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Research paper

From Imposed Ties to Chosen Ties: Transformations of Intimate Relationships within the Family*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines transformations in contemporary family ties by analyzing the shift from socially imposed bonds to emotionally chosen relationships. It seeks to question the capacity of the sociology of intimacy to account for these changes without reducing family relations to a narrow logic of individual freedom and self-choice. The study is grounded in the assumption that recent transformations affecting the family do not signify a complete emancipation from social constraints, but rather reflect a reorganization of ties and obligations within private life. Adopting a critical theoretical approach, the analysis deconstructs sociological perspectives on individualization, intimate relationships, and family change, while reassessing them through frameworks that foreground power relations, social and gender inequalities, and the symbolic market of emotions. This approach makes it possible to move beyond purely descriptive accounts of family transformation toward an analysis of its internal social logic.The findings demonstrate that contemporary intimacy does not eliminate power relations within the family, but instead contributes to their reconfiguration through a logic of choice and negotiation. The study also shows that the family has become a fragile space in which relationships are managed through implicit and revisable contractual arrangements, where emotional fulfillment becomes a condition for continuity and freedom turns into an individual burden. It concludes that intimacy constitutes a central site for the reproduction of social and gender inequalities, thereby calling for the development of a critical sociology of intimacy that moves beyond the traditional dichotomy between liberation and regulation.

Introduction:

The family constitutes a problematic object in contemporary sociology. It is no longer approached as a self-evident social given or as a stable natural unit, but rather as a site where profound transformations intersect, affecting social structures, ways of living, and forms of intimate relationships. The question of the family today is therefore no longer primarily concerned with its form or structure; instead, it focuses on the logic through which bonds are constituted and organized within it, the criteria of their legitimacy, and the conditions of their continuity. From this perspective, François de Singly points out that the very definition of the family is marked by a lack of consensus. He illustrates this lack of consensus by pointing to the highly contentious public debates in France surrounding the law on "marriage for all" , debates that exposed profound divisions in the ways the family is defined and conceptualized. These debates oppose, on the one side, positions grounded in the notion of the "natural family," understood as composed of a husband, a wife, and children, and, on the other, perspectives that argue that sexual difference is not a structural principle in the constitution of the family, and that alternative forms of filiation and kinship are equally legitimate [1]. He further highlights the persistence of a binary

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classification of families structured around the opposition between tradition and modernity — an opposition that presents itself as a description of reality while in fact actively contributing to its production. This classificatory divide, along with the assumptions it generates, derives from an analytical error that consists in equating family form and structure with the value system underpinning family life [1].

Reducing the understanding of the modern family to its structure alone ultimately constrains the explanatory power of sociological analysis. The transformation has occurred less at the level of family form and structure than in the internal functioning of family relationships. According to de Singly [1], the family is increasingly organized around individuals and personal relationships, with marriage founded on choice and love rather than on social obligation. This shift marks a transformation of the family from an institution structured by social roles into a space of intimacy, thereby opening the way for a sociological analysis of the internal logic of relationships within the family.

Within this line of analysis, the works of Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck have highlighted the transformation of family ties into what they describe as pure relationships, as well as the progressive individualization of family and intimate relations through their detachment from traditional structures. Such developments raise a set of fundamental theoretical questions: to what extent does this dynamic amount to a genuine emancipation from traditional constraints? Does the shift toward relationships grounded in choice and affect lead to a decline in power relations within the family, or rather to their reconfiguration in more subtle forms? Put differently, does contemporary intimacy constitute a space of freedom, or does it operate as a new mechanism for regulating commitment and vulnerability within family life?

1. The Transformation of the Concept of the Relationship within the Family

Classical sociological scholarship has traditionally approached the family as a socially structured system of roles and as a key institution for the organization and regulation of behavior [2][3][4][5]. Within Talcott Parsons's theoretical framework, the family is conceptualized as a system of roles, whereby each member occupies a functionally defined position; family relationships are thus not understood as autonomous social ties, but as expressions of the functional roles embedded in the structural order. Within Durkheimian sociology, the family is treated as a regulatory institution whose function is to organize conduct, transmit collective values, and ensure the social regulation of individuals, rather than to provide a space for self-expression. In classical sociological theory, marriage, fatherhood, and motherhood are treated not as matters of individual choice but as socially prescribed positions grounded in kinship, law, and religion. Conjugal relations—and family relations more broadly—are therefore not constituted as arenas of negotiation, but as forms of social commitment oriented toward social continuity, without necessarily securing individual satisfaction or self-realization [5]. The family, in this view, is not a relationship per se but a system of social roles. As the individual becomes central to the modern family, the latter is no longer conceived as a role-based system demanding conformity, but as a relational space oriented toward self-realization. In the notion of the "relational family" [1] , marriage and parenthood derive their legitimacy not from external rules, but from their capacity to offer recognition, support, and the conditions for the construction of individual identity within the family [1].

