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Sensational Kin: Family, Normativity and Women's Weekly Magazines

By Melanie Anne Stewart¹

Abstract

This essay analyses a range of British women's weekly magazines commonly referred to as 'Women's Weeklies'. Examples of these texts include *Pick-Me-Up*, *Take-a-Break*, *Real People*, and *Closer*. Unlike more widely researched magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* or *Glamour*, the women's weeklies draw their readership based on the supposed autobiographical nature of the narratives, which in turn generates the 'authenticity' attributed to personal narratives. In this essay I analyse the personal narratives of the weeklies within the wider public sphere, arguing that such personal narratives render women's weeklies relevant in political debate. The essay demonstrates how the individual narratives of social history and autobiography have become generalized and are thus circulated as evidence of something shared in the larger social and political climate. The aim is not to explain what happens to specific aesthetically mediated subjects as equivalent to what happens to people, but rather to unpack the affective scenarios of women's weeklies' narratives in order to shed light upon the claims they make about the situation of contemporary life. Drawing on theorists such as Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, I argue that through their use of optimism and affect the articles perpetuate the fantasy of the domestic good-life while concurrently, and subconsciously, providing evidence of the violence that heteronormative fantasy enacts. I claim that these articles illustrate the changing form of the family while simultaneously failing to acknowledge it. I demonstrate how they rely on the shared, lived experience of their readers, and as such, use affect to normalize even the most sensational of narratives. Ultimately, I query their insistence on securing futurity and the good-life through reproduction and family, postulating how these texts may be re-appropriated to call for a social and political shift away from the family.

Keywords: Family, Women's Magazines, Normativity, Heteronormativity, Reproduction, the Child, Female Identity, Futurity

'Half of all children born today will experience family breakdown by the age of 16. Too often these children attended school where their aspirations were suffocated, within a culture of low expectations ... the section of society on the lowest incomes has become static and entrenched ... too many children born into such communities find that at best, they remain in the same condition as their parents.'

- Iain Duncan Smith, 2011

Whilst preparing to host the 2012 Olympic Games, Queen Elizabeth II's jubilee celebrations, and still reeling from the worldwide spectacle of Prince William and Kate

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Middleton's 2011 wedding, there was an air of British national pride which circulated throughout the media. Yet buzzing ever increasingly louder beneath the surface of this propagated national pride was an ever increasing fear and uneasiness over other recent awe-inspiring national events. Discourses of discontent and public disorder, as well as class and racial conflicts, dominated the national public sphere since rioting swept England for five days in August 2011.² The social and political responses to the riots provide an illuminating context for my discussion, which reads the politics inherent in the familial discourses of a selection of contemporary British 'women's weekly' magazines.³ Through close textual analysis I illuminate the central claims of women's weeklies' discourses - the linking of reproduction and futurity; the normative and unquestionable desire to bear children; the changing form of the family - and challenge these claims through the use of feminist, cultural, and queer theory.

Women's weeklies have some of the highest circulation of all magazines in the UK, with *Take a Break* boasting a readership of approximately 4 million ('Mums the word,' 2006). Despite their popularity, women's weeklies have scarcely been the subject of scholarly interrogation. Those scholars who do engage with these cultural texts largely relegate them to passing comments within larger discourses on more prominent women's magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* (Holmes, 2007; Keating, 2005; Stevens, Maclaran, & Catterall, 2007). Reading women's weeklies alongside other women's magazines does the magazines themselves an injustice and fails to account for marked differences between women's magazines, such as *Cosmopolitan*, and the cultural texts with which I am concerned. For example, in the popular magazine *Cosmopolitan* 'sex is used as the primary index of power and freedom for women' (Machin & Thornborrow, 2006: 173). In contrast, women's weeklies' narratives primarily revolve around domestic issues - family life, children, health, and relationships - and gain legitimacy through claims the articles are reader-submitted. The narratives' autobiographical nature generates an authenticity that is attributed to personal narratives and thus render women's weeklies relevant in political debate, positioning them as distinctively representative of the everyday contemporary woman's lived experience (Simmons, 2008: 89). The post-riot political climate and discourses provide an illuminating context in which to undertake an analysis of these domestic narratives.

Speaking at a Conservative party conference following the riots, the work and pensions secretary Iain Duncan Smith, said, 'the riots provided a moment of clarity for us all, a reminder that a strong economy requires a strong social settlement, with stable families ready to play a productive role in their communities'. For Duncan Smith 'stable families' equates to 'stable two-parent families taking responsibility for their children and creating a strong society'. To entice people towards this lifestyle Duncan Smith proposes that the government reverse the 'biases [that give] financial discouragement' to couples, such as reinstating tax breaks for marriage - and he is not alone. A Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) poll found that 70% of those polled were in favour of the tax breaks and a resounding 80% of people regarded 'family breakdown' as a serious problem facing society. Duncan Smith further postulates that 'many young gang members drift in [to gangs] from dysfunctional broken backgrounds in search of a place to belong, a perverse kind of family'. By correlating the breakdown of the family with high rates of

² I feel it pertinent to draw a distinction here between the United Kingdom, as nation, and England, as the site of the riots. This distinction is important as Scotland were notably not involved in the riots of 2011.

