	Interview Participants	122
Table 9.1	Summary of Mass Observation One-day Diaries	163

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List of Contributors

Rakel Berman is a PhD student at the Department of Social Work in Gothenburg, Sweden. She has a background in practical social work. Her main research interests concern children and families, particularly children's everyday lives and personal relationships. Her recent work explores children's perspectives on dual residence after parental separation.

Maria Giovanna Cassa obtained her PhD in Anthropology at the University of Milano Bicocca, Italy. She teaches anthropology at the University of Brescia, Italy, works in mental health services and in urban marginal zones promoting active citizenship. She collaborates with Amarcord studios (Casablanca) realising ethnographic documentaries in Morocco.

Susannah Clement is an Early Career Researcher interested in exploring everyday mobility and family life through a material feminist lens. Her PhD research explored the walking experiences of families living in Wollongong, Australia. She is an Honorary Associate Fellow with the Australian Centre for Culture, Environment, Society and Space, University of Wollongong.

Caroline Cresswell is a Research Associate at the Social Policy Research Unit, University of York, UK. Caroline's research encompasses policy and practice relating to the support of young people's transitions, particularly those who are care-experienced. Caroline is currently evaluating service innovations for recent care leavers or children within specialist residential and foster care settings.

Ariane Critchley is a Lecturer in Social Work at Edinburgh Napier University, UK. She recently submitted her Doctoral thesis titled 'Quickening Steps: An Ethnography of Pre-birth Child Protection' to the University of Edinburgh. Ariane has also been involved in research into self-directed support, adoption, maternity and neonatal care experiences in the Scottish context.

Sondra Cuban is a Professor at Western Washington University, focusses on the migration and mobilities of migrant women and their experiences, aspirations, trajectories and strategies. Her most recent books are: *Transnational Family Communication: Immigrants and ICTs* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) and *Deskilling Migrant Women in the Global Care Industry* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

Nuno Ferreira is a Professor of Law at the University of Sussex, UK. Previously, he was a Senior Lecturer at the University of Liverpool and Lecturer at the

University of Manchester. Nuno is a Horizon 2020 ERC Starting Grant recipient and Co-director of the Sussex Centre for Human Rights Research.

Tamsin Hinton-Smith is a Sociologist of Gender and Education and a Senior Lecturer in the Education Department at the University of Sussex, UK. Her previous research has included work around lone and teenage parents. Her current work focusses on supporting the educational progression journeys of young people leaving care, and those from traveller backgrounds.

Clare Holdsworth is a Professor of Social Geography at Keele University, UK and recipient of a Major Leverhulme Fellowship on *The Social Life of Busyness in an Age of De-acceleration*. She has published widely on family mobilities including *Family and Intimate Mobilities* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

Marie Anne Hutton is a Law Lecturer at the University of Sussex, UK. She is the lead Editor of the first *Handbook of Prison and the Family* published by Palgrave Macmillan (Hutton, M. A. and Moran, D., 2019). Her research interests centre on family contact in prisons, prisoners' families and human rights and prison ethnography more generally.

Alexandra Macht is a Lecturer in Sociology at Oxford Brookes University, UK. She obtained a PhD in Sociology from the University of Edinburgh in 2017. She co-edited the annual review of *The International Network of Leave Policies and Research*, with Peter Moss, Sonja Blum and Alison Koslowski. Her first book titled *Fatherhood and Love* will appear in 2019 with Palgrave Macmillan.

Bella Marckmann has a PhD in Sociology and is a Special Adviser in the evaluation unit of the National Center for Learning in Science, Technology, and Health. She has carried out research at the University of Copenhagen's Department of Sociology as part of a project entitled 'The Moral Economy of Families' funded by the Danish Council for Independent Research.

Liz McDonnell is an experienced social researcher who has worked in both academic and community settings conducting research around personal life/intimacy, health and more recently on research that aims to promote equality and diversity in universities through understanding institutional cultures. She is employed at the University of Sussex, UK, as a Senior Research Fellow and teaches on the MA in Gender studies.

Laura Merla is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Louvain, Belgium, and Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Western Australia. Her research focusses on the transformation of family relations in contexts of mobility. She is the co-editor of *Making Multicultural Families in Europe: Gender and Intergenerational Relation* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) and *Transnational Families, Migration and the Circulation of Care: Understanding Mobility and Absence in Family Life* (Routledge, 2014).