This transformation reflects a profound reconfiguration of the normative foundations through which family bonds are legitimated. Whereas, in the traditional model, relationships derived their legitimacy from legal and religious sanction, contemporary relationships are increasingly evaluated according to their emotional quality and their capacity to satisfy individual and psychological needs. The sociological question thus shifts from social conformity to subjective fulfillment. Anthony Giddens conceptualizes this shift through the notion of the "pure relationship " which designates a form of intimate tie whose legitimacy rests on mutual satisfaction between the partners rather than on externally prescribed norms [6]. Within this framework, relationships no longer derive their validity from tradition or institutionalized roles, but from their capacity to respond to the emotional and psychological needs of individuals, thereby rendering them intrinsically conditional and subject to ongoing reassessment [6].

While this transformation in the nature of intimate relationships is often presented as inherently positive, the grounding of relationships in free choice does not translate into greater stability. In the analysis developed by Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, free choice itself becomes the source of what they term a "normal

chaos of love" [7], a condition in which relational ties are simultaneously emancipated and structurally fragile. As the possibility of withdrawal becomes internal to the relationship, the relationship itself takes the form of an uncertain project—one that must be continuously justified in order to be sustained [7].

Seen in this light, the transformation of the relationship within the family—from an imposed bond, characteristic of traditional family arrangements, to a chosen bond—constitutes the structural backdrop against which contemporary transformations of intimacy unfold. As family ties become organized around satisfaction and affect rather than obligation, the family is increasingly configured as a site of ongoing negotiation and justification. This configuration foregrounds emotional fragility as a central analytical concern within the sociology of contemporary family intimacy.

2. The Pure Relationship and Individualization

The concept of family relationality raises the question of the foundations upon which intimate relationships are structured in contemporary societies. As previously noted, sociological analyses point to profound transformations in the nature of family relationships. According to Anthony Giddens, intimate family relations in late modernity are no longer organized around duty, kinship, social roles, or collective interests, but are instead grounded in mutual satisfaction. In this shift, the relationship ceases to function as an institution and comes to be experienced as an ongoing relational project between individuals, rather than as an unconditional commitment anchored in externally imposed norms. For Giddens, the pure relationship presupposes an individualized self-conceived not as a given, but as a socially constructed project. As the self becomes a project, the relationship is incorporated into its very process of formation, transforming the pure relationship into a site of identity construction rather than a stable identity framework [6]. Individualization, in this sense, does not imply detachment from others, but points to a reflexive self that depends on ongoing recognition within intimate relationships. This shift also alters the status of marriage itself, which can no longer be adequately understood through the classical notion of an institution. In pre-modern societies, marriage functioned as a key mechanism of social integration, through which individual identity was defined by family membership, kinship relations, and one's position within the social group [6]. In modern societies, by contrast, the relationship increasingly comes to serve the project of the self, transforming love into a domain of self-realization rather than one grounded in institutional obligation or sacrificial norms.

In Giddens's analysis, the process of individualization and the modern redefinition of the individual fundamentally reshape family and intimate relationships themselves. Along similar lines, Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim emphasize that individualization within relationships does not lead to the erosion of social ties, but rather to the individualization of responsibility for sustaining them. Intimate relationships thus become increasingly dependent on the identity, biography, and personal life project of the individuals involved. From this standpoint, contemporary society no longer offers individuals a predefined relational script. It neither fixes the timing of marriage nor prescribes its form; instead, individuals are required to actively shape and assume responsibility for their own relational pathways. Marriage, family, and intimate ties are thus reconfigured as individualized projects, collectively negotiated within the family as a relational setting [8]. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim stress that this process of individualization does not amount to a straightforward emancipation, but to a deeper transformation of the relationship itself. While traditional societies sustained intimate ties through shared norms and social conventions, modern societies have progressively dismantled these forms of support. Intimate and family relationships have therefore not vanished, but they have been stripped of the institutional safeguards that once stabilized them [8]. In this configuration, uncertainty no longer resides at the level of institutions, but is internalized within the relationship itself. Individuals are no longer shielded by institutional frameworks, as they once were; instead, they are compelled to assume responsibility for coping with, and protecting themselves against, the fragility of relational ties.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim emphasize that the freedom to choose a partner is inseparable from the freedom to withdraw from the relationship. While this configuration may foster forms of individual autonomy, it simultaneously gives rise to ties that are structurally insecure and unstable. The enduring tension between the option of choice and the possibility of exit produces a persistent state of uncertainty and asymmetry in relational resources, thereby undermining the stability and continuity of the relationship itself [7].