³ Due to space constraints, I focus on the seven most popular British women's weeklies - *Chat*, *Closer*, *Full House*, *Real People*, *Pick Me Up*, *Take a Break*, and *That's life* - in the period February - March 2012.

teenage pregnancy, citizen's financial problems, and the benefit system, he claims that the nation is witnessing 'poor parenting transmitting dysfunctionality from one generation to another'. Duncan Smith goes on to assert that the Conservative party should become social reformers to restore 'aspiration and hope to people that have been left behind for too long.' Given his conflation of family life, teenage pregnancy, benefits, and finances it is clear that the 'people that [sic] have been left behind for too long' are the working-class population (quoted in Mulholland, 2011).

Contradicting Duncan Smith's assertions are the penalties levied upon the rioters and their families. While advocating for the preservation of the family as paramount in the resurrection of the social economy, reports of rioters' parents and families receiving eviction notices and benefit docking only serves to further the unrest (Smith, 2011). By emphasizing the perceived failure of parents, and punishing them for this failure, the state threatens the working-class families it wants to transform into 'stable two-parent families'. Duncan Smith's insistence on a particular form of family illustrates that he is unfamiliar with the family's changing form and, furthermore, contemporary British working-class life in general. Through my analysis I argue that an acknowledgement of the changing form of the family is paramount for the nation to socially and politically progress.

The exact readership of women's weeklies is not published; however, a 2006 *Guardian* article claimed that the readership of the most popular magazine, *Take a Break*, consists of 'mainly working-class women living in old industrial towns and cities' (O'Hara, 2006). The text's insistence on the working-class' domestic narratives and intended audience makes the backdrop of the riot's aftermath poignant. In this sense, I seek to bind the women's weeklies' narratives to the wider national public sphere. In this analysis, I am not suggesting that this paper offers sociologically empirical evidence about family life. Nor am I suggesting that the readers of women's weeklies necessarily believe or engage affectively with the problematic discourses with which the magazines deal.⁴ Instead, I am interested in how these individual narratives of social history and autobiography become generalized, and thus permeate broader cultural and political discourses. My method consists of tracing the means by which these individual narratives become general and are thus circulated as evidence of something shared in the larger social and political climate. The aim of this paper is not to explain what happens to specific aesthetically mediated subjects as equivalent to what happens to people, but rather to unpack the affective scenarios of women's weeklies' narratives in order to shed light upon the claims they make about the situation of contemporary life.

I draw on contemporary cultural theory, feminist theory, and queer theory, specifically on Lauren Berlant's national sentimentality trilogy – *The Anatomy of National Fantasy*, *The Female Complaint*, and *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* – seeking to expand key concerns in these texts both transnationally and temporally, to contemporary Britain. Berlant's national and cultural theory in these texts is contextualised to the United States, however the cross-pollination of popular culture between the US and the UK has served to blur the lines of identity politics and national identity (Berlant, 1997:13). I use Berlant's work to expand its current conversation regarding issues of national life and to challenge existing scholarly work on

⁴ A thorough, sociological analysis of how women react to women's weeklies is unfortunately outside the scope of this paper however, Joke Hermes, in her interesting text *Reading Women's Magazines: An Analysis of Everyday Media Use* (1995), highlights the enjoyment the women readership gain from reading the magazines without necessarily believing or engaging with the problematic narratives/discourses.

women's magazines, illustrating how women's weeklies can be read as key cultural texts illustrating contemporary British life.

Several of Berlant's terms are key to my discussion here. Women's weeklies are culturally positioned in the scene of 'women's culture' and the 'intimate public sphere' that culture creates. While other scholars have written on the intimate public sphere, I use Berlant's definition in my discussion. Berlant (2008:8) argues that 'an intimate public operates when a market opens up to a bloc of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people's particular core interests and desires'. A public sphere is intimate when its productions' intended consumers are assumed to *already* share a specific worldview and emotional knowledge derived from a common historical experience (2008: viii). Since the consumer participants of an intimate public sphere share a commonly lived history, the sphere's products are thus expressive of that history, and as such shape the conventions of belonging. Berlant also argues that by 'expressing the sensational, embodied experience of living as a certain kind of being in the world', an intimate public sphere promises also to provide a better experience of social belonging, 'partly through participation in the relevant commodity culture, and partly because of its revelations about how people live' (2008: viii). Women's weeklies' insistence on 'real-life' narratives embeds the texts within the intimate public sphere of women's culture. The texts use slogans that emphasise the collective and 'true' nature of their narratives - 'It's your life: your laughs, your world, your kids, your friends' (*That's life*); 'THE Real Life Mag' (*Take a Break*); 'Everyone deserves a pick me up' (*Pick Me Up*). By binding the readers together - it's 'your world' yet 'everyone deserves a pick me up' - the weeklies express the commonality of the consumers of this intimate public sphere.

