



New Forms of Kinship Session

**Roona Simpson,
Centre for Research on Families and Relationships
University of Edinburgh
UK**

Changes and Continuities in the Intimate Relationships of Contemporary Spinsters

Abstract

There has been widespread academic support for the notion of individualism as a major explanation of recent familial change. These changes have been subject to much political attention as well as academic theorising, and several commentators have raised concerns that changing familial forms signal a decline in moral obligations and commitments to others, with associated negative consequences for wider society. However, others interpret such changes as signifying increasing diversity in family formations, and argue the progressive potential of a shift from ascribed relationships to 'elective affinities'. Remaining single is often seen as paradigmatic of individualism in contemporary western societies. Single women in particular risk being depicted as strident individualists, characterised by their lack of connection to significant others, despite their singleness historically being explained in relation to duties to care for family members. This paper draws on research on contemporary never-married single women in Great Britain, including women who have opted into [single] motherhood while single. A notion of family as a fluid and potentially variable set of relationships is used in considering the personal relationships of these 'contemporary spinsters', in order to investigate the extent to which these women's life histories support arguments of profound changes in the sphere of personal relationships. This paper also addresses the ways in which normative understandings of familial duties and rights may mean a lack of cultural validation and institutional support for the diverse relationships in which these women are embedded, such as their exclusion from particular policy provision.