3. The Illusion of Emotional Freedom

In Beck's analysis, the individualization of intimate and family relationships constitutes a defining feature of modernity. While this configuration expands the scope of individual choice, it simultaneously renders relational bonds more fragile and introduces a structural tension between the capacity to choose and the possibility of withdrawal. Yet this form of emotional and intimate freedom does not operate in a social vacuum; it remains deeply embedded in the broader cultural context of contemporary society.

Eva Illouz situates modern emotional and romantic choice squarely within the historical and cultural framework of capitalism, arguing that contemporary forms of romance and intimacy emerge not outside, but through the consumer culture of late capitalism [9]. From this standpoint, the idea of free emotional and intimate choice is misleading, insofar as such choices are deeply culturally coded. Individuals' affective orientations are shaped by cinematic imaginaries of romance, market-produced standards of attractiveness and desirability, and consumption-based rituals such as gift exchange, travel, and celebratory practices. Emotional freedom, in Illouz's analysis, therefore signifies less an autonomy from the market than an incorporation into its symbolic and material structures. At the same time, the emotional marketplace promotes a rationalized orientation toward intimacy, encouraging individuals to approach romantic choice through calculations of cost, benefit, and personal utility.

The framing of intimate and family relationships in terms of freedom of choice—whether through Giddens's notion of the pure relationship or Beck's emphasis on individual responsibility for shaping one's relational biography—must therefore be situated within the symbolic market of capitalist consumption. Within this market, standards of attractiveness, regimes of comparison, and unequal capacities for withdrawal are systematically generated. It is precisely at this juncture that the illusion of emotional freedom takes shape: as overt social constraints appear to diminish, individuals' intimate and emotional choices become increasingly structured by invisible market mechanisms [10].

Approaching emotional choice through a gendered lens, Eva Illouz situates it at the core of what she identifies as the illusion of emotional freedom. By embedding intimate relationships within an emotional and affective marketplace, she demonstrates that this market unevenly distributes the capacity to exit relationships. Those endowed with greater bodily and symbolic capital are granted a higher degree of exit power, while individuals who invest more heavily on the emotional level are rendered structurally more vulnerable within the relationship itself. Illouz argues that the former configuration tends to characterize men, affording them greater ease of withdrawal, whereas emotional investment is more strongly associated with women, exposing them more directly to the disruptive and damaging consequences of exit and relational breakdown. Emotional freedom, in this sense, operates less as a condition of equality than as a mechanism that obscures the underlying power relations structuring intimate life [9].

4. The Family as a Space of Negotiation and Fragility

Anthony Giddens conceptualizes the contemporary family as increasingly organized around negotiated intimacy. Intimacy, in this sense, does not involve fusion with the other, but a mutual recognition of personal boundaries and individual particularities—a form of relational balance that also implies a balance of power [6]. Within this configuration, the nuclear family generates a diversification of kinship ties whose defining feature is no longer stability, but negotiability. Whereas kinship relations once provided a taken-for-granted foundation

of trust, trust today must be actively produced through negotiation, and commitment itself becomes a contingent issue, comparable to what characterizes sexual relationships [6]. Under these conditions, the family is no longer structured around fixed hierarchical authority, but is increasingly reorganized through negotiated arrangements. Authority is no longer monopolized by predefined figures or roles; instead, questions of decision-making, labor, sacrifice, care, and responsibility are continuously reopened and renegotiated among family members. Everyday practices and life choices thus cease to be taken for granted and become the subject of ongoing negotiation within family relationships.