The language employed by women's weeklies is steeped in emotion, the domestic, the intimate, and the personal. In employing affective linguistic devices the weeklies are consistent with the intimate public sphere in which they belong, a belonging that is built on emotional knowledge and affective experience. Their emphasis on emotions and affect positions them as 'waste materials' with little importance to intellectual or political life in general. The weeklies are, to borrow another term from Berlant, 'juxtapolitical' - they exist in proximity to the political without crossing over into active political work (2008: x). Berlant calls women's culture juxtapolitical because it acts as 'a critical chorus that sees the expression of emotional response and conceptual recalibration as achievement enough' (2008: x). The women's weeklies' juxtapolitical position and their insistence on the normalizing power of affect is one of the central concerns of this paper.

In this paper I draw and elaborate on the key ideas discussed above to develop a reading of these cultural texts. I argue that through their use of optimism and affect the articles perpetuate the fantasy of the domestic good-life while concurrently, and subconsciously, providing evidence of the violence that heteronormative fantasy enacts. I claim that these articles illustrate the changing form of the family while simultaneously failing to acknowledge it. I illustrate how they rely on the shared, lived experience of their readers, and as such, use affect to normalize even the most sensational of narratives. I query their unquestioned insistence on securing futurity and the good-life through reproduction and family, and postulate how these texts may be re-appropriated to call for a social and political shift away from the family. I begin my discussion by elaborating on the paper's title, before proceeding to illustrate my claims through close textual analysis of my primary texts.

The Sensational

For the title of this paper, I draw inspiration from a body of Victorian literature known as the ‘sensation novel.’ The sensation novel has been described as a ‘structuring container for anxieties focused on the domestic’ (Gilbert, 1997: 88), and involves ‘mysteries, murders, and social improprieties usually within the respectable middle class or aristocratic home’ (Harrison & Fantina, 2006: xii). The themes of the sensation genre bear striking similarities to the real-life articles of the women’s weeklies. For example, in Wilkie Collins’s *The Dead Secret* (1857) and Charles Reade’s *A Terrible Temptation* (1871), ‘women conspire successfully to deceive their husbands about their children’s biological paternity’ (*ibid*: xv). Similar stories exist in women’s weeklies, for example, ‘Friend tricked my hubby into giving her a baby’ (2012). The narrative of Collins’s *Man and Wife* (1870), in which ‘one character attempts to kill his wife and another has murdered her abusive husband’ (*ibid*: xv), could be read in women’s weeklies in any given week – ‘Chopped to bits by butcher hubby’ (Gibb, 2012: 36 – 37); ‘Wicked wife hired a hitman!’ (Dippolito, 2012: 34 – 35).

Women are generally the featured protagonist in the sensation novel, while the sensation novel reader was thought of as ‘passive, feminine and receives inward movement...is female and colonial rather than male and imperial’ (Gilbert, 1997: 73 – 74). As the literary critic Winifred Hughes points out, ‘even the sensation novels written by men focus on the feminine point of view’ (1980: 30). The aligning of male authors with feminine points of view allows for their inclusion in a body of literature that is categorized as female, and this technique is seen in women’s weeklies. For example, Kevin’s article ‘From chunky to hunky’ (McGreevy, 2012: 40 – 41) is included only because it shares the common, female-orientated theme of weight-loss and diet fads.⁵ In comparison, the woman-authored article ‘I can’t be the fattest bridesmaid’ (Blackmore, 2012: 40 – 41) employs a similar use of emotion and affect, along with a similar theme.

