ORDINARY LIVES IN CONTEMPORARY BRITAIN: A PRELIMINARY REPORT OF FINDINGS

Will Atkinson

University of Bristol

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Harriet Bradley

University of Bristol

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School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies

University of Bristol

Working Paper No. 08-13

Will Atkinson will be Lecturer in Social Research in SPAIS, University of Bristol, from September, and is currently a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow in the School. He is the author of *Class, Individualization and Late Modernity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) and co-editor or *Class Inequality in Austerity Britain* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). He can be contacted at: w.atkinson@bristol.ac.uk

Harriet Bradley is Professor Emerita at Bristol University and Professor of Women's Employment at UWE. She has written and researched on women's work in the labour market and the household, women and reproduction, gender and ethnicity in trade unions, young people's life histories and employment and intersections of class, ethnicity and gender. Her books include *Fractured Identities* (Polity, 1996)*, Gender* (Polity, 2012) and, with Geraldine Healy, *Ethnicity and Gender at Work* (Palgrave, 2008).

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Abstract

This report offers an accessible, non-technical overview of the main findings so far of the Ordinary Lives project, an ESRC-funded programme of research undertaken in SPAIS between July 2010 and July 2012 by Harriet Bradley, Will Atkinson and Adam Sales. It is not intended as a summary of the project findings as a whole, as these are still emerging, nor does it explore the theoretical interpretations and advances made by the project, as these are being directed toward their appropriate academic consumers. Instead we hope to provide an easy-to-digest synopsis of results as so far interpreted which, due to the scale of the data and the nature of academic publishing, will take some time to find full expression and most likely appear in a form rather less accessible to non-academics. After outlining the background and method of the project, we chart the findings regarding family life, differences in food consumption, the effects of the recession, the perception of the future, schools and education and travel and community, drawing specific attention to the effects of social class.

Introduction

The Ordinary Lives project was launched in summer 2010. Its aim was to try to get an insight into everyday life in 21st Century Britain and how it differs depending on social background. Plenty of statistics show the long-term trends through the last fifty years or so – that people are more mobile around the country than before, that more people are going to university, that more people are using new technologies and social networking to stay in touch and so on – but there has been less exploration of exactly how all this change is experienced by different people in their normal day-to-day lives or what they think about them. Are families becoming more democratic yet prone to breakdown? Are people's tastes and habits changing? Are educational opportunities open to all? If so, how and why? All this the team behind the Ordinary Lives project were keen to find out.

The project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the premier funding body for social science research in the UK, and ran for two years, ending officially in July 2012. The research team consisted of Professor Harriet Bradley, who headed the project, plus Dr. Will Atkinson and Mr Adam Sales, all of who were (and still are) based in the School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies at the University of Bristol. Bristol as a city was deemed a good yardstick for British society. The city has its own unique history and geography, certainly, but at the same time it is thoroughly typical of many provincial cities in Britain. The move from manufacturing to finance and service provision as the core industry of the city, the flows of migration in and out of the area and the residential divisions and concentrations make its labour market, its sources of tension and celebration and, ultimately, its inhabitants like those of many other cities.

In order to try to get a handle on the detail of everyday life, the team devised a week-long programme of activity for participating families consisting of diary-filling, interviews and, most importantly, having one member of the research team spend time with them. Overall, 29 families took part in the full programme of activities, though three more were willing to give interviews only. The amount of material generated by the research was overwhelming. To get as much detail as possible about everyday life, researchers tried to note down everything that happened while they were with each family and interviews were designed to be exhaustive, but the generosity of participants in giving their time and their willingness to share the details of their lives were very pleasant surprises. This, along with the fact that all the research team

moved onto other projects after July 2012, means that analysis of the material and writing up of findings for the social scientific community is still ongoing, and will continue for the next couple of years. Presented here, therefore, is an overview of the initial key findings to have emerged. The details, little differences and full range of supporting stories and quotations are for the future.

All recorded conversations, diaries and notes were transcribed. Any details that may identify participants − names, employers, street names, school names and so on − were removed or changed before the material was archived online at the UK Data Archive, as is a requirement of any research funded by the ESRC. This was agreed upon by participants when signing the consent forms. The decision was made not to archive any of the photographs taken for the research, however, since the risk of disclosure of identity was too great.