Ulrich Beck identifies another dimension of the transformation of family ties, namely the reconfiguration of intimate relationships as arrangements that are inherently revisable and open to dissolution. The family can no longer be understood as an unconditional form of commitment; instead, it increasingly takes shape as a field of lived experiences shaped by ongoing social transformations. In this context, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue that "individuals, largely driven by social change and often in an involuntary manner, enter a phase of searching and exploration. They seek to experiment with and to live—in the active sense of the term—new ways of life in response to the dominance of roles (man, woman, family, occupation) that have become increasingly irrelevant. They wish to express themselves freely and to give rein to impulses that they had previously repressed. They allow themselves to enjoy life here and now, rather than only in some distant future, cultivating a conscious pleasure in the good things of life. They have begun to regard their needs as rights that must, when necessary, be defended against formal injunctions and institutional obligations. They develop a sense of freedom and become acutely aware of the need to protect their lives from any external interference, ready to become socially and politically active whenever their private domains are threatened, while largely disregarding traditional forms and arenas of expression."

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This raises the question of whether the negotiated configuration of intimate and family relationships gives rise to a generalized condition of fragility. In this context, Ulrich Beck argues that "for the individual, the dissolution of traditional bonds signifies liberation from previous constraints and obligations; yet at the same time, the support and security once provided by cohesive communities begin to erode" [7]. This transformation gives rise to what may be described as a profound loss of inner stability. Within this context, marriage itself takes on a new meaning: "through shared living, men and women construct a common universe of attitudes, views, and expectations, encompassing everything from the most ordinary routines of everyday life to major developments in global politics. This universe is formed through verbal and non-verbal dialogue, through shared habits and experiences, and through continuous interaction between each partner and the other. The shared image of the world is constantly reworked—transmitted, replaced, questioned, and reaffirmed" [7].

In examining the loci of vulnerability, the issue of personal stability and its guarantees becomes central. In traditional models, intimate relationships were primarily anchored in membership within the extended household, which functioned as an economic unit providing continuity and security under externally prescribed rules. In contemporary contexts, however, the consolidation of the nuclear family has profoundly altered the

organizing logic of intimate relationships. As Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim observe, “what was once a team sharing work has become a couple sharing emotions” [7]. This shift places partners under shared structural and economic pressures, increasingly requiring them to engage in rationalized reflection—whether concerning continued investment in the relationship or the option of withdrawal and disengagement.

From another angle, François de Singly argues that the family has moved from a setting primarily devoted to the regulation of individual behavior toward one that enables the recognition of individuals as autonomous selves. He contends that "the modern family is a group of individuals who enjoy a higher degree of individuality than in the past" [1]. In this configuration, the family increasingly functions as a space of negotiation over individual identities and the constraints imposed by public life. This shift raises a critical question: why does the transformation of the family and of intimate relationships give rise to heightened insecurity or emotional fragility?

Carol Smart demonstrates that transformations in the structure of the family and in intimate relationships give rise to what she describes as families organized around "fragile calculations". Family life, in this sense, comes to rely increasingly on the emotional labor invested by both partners, on their capacity for communication, and on a persistent awareness of the risk of relational breakdown whenever the familial situation no longer aligns with the expectations and calculations of its members. Love therefore acquires significance not simply through its existence, but through its continual enactment—both verbally and practically—in what partners say and do for one another. Carol Smart illustrates this dynamic in her analysis of interviews conducted with couples in her study, observing that "this shared history was a story about how they cared for one another and expressed love in practical ways. This suggests that the idea of commitment is intertwined with the idea of love as a process" [11]. From this perspective, the contemporary family can no longer be understood either as a stable institution or as a freely flowing emotional collectivity. Rather, it is constituted as a space of continuous negotiation within an individualized social framework. Individuals are expected to choose, communicate, and justify their choices, their everyday trajectories, and their positions vis-à-vis both their partner and wider domains of social life, while continually renegotiating individual and family identities—yet without any absolute guarantees of continuity.

5. Critical Sociology of Intimacy

Contemporary family and intimate relationships give rise to fundamental theoretical questions. Building on the preceding analyses, a central tension can be identified between, on the one hand, the representation of modern intimacy as a space of pure freedom and, on the other, its conceptualization as a new social order structured by power and social inequality. Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck articulate a narrative that foregrounds the emancipation of intimate and family relationships, particularly by framing them as no longer imposed by social structures, as was characteristic of traditional societies. Within this perspective, one of the defining features of modernity resides in individuals’ capacity to choose their partners and in the conception of intimacy as a negotiated—if ostensibly democratic—domain. Anthony Giddens, in particular, maintains that within intimate relationships no participant holds a natural or inherent authority; instead, such relationships are lived on the premise that negotiation itself constitutes their primary organizing principle. From this standpoint, neither Ulrich Beck nor Anthony Giddens approaches this transformation through an analysis of emergent power relations. Their accounts do not systematically engage with gender inequality, bodily or symbolic capital, or unequal capacities to withdraw from intimate relationships. Giddens, for example, interprets negotiation as an expression of an egalitarian situation between the parties involved [6], without sufficiently examining the resources that structure power positions within the negotiation process itself. Beck, for his part, foregrounds the fragility produced by freedom of choice [7], yet without critically unpacking the asymmetry between those who bear the social costs of this fragility and those who derive advantages from it.