The sensation novels presented a radical critique of the social and allowed authors to engage with wider political discussions. Harrison and Fantina have noted that the novels ‘questioned the sanctity of the family’ (2006: xii). Other scholars, such as Elaine Showalter, have argued they were a response to ‘women’s dissatisfaction with their limited gender roles’ (quoted in Harrison & Fantina, 2006: x). Rather than being the ‘bastard child of classic Victorian realism ... something to be read as a curiosity but certainly not to be taken too seriously’, the sensational novels utilized the genre to create poignant social discussions, often critically engaging in discussions surrounding the Matrimonial Causes Act (1857), the introduction of the first Women’s Suffrage Bill (1869), and the Married Woman’s Property Acts (1870, 1882) (Harrison & Fantina, 2006: x). Similar to the sensation novels, women’s weeklies are frequently thought of as occupying a low-status position; they are considered the ‘waste materials’ of trash consumerism, and as such not worthy of much consideration. I have shown above how these texts are far from ‘waste’ materials, rather these magazines are pivotal to the ‘construction, experience, and rhetoric’ of women’s culture and the national public sphere. The ‘very improvisatory ephemerality’ of the weeklies make them worth reading. Thus, sensation novels serve to illustrate the political potential of these ‘waste’ materials. These magazines present engaging stories that unintentionally convey huge paradoxes about the relationship between the national public sphere and contemporary life which offer the potential to create poignant social critiques, particularly of family and domestic life (Berlant, 1997: 12).

⁵ The texts are inconsistent over their use of capitalization for article headlines. For clarity, I have decided to follow the most common style of only capitalizing the first word of an article title and have applied this style consistently.

The Domestic

In the narratives of women's weeklies, women are shown to be assertive, powerful, and independent, not through any specific political view, the way they act upon society, or their binding of sex and power, as commonly repeated in other popular women's magazines (Machin & Thornborrow, 2006:173). Rather, they demonstrate their agency through their management and maintenance of normative, domestic matters. The 'illiterate' Kirsty, in 'My kids got me reading' (Swettenham, 2012: 25), describes how she learnt to read in order to read bedtime stories to her six children. Until her divorce in 2010 her husband had been responsible for reading stories and school letters, a duty her eldest children, aged 12, 11, and 9, took over when her husband left. Realizing that 'now the kids were getting older, they were picking up on [her illiteracy]' she decides to learn to read and write in order to maintain her image of family life. Kirsty details that she thought it was unnecessary for her to learn to read, and positions her children as the catalyst for her assertive action. Her passing comment that she would eventually like to train to 'be a teaching assistant' is lost amongst the normalizing familial discourse. This example clearly illustrates the way in which action that could be interpreted as an expression of independence and agency, is instead cleverly re-situated within the heart of the domestic. The article's omission of any desire to learn to read prior to the birth of her children, along with her 'embarrassment' that her children were noticing she could not read, emphasizes the important role domestic life played in Kirsty's decision. As *readers* we are asked to identify with the severity of her situation – a woman in her late twenties who cannot read bedtime stories to her children. Her inability to read bedtime stories is equated with failure as a mother, and the article implicitly asks us to imagine our own emotional response to such a failure. That Kirsty learns to read is no small feat, and her accomplishment is evident in the fact we are *reading* her story in a self-authored, published article. Nevertheless, Kirsty is only represented as powerful, assertive, and independent through the way in which she manages and maintains her family, conforming to and striving to meet society's expectations that the identity of mother conveys. She feels that her illiteracy is negatively impacting her family life, and thus in order to manage and maintain it in an effective way, learning to read bedtime stories to her children becomes her prerogative. Now, her 'favourite time of day,' predictably, is 'reading the kids a bedtime story.' With her family life managed and maintained appropriately, and her independence secure, she ends her article with a nod towards the fantasy of the good-life: 'just like the stories, I guess we did live happily ever after!'

The idea of living 'happily ever after' is given consistent emphasis in the articles. The fantasmatic language used and the scenes depicted bear striking similarities to children's tales. For example, in 'Help! My wedding's on fire' (McKnight, 2012: 6 – 7), the wedding of Jo and Stefan is to be housed in a venue with 'fairy tale castle turrets,' where a 'white owl [will] fly down the aisle to deliver the wedding rings'. After overcoming adversity, in this case a fire in a remote location of the wedding venue, Jo and Stefan are finally wed and set to continue their 'fairy tale'. In 'Reunited after 43 years' (Wilkie, 2012: 34–35), Kathleen says that reuniting with her daughter, whom she placed up for adoption in 1968, is 'the final piece to [her] fairy tale ending'. By employing discourse embedded with ideas of fairy tales and happy endings the articles create an impression that once one has attained the normative, domestic good-life the future is by virtue positive, so much so that it does not bear mentioning. We are left with the idea that a fairy tale ending positions a subject in the privileged and static site of the good-life that

heteronormativity and familial propaganda promises. The emphasis on happy endings in many of the articles creates a paradox when looked at alongside some of the other common narrative – a paradox consumers appear not to notice. In these narratives the subjects are positioned from the outset within some notion of the familial, domestic good-life. The drama of these articles is borne from a threat to this good-life, usually in the form of another aggressive individual, as in the case of ‘8 months pregnant: raped and murdered’ (Mayes, 2012: 6–9), or in the form of an illness, as in ‘Battling the enemy within’ (Moss, 2012:10–11). What is interesting, however, is that they *still* seek resolution in normative, family ideals and an idealized life. More specifically, they offer versions of the future that can only be envisioned through the family. While many of the stories reflect the failure of normative family life, or the failure of that ideal to live up to the hope it perpetuates, their representation of emotions and desires preserves its fantasy even while acknowledging its changing form.