Lesley Murray is an Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Brighton, UK. She has published extensively in the field of mobilities, including co-authoring a

book on *Children's Mobilities* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) and co-editing three collections, *Mobile Methodologies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), *Researching Mobilities: Transdisciplinary Encounters* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and *Intergenerational Mobilities* (Routledge, 2016).

Bérengère Nobels is a PhD student in Sociology at the University of Louvain, Belgium. Her research examines children's lived experiences of multi-locality in the context of joint physical custody arrangements in Belgium in the larger framework of the ERC Starting Grant Project "MobileKids" (PI: Laura Merla).

Lisa Taylor is Head of Media at Leeds Beckett University, UK and has published on media studies, popular film, music and art. In 2008, *A Taste for Gardening: Classed and Gendered Practices* was published, an ethnography about lifestyle television and gardeners. She is currently working on responses to demolition in an ex-industrial village.

Katie Walsh is a Senior Lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Sussex, UK, researching home, family and migration. Her recent publications include *Transnational Geographies of the Heart: Intimate Subjectivities in a Globalising City* (Wiley, 2018) and co-edited *Transnational Migration and Home in Older Age* (Routledge, 2016) and *British Migration* (Routledge, 2018).

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Family and Families in Motion

Lesley Murray, Liz McDonnell, Katie Walsh, Nuno Ferreira and Tamsin Hinton-Smith

Abstract

This chapter introduces the argument that pervades the collection that families are in motion both conceptually and in practice. It articulates the motion of family and families, which are made through space and time, and explains the ways in which the book develops current thinking on family. It also situates the concept and practices of family within wider debates and contexts. The chapter then details the contribution of each of the chapters to this argument, which are organised around three thematic parts: moving through separation and connection; uneven motion and resistance; and traces and potentialities. The chapter draws out six conclusions from the chapters in the collection.

Keywords: Mobilities; family; intimate relationships; family transitions; family practices; lived experiences of family

Introduction

Rather than break or disintegrate, families ebb and flow, moving from one iteration to another; they are in perpetual motion. This interdisciplinary edited collection builds on scholarship that challenges the idea of the ‘stable family’ by rethinking family from a different perspective, as always ‘on the move’, both conceptually and in practice; as flowing through space and time. The central argument of the book is that family is *always* in motion: that movement and change are part of the ongoing project and constitution of family. As such, transformations in family relations – including the ending of an intimate relationship between parents, but also through imprisonment, illness, moving house or migration – are viewed as disruption rather than fragmentation. Family and families carry on after these kinds of disorienting, or perhaps reorienting, events. They may cause significant

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upset and disarrangement, but they are rarely catastrophic in the ongoing and everyday livedness of family. The degree of choice, sense of agency and the extent to which all these events are viewed as positive or negative disruptions will also vary among family members. They are contingent on circumstance. By exploring families in motion, as we do in this book, becomes evident that family is never 'broken', but rather, its rhythms and routines are recast and adapted in material and affective form. There is always a maintenance of rhythm, whether this emanates from within or outside the family. Family is an ongoing process of change, adjustment and re-routing. Through this motion, the conceptual and lived experience of families change.

Integral to this discussion is the spatiality and temporality of family. Families in motion are produced through space and time. Family is both 'in place', embedded and coproduced through key sites of family – the domestic space or 'family home', but also in less acknowledged 'static' sites of family, including residential care and 'mobile' spaces like cars and buses. Family is created and recreated too, in the times of holidays, of illness, of celebration and so on. Family endures a series of modifications, adaptations and modulations that may or may not take a linear trajectory in space and time. Families are culturally shaped and so these adaptations are dependent on spatial and temporal contexts at micro and more global scales.

This volume explores these assertions by bringing together 13 empirical chapters from established and emerging researchers of families across disciplines, with examples of scholarship in sociology, anthropology, geography and criminology. It articulates family across varying contexts and is international in scope, with chapters from Australia, Belgium, Denmark, England, Italy, Scotland, Sweden and the USA. Before introducing these contributions, which are organised into three parts: (1) 'Moving through separation and connection'; (2) 'Uneven motion and resistance'; and (3) 'Traces and potentialities', this chapter firstly attends to the key arguments of the collection, namely that both the concept of family and families themselves are in motion, and that family is co-constituted through the interplay of conceptual and lived.