Eva Illouz argues that the apparent emancipation of intimate relationships conceals new forms of power. She maintains that romance and "emotions constitute a complex intersection of physiological arousal, perceptual mechanisms, and interpretive processes; they operate at a threshold where the non-cultural is encoded into

culture, where body, cognition, and culture converge and dissolve into one another. As a cultural practice, romantic love is subject to the dual influence of the economic and political spheres; yet, unlike other practices, it entails a direct, embodied experience" [9]. This perspective suggests that intimacy is structured within a regime of soft power, anchored in market dynamics, gender relations, and cultural norms. Intimacy thus becomes embedded in society and in its social and gendered configurations. A comparable argument is developed by Carol Smart, particularly through her rejection of any rigid separation between the private and the social. She argues that private life is saturated with social norms, power relations, and moral judgments, and that intimacy provides a crucial analytical lens for understanding how inequality is lived, experienced, and reproduced [11].

The discourse of individualization and emancipation tends to present the transformation of intimate and family relationships as a loss of traditional meanings accompanied by a shift toward individual freedom and responsibility in emotional choice for both women and men. Such an account, however, remains largely descriptive of social change rather than analytically explanatory. A critical perspective, by contrast, must confront a set of fundamental questions: who actually possesses the capacity to choose, and who bears the social costs of this freedom of choice? From this standpoint, intimacy must be understood as embedded within social structures and governed by a logic comparable to that of supply and demand. Emotional choice, moreover, is far from neutral. Women are generally required to invest greater amounts of emotional labor, while simultaneously bearing a disproportionate share of the social and emotional costs associated with withdrawal or relational breakdown. Men, by contrast, tend—relatively speaking—to benefit from the flexibility of the emotional market and from a greater capacity to adapt to exit.

From this perspective, intimate lies in contemporary societies can be understood as a social system in which market logics, gender inequalities, and the pressures of individualization intersect to produce relationships that appear, at first glance, as free choices, yet remain deeply structured by power and its subtle reproduction. Power thus shifts away from overt forms of coercion and direct domination toward the transformation of desire and intimacy themselves into instruments of power, a process that secures their effectiveness precisely through their apparent voluntariness.

Conclusion :

This study demonstrates that the family in contemporary societies raises more questions than it offers definitive or conclusive answers. The range of approaches and problematics generated by transformations of the family can be broadly organized around two main perspectives. The first is associated with the work of Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck, who emphasize freedom of choice, individualization, and family intimacy, while also drawing attention to its increasing fragility. The second perspective, associated with Carol Smart and Eva Illouz—despite their theoretical differences—focuses on personal life within the family as a reflexive condition lived under social structures, and on intimacy as embedded within the consumer-cultural context of late capitalism. Taken together, these perspectives point to a dynamic of structural fragility that does not result from individual failure, but rather from a new social logic governing intimacy and family relationships.

This study has sought to provide a critical examination of the internal logic structuring transformations of the family and the shift from roles to relationships. It argues that contemporary intimacy cannot be reduced to a discourse of emancipation and individual choice, insofar as it functions in practice as a social system that reproduces power relations through subtle and largely invisible mechanisms. Intimacy—and, by extension, family relationships—emerges from the analysis not as detached from social structures, but as a site of intersection among individualization, market dynamics, and gender relations, through which inequality is reproduced under the language of consent and mutual freedom.

It can therefore be argued that while contemporary intimacy has released family relationships from a range of traditional constraints, this emancipation does not take place within a socially neutral space. Rather, it unfolds under conditions of structural inequality that shape access to resources, capacities for choice, and possibilities of withdrawal. This leads us to suggest that contemporary intimacy has not produced a complete rupture with power, but has instead reconfigured it within a framework that appears voluntary and negotiated. What

ultimately emerges is a persistent tension: family lies and intimate relationships become free in principle, yet in practice they are increasingly fragile and marked by new forms of differentiation and inequality.

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