A recent edition of *Pick Me Up* plastered on its cover the headline ‘I died twice, now I’m a Mum’ (McDowell, 2012: 44 – 45). Flicking to the article, a second headline reads: ‘Against all odds: In 2007 Jade died twice after a horrific car crash. Now she’s smiling again...’ One can infer from the two headlines the crux of the article – Jade, now aged 20, was in a life threatening car crash when she was 14 years old which left her with mobility issues. Now, six years later, she has become a mother. Written in the first person, as these narratives consistently are, the text is rife with sentimental familial discourse that appeals to the feminine identified readers of the intimate public sphere. Jade details: ‘One man died. Another had brain injuries. The first thing I did was think of their families. And then of myself. I was only 14 years old and there were so many things I wanted to do with my life’. The article goes on to detail Jade’s horrific recovery, a recovery only permissible through her extreme desire to create a family. Specifically, Jade details how she suffered a brain injury that affected her ‘ability to move her legs,’ and ‘devastated and in denial, [she] refused to start physio[therapy]’ against doctors’ advice. Ultimately, and in short, she changes her mind: ‘Mum had worried I’d be scared getting in a car again – but I couldn’t remember the crash, so it didn’t bother me. Something else did, though ... “What chance have I got of having a boyfriend now?” I sighed, looking at my chair. I finally faced up to the fact I needed to do the physio[therapy]’. Jade’s use of memory is significant as she laments the loss of the adult heterosexual couple, her future position in which she feels she can no longer occupy. As the article unfolds, Jade laments the loss of a fertility she never actually lost: ‘A few years older now, one thing still terrified me. Though doctors had never said so, I was convinced my injuries had left me infertile. And even if I could get pregnant, could I actually be a mum if I needed a wheelchair most of the time?’ As the headline has already told us, Jade’s use of a wheelchair had little impact on her ability to find a boyfriend, and she was not infertile. Jade goes on to have her baby with a man 10 years her senior, who already has three children of his own, but who ‘seemed really caring’. The article makes little reference to Jade’s partner after this description. The article ends as many of the articles regarding family do – with Jade detailing how ‘thanks to [her] little man, [her] dream has come true.’

Jade’s article presents an example of ‘reproductive futurism’. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman coins the term ‘reproductive futurism’ to describe the ever engulfing image of the Child as the marker of futurity, and as such the Child must be protected at all costs for the preservation of the national future at large (2004: 1 – 31). The image of the Child has become so central to discourse surrounding the future that imagining a future which is not in some sense tied to the image of the Child and to reproduction is no longer possible. As Edelman notes ‘[t]he Child...marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity: an

erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism' (2004: 21). In 'I died twice, now I'm a Mum,' Jade is a concrete example of the drive of reproductive futurism. By the end of the article, only her motivation to have a child and to secure a future through that child motivates her. Jade is unable to accept that her thrill-seeking could cost her a reproductive future and as such, a future at all. As Edelman notes '[i]f...there is *no baby* and, in consequence, *no future*, then the blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning and therefore as responsible for the undoing of social organization, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself' (2004: 13). In the article, Jade describes her own 'sterile, narcissistic enjoyments' when she provides the details of her car accident – she was one of *six passengers* in a convertible Mini Cooper that is designed to seat *three*, with a driver who had been using cocaine and driving at over 100mph. After the accident Jade is angry and, although she never accepts any responsibility for what happened to her in the article, I postulate that she sees her 'narcissistic enjoyments' as devoid of meaning and as such the thought that they could threaten her fantasy of the good-life propels her to secure a future through having a child. As the threat to her future becomes a reality, Jade defaults to the 'governing compulsion, the singular imperative' to 'embrace [her] own futurity in the privileged form of the Child' (Edelman, 2004: 15). She follows what Edelman describes as 'the governing fantasy of achieving Symbolic closure through the marriage of identity to futurity in order to realize the social subject' (2004: 21). The issue of identity within this narrative is problematic, and I argue, the conflict Jade faces is not purely about her accident but indicative of the issues faced when a Child attempts to transition into an adult identity. I refer to Jade as a child here, since intimacy with a parent with whom she still lives is prominent in her discourse – indeed, so much so that her mother is even given her own textual space to present her side of the ordeal.⁶ At the beginning of the narrative Jade is very much a child but her accident propels her into adult sexuality through her fear that she may never experience it. Jade considers her wheelchair an exclusionary factor in the creation of the heteronormative good-life, and thus her inability to walk threatens her reproductive future. She cannot envisage a life outside of the identity of Child or mother. Jade's is a desire not for a child specifically, but a 'desire simply and minimally to be in the game' (Berlant, 2011: 177). Unable to imagine a future in which she could gain significance through other means, Jade takes up a position within sexuality that at least enables her a feeling of vague normalcy that can be derived on the fly, in a do-it-yourself (DIY) fashion (Berlant, 2011: 177). By the end of the article, Jade appears to be occupying her original role of Child, as well as her new role of mother. Of all the 'many things [Jade] wanted to do with [her] life' what she wanted most was to become a mother, a desire that gives an identity, preserves a future, and allows for an affective transaction.