Motion in 'Family'

The notion of family in motion as 'family in transition' has been used to characterise families 'in crisis' (Pittman, 1987) and families in 'marital transition' (Bray & Hetherington, 1993). However, more recently, it refers to the ways in which the broader structures and contexts of family change (e.g., Charles, Aull Davies, & Harris, 2008), rather than to particularities of intimate relationships and their 'status' within families. Still, the idea that family is breakable is prevalent even in critical studies of family (e.g., Blomqvist & Heimer, 2016). We strive to resist this by highlighting that family is *always* transitional – produced, practiced and 'on the move', as a wealth of literature illuminates (Allan & Crow, 1989; Gubrium & Holstein, 1990; Silva & Smart, 1999; Smart, 2004; Smart & Neale, 1999; Williams, 2004). Family has been situated according to being 'complete' and being 'broken', primarily in relation to its relationship to parenting. It has been considered the

‘right’ context for childhood development since the Enlightenment period, with increasing protectionism and investment in childhood as the future (Jenks, 1996; Wyness, 2000). The state acts to intensify the role of the family in children’s lives in particular ways (Murray & Barnes, 2010), for example, through policies that consolidate parental control and responsibility for children such as the 1989 Children, Act and the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act in the UK (Hendrick, 1994, 2003; Wyness, 2000).

As discussed, in reading family as a concept and an entity in motion, this collection challenges the idea of the ‘broken’ family and instead stresses the notions of relatedness and relationality, which assume that people live within intentional, thoughtful networks of others which they can maintain or allow to atrophy (Smart, 2007). The families described in this collection remain connected, embedded and entwined, essentially bonded and linked, in memories, in imaginations, as well as in present moment everyday life (Smart, 2007). These family tales thus refute the notion of ‘broken’ and rather narrativise family as possessing an enduring capacity to adapt and reconfigure movingly. The notion of families in motion also captures the adaptation and change in family identified over the last few decades. The increasing prevalence of single parenting and blended families in the 1990s and 2000s was, in part, responsible for the rethinking of ‘family’ (e.g., see Smart & Neale, 1999). These changes in the configuration of families, which sit alongside the continuities of family practice (Charles et al., 2008) are part of an ongoing and iterative project of family.

Much of the critique of the concept of family – as a nuclear configuration, a heteronormative entity and economic and moral unit – stems from its stasis, so that alternative accounts emphasise the ‘doings’ of family (Morgan, 1996, 2011, 2019; Silva & Smart, 1999). Morgan’s (2019) ‘family practices’ approach:

emphasised the activities that family members did in relation to each other and how, in carrying out these practices, they affirmed, reproduced and sometimes re-defined those relationships understood to be family relationships. (p. 2)

As Silva and Smart (1999, p. 5) helpfully surmise, ‘families are what families do’ and this continues to be influential to many of the authors in this volume. In mobilising the concept of family, we thus contribute to this critical body of literature in articulating the mobility of the concept of family based on its relationship to ‘doings’, where ‘doings’ are mobile. We illustrate the ways in which the concept of family, derived through practice and discourse in time and space, is continually made and remade. Family is in constant flux, moving from one iteration to another. At the same time, families move through time and space – there is a literacy of motion and an associated tension between ‘in place’ and mobile. Family is part of the making of space, when space is considered as processual rather than absolute (Massey, 2005).

To some extent, the language of family has changed and the importance of family practices have become mainstream, with normative depictions of ‘the family’ more frequently being challenged in popular culture. For instance, the

frozen potato product company McCain chose to harness these shifting ideas about family in their 2017 advert entitled 'We are family'. The advert constructs a narrative of the different shapes and bonds of family life to appeal to their (potential) consumers. The voiceover starts by asking 'What's normal? Normal isn't normal,' and ends: 'it's mealtimes that make a family'. However, the critical responses of some viewers to these adverts on YouTube (2017) are a stark reminder that defining family remains fiercely contested. There is certainly friction in the moving away from normative conceptualisations of family and a continuing rationale for finding ways to challenge these and to re-situate family critically. Here, we do so using the language of movement and mobility.