The naturalization of Jade's desire to secure an identity, future, and affective transaction through occupation of the role 'mother' is paralleled in other women's weeklies' narratives. In the sensational narratives of some articles, such as 'I prefer my fake babies to sex with my husband' (Retter, 2012: 32 – 33) and 'The fake baby club' (Thompson, 2012: 14 – 15), women

⁶ I draw here on Berlant's discussion of the films *La Promesse* (1966) and *Rosetta* (1999). In her analysis, Berlant notes: 'Even the category *children* is as volatile as the categories of *citizen* and *worker*. I call these protagonists 'children,' but actually that's an open question whose openness is an index of how hard it is to describe anyone in the flux of improvised survival habits that constitute existence in the contemporary economy. It is appropriate to call Rosetta and Igor children in that their stories are organized by intimacy with a parent with whom they live. At the same time, though, they are adolescents on the verge of seeking out sexual attachments and experience while also being adults economically' (Berlant, 2011: 173).

detail their relationships with particularly life-like dolls which the magazines refer to as ‘fake babies’. Articles of this sort are shockingly common in women’s weeklies and as such I have limited my analysis to the two named above. In ‘I prefer my fake babies to sex with my husband’, Alice Winstone describes how ‘when [she] was forced to choose between husband Chris and her 48 fake babies, she picked her dolls’. Photographs show Alice changing their nappies, rocking them to sleep, and having them in her marital bed. The dolls are ‘designed to replicate new-born babies, with painted faces, hair and soft bodies’. As readers, we learn how her ‘fake babies’ take precedence over everything in her life, including her real children, one of whom, now 14, ‘threatens to stab them’ and is too ‘embarrassed to bring his mates home’. And, as the title suggests, she chooses her fake babies over her husband, Chris, who can no longer bring himself to live in the family home. Alice justifies this move, saying that ‘unlike Chris, I know my babies will always be here for me’. Her insistence on the lifeless babies being ‘there for her’ and some form of reciprocal love is curious. However, more curious is the presence of a third-party author/journalist writing in the first-person, but whom makes no attempt to destabilize Alice’s ideas. It presents her ideas and behaviour as ‘normal’ by aligning them with her emotions. On the status of her marriage and potential loss of it she says ‘I love them – I only love him to a point. They come ahead of him on my list of priorities and I prefer them to having sex with Chris’. Alice also details how she is awaiting the arrival of her next baby, and due to advances in technology, ‘she’s [the new baby] got a mechanism that will allow her to breathe like a real baby!’ The article presents Alice’s collecting of fake babies as normative by explaining it as a symptom of the unfortunate fact she can no longer perform her ‘natural’ desire to reproduce. The article plays to the shared emotional knowledge of the intimate public sphere and relies heavily on the normalizing potential of affect. It presumes that readers understand the burning desire to bear children and thus asks us to naturalize her behaviour by looking at it through our own reproductive aspirations. The article’s emphasis on emotions serves to make Alice legible, and as such it manages to reaffirm the normative ideas of reproduction. Alice serves as a warning of what could become of a person who fails to reproduce naturally, while also exemplifying a potential consolation family for those unable to have children.

The use of affect to naturalize reproductive desire is employed again in ‘The fake baby club’, an article detailing a group of women who get together to enjoy ‘play-dates’ with their fake babies. The six women briefly detail their own stories, all of which bear similar characteristics. Andrea, after losing her daughter Vicky at age 20, purchases a doll that is the image of Vicky and calls it Baby Vic:

It was the absolute spit of Vicky as a new-born – same soft, dark hair and rosebud lips. *I have to have her* ... Now I can’t even begin to describe the joy Baby Vic has brought to my world. I live alone and she has her own nursery, with a wardrobe stuffed full of gorgeous clothes. She has a pram, two Moses baskets and a cot ... Holding her in my arms has filled the void left by Vicky’s death. She has saved my life.

Andrea’s story is similar to that of Emma, who came to the fake baby club following a miscarriage. She describes receiving ‘cuddle therapy’ from her fake baby, but also briefly notes the reality of the situation: ‘When I take her to friends’ houses, I put her in a real car seat. I used to take her to the shops but I got so much abuse.’ Another woman, Claire, describes how she was

unable to receive affection and physical contact from her ‘real,’ yet autistic, son, and the lack of affection brought her to the fake babies because ‘it’s more straightforward.’

The stories of the fake babies present some of the issues involved in the political and social marketing of families and children as tied up with a fantasy of the good-life. The women in these stories are bargaining with the norm in order to stay in proximity to it. Unable to attain the object that both preserves futurity and provides for them the fantasy of the good-life, they seek substitutes in the form of the Reborn dolls. For these women, their objects of desire are ‘scenes they orchestrate in order to experience absorption, a sense of being held in a scene, of having reciprocity, and being unanxious somewhere’ (Berlant, 2011: 166). The fake babies are an example of an ‘optimistic gesture’, they are an attempt to synchronise their lives with the affect they either want to continue feeling or desire to feel. The fake babies provide a continued affective experience for the woman that the intimate public sphere, and society at large, tells them is synonymous with the family form. In this sense, the optimistic gestures of these women demonstrate how much ‘aggression is involved in lining up life with fantasy’ (Berlant, 2011: 166). The families created using the fake babies could be another invocation of the ‘perverse’ families Duncan Smith describes when talking about children seeking reciprocity in gangs. However, in these cases the women seem compelled to repeat an attachment to an object (the Child) who has failed to secure the index of the projected happiness that it promised (Berlant, 2011: 166 – 7). More damningly, they are modifying the form of the Child so that it can ‘never leave’, as Alice states, will always reciprocate the love given to it, and most importantly, will never die. The only threats the fake families face are their real families, which, as Alice demonstrates, can be cast aside if the situation becomes too threatening. In this sense, the fake babies promise a static family in which the idea of a ‘happy ending’ can be truly guaranteed and sustained.

Through their use of fake babies the women are able to ‘play’ at normalcy. They allow them the sense of a normative, familial good-life without the risk. As Berlant (2011:171) notes ‘play allows a *sense* of normalcy...while risk tries to make some headway in the impasse: play is the performance of an interruption without the risk’. The fake babies possess the ‘capacity to deliver an affective, transpersonal sense of unconflictedness, belonging, and worth’, thus allowing the women to secure the feeling of normalcy (Berlant, 2011: 171). In this sense, the risk to which Berlant makes reference would be in *not* pursuing this feeling, i.e. in ignoring the drive to reproduce and thus not securing an affective transaction that revolves around the Child. The women are unable to acknowledge that ‘one does not *necessarily* require families or nations to secure this feeling’ and this lack of foresight is attributed to the ever encompassing familial narratives of both the intimate public sphere and the nation at large, as we see in the family-driven politics quoted earlier from Duncan Smith. Instead, the women, by being incorporated in these specific cultural texts that normalize their behaviour through affect, are mimetically reproducing the intensity of the need to *feel* normal. What the women, the texts themselves, and Duncan Smith fail to note is ‘economic conditions of nonreciprocity’ create this need to feel normal, which is ‘reproduced in households that try to maintain the affective forms of middle-class exchange while having an entirely different context of anxiety and economy to manage’ (Berlant, 2011: 180). As the authors of these texts are perceived to be working-class, and with all the stereotyped economic conditions that come with such a position, the texts acknowledge the changing and differing form of the working-class family through the families they choose to represent. However, they ask their readers to identify with the authors of the articles through the normalizing power of affect and as such identify with their drive for the affective forms of the