In academic studies of family, there has been a tendency to overemphasise the frictionless 'progress' of family in the context of societal change. For example, [Charles et al. \(2008\)](#) look at the ways in which families have changed since the 1960s with reference to a study of family change in the East End of London between 1900 and 1960. The study, carried out by Rosser and Harris in 1965, characterised these changes as a 'move from a cohesive to a mobile society' ([Charles et al., 2008](#), p. 1). The study concluded that families were mobile, both socially and spatially, especially in terms of the dispersal of kinship networks. They discussed the diminution of 'kin connectedness', using Durkheim's 'solidarity based on sameness' to understand increased geographical differentiation and a breakdown in cohesion. [Charles et al. \(2008\)](#) acknowledge debates that centre on a rethinking of family in the context of post-modernity, reflexive modernisation, risk society, less patriarchal society, and post-material values, which emerged in the 2000s, with family defined according to individualisation and detraditionalisation. However, they critique the idea that family has gone through significant changes in the last decades and argue, instead, that we need to look again at how people 'do' family in order to reveal continuities in family practices. In viewing families through the lens of motion, we seek to mobilise the more generalised perspectives of contemporary changes in intimacy and personal life in a way that acknowledges the immobility as well as mobility of family.

Hence a mobilised notion of family focusses on the 'doings' of family based on the empirical – on understanding family through research that seeks to understand its lived experience. In exploring the lived experience of family, we look beyond the normative constructions of family to contribute to contemporary debates and critical thinking on family. We approach the 'doings' of family with an openness that allows us to move beyond normative assumptions – considering family as a particular blend of social relations in space and time – based on change *and* continuity. It is a broad social grouping that encompasses a wide range of social and caring relationships involving both kin and non-kin, humans and non-humans. Family is often constructed in relation to the people that may live together in close proximity, in the 'family home' ([Settles, 2001](#); [Shepherd, Arnold, & Gibbs, 2006](#)).

However, the spatialisation of families is increasingly recognised as open to reconfiguration in response to members of families living outside the 'family

home' in the local vicinity or further afield. Family is conceptualised across multiple scales. Transnational families, defined as those where members 'live some or most of the time separated from each other,' still 'hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely "family-hood", even across national borders' (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2003, p. 3). In other words, being part of a family is not something that simply ends with international migration, even when migrants do not anticipate an eventual return. Rather, families adapt their family practices in and through transnational space and the meaning of family continues to have significance in their everyday lives. Family perseveres despite, as well as through, motion (Walsh 2018).

Family and Families in Motion

Thus, the concept of family is mobile, taking on different meanings through cultures, politics, and practice. It is determined by the mobilities of families and family members as they travel across space and time. This has had some attention in the field of mobilities (Hall & Holdsworth, 2016; Holdsworth, 2013; Jirón & Iturra, 2014; Murray & Cortés-Morales, forthcoming; Murray & Doughty, 2016; Pinkney, 2018). Much of the recent work centres on interdependencies, in that the mobilities of family members are relational to others, but also the family moves as an entity in itself (Jirón & Iturra, 2014; Murray & Cortés-Morales, forthcoming). There is a complex network of mobility decisions and practices that construct families. Drawing from developments in the 'mobilities turn' (Sheller & Urry 2006; Urry 2007), parenting, but also being in a family, can be conceptualised as a mobile practice encompassing the movement of people, objects, information and ideas, and the meanings and beliefs attached to these movements. Emotions and affect, too, play a significant part of the mobile construction of family – as Jensen, Sheller, and Wind (2015, p. 17) suggest: 'affective ambiances, relational mobility constellations, and interpretative meanings of everyday mobility influence mobility patterns'.

Families are mobile from the micro-movement of the body in intimate relations with others to the macro-movements across continents of bodies and communications. They are formed through the mobilities of reproduction, the movements of eggs sperm and embryos and of surrogates (see, e.g., Vora, 2013). Recognition of the connectedness and range of family in, for example, the emergence and increased openness around reproductive technologies and adoption, among both heterosexual and same-sex couples, has helped to transform notions of kinship much more extensively (Finch & Mason, 1993). Families are made through the coming together of people across time and space to create family in its myriad forms and through the dispersal of people to different corners of the world. Family is determined according to movement between and within hospitals, homes, nurseries, schools, churches and graveyards and so on. The 'doings' of family in these different temporal and spatial contexts have been studied empirically and this has helped challenge the normative assumptions around family discussed above.

At the same time, it should be recognised that the structures of family are often immobilising. As Holdsworth (2013, p. 422) argues the:

[...] objectification of children through family mobility misses the reality of how this mobility is experienced. In particular, notwithstanding the significance of holiday mobility, the ideal of immobility for children is often reproduced in family life, and this has implications for other family members.

The conflict between the acknowledgement of non-normative family configurations alongside the inertia of acceptance means that the lived experience of the former can further immobilise particular family members. Families play out prevailing discourses of protectionism and risk minimisation in controlling children's mobilities (Murray, 2009). Caring roles and domestic labour are more likely to be taken up by women and, set in the context of family, these can inhibit mobilities. There can also be immobilisation when there is heightened mobility. Shared residential custody, whereby children move between parental homes, is becoming more prevalent in many European countries, especially the UK and Sweden, as well as the USA and Australia (Blomqvist & Heimer, 2016; Nielsen, 2011; Skevik, 2006; Smyth, 2009). Many empirical studies have stressed the ongoing ordinariness of post-separation/divorce family lives and establish the children they interviewed as themselves resilient and reflexive. They are active participants in family life, even if we acknowledge the mixed experiences and challenges of such families (Smart, Neale, & Wade, 2001; see also Smart & Neale, 1999). At the same time, there is evidence of hardship and distress in children moving between homes in spatially dispersed families and they are immobilised in this regard (Murray & Cortés-Morales, forthcoming). Smart's (2004) call for policy and practice on children moving between parents, based on 'recognition' rather than 'rights', reflects the impact that parental rights has had on the mobile lives of children.

Families are formed and re-formed through care and this accounts for key aspects of family mobility and the mobilities of family members. Day (2000) argues that spatiality is dependent on caring relationships and that it is only possible to understand the constraints of public space through caring commitments, an approach developed by Bowlby (2012) through the notion of 'carescapes'. Caring makes space, in that caring responsibilities are privileged over others, 'reinforcing women's primary responsibility for care-giving to children and family and home' (Day, 2000, p. 110). There has been a trend for families (who can afford it) to move to particular catchment areas for schooling, with parents spending significantly more for houses in desirable areas (Pells, 2016). There is movement, too, in adult children moving closer to older parents for reciprocal care – of grandchildren, for example (Pettersson & Malmberg, 2009). Transnational family life, Bal-dassar and Merla (2014) suggest, is characterised by the negotiation, monitoring and management of care exchanges and commitments across the life course, with care circulating among family members over time and distance.

Today's global labour markets and temporary labour regimes are responsible for the unwanted reorganisation of family life in which many may feel ongoing separation as traumatic and violent (Pratt, 2012), but other transnational families

are created through the agency of one or more members choosing to migrate for economic or lifestyle opportunities. Precarious labour markets are responsible too for the trend towards children returning to their parents' home after moving out – in so-called 'boomerang moves'. Tosi and Grundy (2018) found that across Europe 'intergenerational co-residence' is increasing, with young people moving back to their 'parental home' and that this is having negative impacts on parents' welfare and quality of life. Movements of people back and forth make family – its form changes over time and with the times.

The range of interdependent aspects of mobilities highlighted through mobilities' approaches also draws attention to the imagined and virtual. Family mobilities are imagined through television, film, literature and so on. As discussed, with reference to television advertising, this can recreate normative conceptualisations of family. It is the imagined versions of 'good parenting' that lead to families moving homes to areas where schools are deemed to be particularly successful in league tables. But the imagined family mobilities can also challenge normative assumptions. Although tempered by its adultist beginnings, children's literature depicts myriad examples of resistance to the immobilisations of family (Holdsworth, 2013; Murray & Overall, 2017). Family practices and feelings of 'togetherness' are also 'artfully' mediated through mobile technologies so that they become part of the doings of family life and coordination (Cycil, 2015). The car is another mediator, arguably central to family practices on the move, for those who have access, and a space in which power relations are played out, both gendered and generationed (Barker, 2009, 2011; Bon-sall, 2015). At the same time, lack of access to car travel, in social spaces designed for the car, can be excluding and produces injustice (Bostock, 2001).