middle-class family that societal and economic conditions are unlikely to ever allow them to achieve.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the representation of family life and reproduction in a selection of contemporary cultural texts known as women's weeklies. Through my readings of these texts I have illuminated the central issues of their discourses—their unquestioned insistence on securing a future through reproduction and family life; their unwillingness to acknowledge the violence of reproductive futurism; their failure to fully emphasize the changing form of family; and their use of affect to normalize potentially problematic scenarios. Their representation of the desire for the familial good-life are consistent with the desires of Iain Duncan Smith, who proposes that in traditional family forms we will find solutions to the harsh social and political climate of contemporary Britain. In contrast to Duncan Smith, the narratives of the women's weeklies are unconcerned with larger social life, but rather suggest that solutions to personal conflict can be found through attaining the fantasy heteronormative, familial good-life. However, while the articles share a desire for family life that is consistent with Duncan Smith's they also illuminate the violence these desires can inflict on subjects. As I have demonstrated, the authors illustrate an often extreme desire to gain even a proximate relationship to the good-life and such extremity is normalized through the use of affect. By situating themselves within the intimate public sphere of women's culture that presumes its consumers share an emphasis on affective experience, the articles are able to play on the power of emotions to naturalize the desire to reproduce and create a family.⁷ Although the aspirations of Duncan Smith and women's weeklies are different, their shared focus on the family and reproduction creates one way in which women's weeklies could realize their political potential. By changing the narratives of their stories slightly the articles could transition from their current juxtapolitical position to a more politically orientated one by changing the motivating factor for reproducing. The texts could represent the desire to reproduce not for personal satisfaction, as a means for preserving a personal future, or as a way of securing some notion of a fairy tale, but rather as a way to create a 'stable [family] ready to play a productive role in [the community].' In doing this, they would be aligning with Duncan Smith's assertion that 'stable two-parent families' can create a 'strong society' and a 'strong economy.' However, aligning them politically in this way does not, I argue, allow them to reach their full political potential.

The texts fail to acknowledge the paradox that the heteronormative, two-parent, stable, familial good-life to which they and Duncan Smith aspire is seldom represented within the pages of women's weeklies. Nor do they ever draw sufficient attention to the fact that the most extreme and violent of narratives are borne out of heteronormative desire.⁸ Central to the narratives is the

⁷ I use 'create' here, rather than the traditional 'start a family,' as in some of the articles (fake babies) the family is literally created from the imaginary and designed to fit a certain set of criteria (hair colour, skin colour, size, weight, facial features, etc.).

⁸ Space constraints do not allow an in-depth discussion of these narratives. However, I thought it pertinent to add a brief example: the article '8 months pregnant: raped and murdered' (Mayes, 2012: 6 – 9) describes the rape and murder of Nikitta Grender, aged 18. Engaged to Ryan Mayes, and 8 months pregnant, Nikitta is on the cusp of achieving her own heteronormative, familial good-life, before she was raped, murdered, and set alight by her fiancé's jealous best-friend. Carl Whant's overwhelming heterosexual desire for Nikitta leaves him unable to cope with Nikitta and Ryan's familial future together, and as such the only resolution he can find to his conflict is to destroy their reproductive future together.

desire for the fantasy of the good-life, while the changing form of the family is relegated to the subtext or passing comments. For example, noting that Jade's partner already has children with other women. The only instances that non-stable, non-two-parent families are acknowledged for their potential are in articles of extreme violence, when a broken or dysfunctional family is used as justification for someone's violent behaviour.⁹ By making the changing form of the family central to their narratives, not the desire to have a family, women's weeklies could emphasize the inadequacies of the traditional family form. They could shift from their position of juxtapolitical into the political sphere by calling for a redefinition of 'family.'

In the social and political climate that has emerged since the riots, however, even a complete redefinition of family will still fall short. Both Duncan Smith and the articles fail to note the extreme paradox of contemporary family life in Britain. The state attempts to preserve society through investment in the family, providing incentives in the form of state benefits and credits for families with low incomes. However, with few jobs available and nationwide youth unemployment hitting a high of 22% (Weber, 2012), many people are allegedly turning to child rearing in order to secure further financial resources. With financial gains being a motivating factor for reproduction, these family units will doubtfully become the 'stable two-parent family' for which Duncan Smith calls. Furthermore, the totalizing and far reaching propaganda focussing on the natural desire to reproduce, both in the women's weeklies and in culture at large, creates an altogether appealing logic – reproduction is natural, it offers financial gains, and contributes to society and the economy at large. However, the marketing of the fantasy good-life is out of sync with the reality that is represented in the pages of the texts. In fact, Duncan Smith implicitly refers to the families and parents represented in women's weeklies as 'dysfunctional' and infers that these families create the 'young gang members' who seek 'perverse kind[s] of family' in their peers. However, without the naturalizing reproductive and familial propaganda, the financial incentives, and with better social prospects, many of the authors may choose not to seek fulfilment in the family. In this sense, the articles contain their true political potential. Rather than positioning the desire for family life as their central concern the articles could reorganize their material to emphasize the *failure* of family life to live up to all that it promises. Emphasizing the family's failure to provide personal, financial, or social security, or to positively influence the political and social climate, these texts could shift the propagated focus away from the family as the site of solution and optimism, and instead assert that solutions to national problems need to be found outside of the family.

⁹ For example, 'Dear diary, I just killed someone' details Alyssa's murdering of her 9 year old neighbour, Elizabeth Olten. The article states 'They'd both had a difficult past. Their father was in jail, their mother had a history of personal and legal problems' (Staveley, 2012: 58 – 59).

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