This vast body of literature and beyond illustrates how families are far from being 'static' or 'finished'. They are mobile, spatially and emotionally, and so always 'in motion'. The contributions to this volume render this understanding more sophisticated and offer a much-needed layer of complexity and analysis to this field. This mobility of family and families is a common thread throughout this collection. The contingencies of space, temporality, materialities and emotions run through the book, but a number of themes emerged through the development of the collection and are used to structure the collection. Hence the book is divided into three parts: moving through separation and connection, uneven motion and resistance, and traces and potentialities.

Part I – Moving Through Separation and Connection

The contributions in Part I, Moving Through Separation and Connection, refer to the ways in which people move in and out of different contexts of family, become separated and then reconnect. This does not occur in a linear movement through time, but is cyclical and iterative. It occurs in rhythms that are not always smooth, but often disjointed. This is a theme explored by Macht (Chapter 2), as she focusses on the emotional dynamics inherent in the cultural shaping of fatherhood. Macht draws from two case studies, one of a Scottish and another of a Romanian father, to reflect on the interconnections between 'doing family' and 'loving', as types of relational and emotional activities which maintain family bonds across borders in spite of intimate separations arising from divorce and

work migration. Through these case studies, Macht explores the process of ‘doing family’ as a disjointed and renegotiated one, involving an emotional reflexivity developed as a consequence of changing life circumstances. Macht also highlights the dissolution of the normative precepts of family life, in situations of emotional upheaval, movement and relocation, a theme also present in Hutton’s (Chapter 3) account of the brutally disruptive impact of imprisonment on family life.

Hutton argues that imprisonment leads inmates to cling on to their families, rather than truly ‘maintaining’ their family ties, despite policy jargon. The chapter reveals how the spaces where family life can happen narrow severely and become dictated by the prison environment and the plethora of rules that regulate it. The immediate physical separation, onerous restrictions on physical contact and the heavily surveilled nature of family contact during imprisonment also constrict space for emotional expression, often rendering romantic relationships clandestine and fatherhood attenuated. Drawing on empirical research conducted at two male prisons in England and Wales, Hutton details the complexities of how families navigate this transition and the limitations on what family can mean in the prison environment. Hutton concludes with the implications of these restrictions for the ultimate transition when prisoners return ‘home’.

The concept of home is also significant in the next two chapters by McDonnell et al. (Chapter 4) and Merla and Nobels (Chapter 5). McDonnell et al. focus on ‘living together apart’ (LTA) and the intensities and tensions that result from living together when an intimate relationship ends. This chapter argues that LTA is as significant a contemporary practice as the term ‘living apart together’ (LAT) (Duncan & Phillips, 2010), which has been further explored by scholarly work. LAT is a concept that has been developed as a way of conceptualising families where family members live in more than one place. McDonnell et al.’s contrasting research on LTA attempts to capture the lived experience of families maintaining cohabitation arrangements for practical or principled reasons after the end of an intimate relationship. McDonnell et al. argue that in LTA families there is an increased intensity of experiences and different tensions emerge: tension in spaces of individualisation and spaces of togetherness. The suggestions are based on collaborative autoethnographic research among McDonnell et al., all of whom have had experience of being part of families in transitional states, including ‘LTA’. This uncovered some of the complexities of families in motion in family homes.

Merla and Nobels’ chapter discusses multi-local families and, more specifically, the way in which children of separated parents, living in equal shared custody agreements, define and construct their ‘home’ in this context of circular mobility. Drawing from activity-based interviews with 30 children aged 10–16 and other fieldwork with children of separated parents living in recomposed families and shared custody arrangements, Merla and Nobels explore, in particular, the meanings and feelings that family relations confer to the space of the ‘house’ in children’s experience, including both the physicality of the place of residence, and the relations and emotions that children attach to it. The authors also highlight the various strategies that children develop to mediate and influence their family relations through ‘space’, including strategies of spatial appropriation and territorialisation.