Family Life

Family life is often said to be very different from the not-too-distant past. Compared to previous generations, many say, it is much more equal, democratic and loving, with everyone in the family involved in decisions, both men and women balancing paid work and domestic responsibilities and everyone expressing love and affection more openly. For example, whereas looking after children was once considered 'women's work', it is often argued that fathers are now much more involved. At the same time, others believe these changes mean the family is more fragile and ego-centred than before: tensions and unhappiness get aired more readily and people are more willing to go their own ways in a search for what is 'best for them' rather than 'best for us'. Indeed, this has prompted political arguments about 'broken Britain' and 'problem families'. Since family life is central to ordinary life in contemporary Britain, the research provided a good opportunity to look at these issues. Although we acknowledge that families with significant strains were unlikely to volunteer for the research, insights nevertheless were gathered on precisely how family 'works' and whether its 'glue' is any weaker than in the past even for strong families.

The research confirmed that family continues to be a strong source of identity and activity for people. Each family has its own special 'culture' which unites and binds its members, and at the same time closes it off to others, based on deep mutual knowledge, shared routines and

joint interests (such as football, photography, religion or nature). As Mrs Geoffrey, a housewife, put it:[1]

> I mean, you know, I've got some absolutely fantastic friends but I think family are.....you know. Well, you know, you've shared your life together haven't you so they know you inside out, back to front, you know?

This is witnessed in the little sayings of everyday life: 'you like that, don't you?', 'I know what you're going to say', 'you always do that', 'that's not like you', 'you know me', 'he's not very academic', 'he's more of a "doing" child' and so on. Some family members even have a tendency to finish each other's sentences, so well do they know the other person! This also serves as the basis for teasing and banter within the family. Importantly, this knowledge of others often refers to their place in the family as a whole compared to others – 'she's like me', 'he takes after his dad', 'I can see myself in him' and such like. Furthermore, this knowledge adds up to a sense of what 'we' do or what 'we're' like altogether, as a *unit* rather than a collection of individuals: 'we love walking', 'we're not materialistic', 'we're not very well organised' and so on were the kinds of phrases frequently heard.

Family-specific language – nicknames, phrases or words associated with people and places with significance – also serve to bond family members, as do family stories, photos, mottoes, legends and the objects with which they are associated. Some families talked of episodes going down in the 'family legend books' or becoming 'family folklore', while Mrs Richards kept a statue of a miner on the mantelpiece to remind the family of their mining heritage.

This sense of 'togetherness' and belonging is something that is actively worked at by family members, especially mothers. Many families who might otherwise spend time apart individually in the week made sure to have specific 'family times' when everyone spent time together doing something pleasant. It might be a 'family night' in the week, where all play games or watch a film together, or it might be going for a walk together on the weekend. Some events were more organised and made explicit than others, and some families actively enforced them while others did things together on a more ad hoc basis. The evening meal is a particular case of this 'family time', though there have been claims that eating together is on

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[1] To protect the identities of our respondents we have, following standard practice, given them false names.

the decline as more people 'do their own thing'. Certainly there were some instances of this in families who had hectic schedules due to extra-curricular activities for their children, with different household members eating at different times to fit everything in. Shift work or long commutes from the workplace could also mean one adult – generally the father of the house – eating later than everyone else. For the most part, however, there remains a focus on the family eating together, and while it might be mainly for practical purposes it unintentionally serves to bring members together by prompting the sharing of stories and conversations. Active efforts to maintain contact with the wider family who did not live nearby using new technology – email, mobile phones, Skype and so on – were also common.

None of this means that struggle or tension were totally absent. In fact, many of the elements which serve to bring families together can also be the source of problems. Children not wanting to go to church, complaining about not having enough pictures of them up (or about the pictures of them that are up), fighting over which chair is 'theirs' and so on, all happen, but they are still grounded in the shared knowledge and sense of belonging which brings them together.

So is the family more open, affectionate and democratic than in the past? Certainly many fathers believed that they were much more involved and openly loving with their children than their own parents had been with them. Many spoke of an active choice to do things differently from the previous generation, who were described as too strict or absent from the home a lot. Some parents also stressed the importance of having time together as a couple in order to talk things through or 'touch base' with one another.

One interesting area in which there have been both changes and continuities is the household division of labour. While women increasingly take on paid work, it is still expected that they will do the majority of childcare and housework. In the families we saw, they often took major responsibility for household managers, controlling the complex arrangements needed to keep things going and taking charge of the family diary. For their part, men will generally do specific chores which are deemed masculine, such as mowing the lawn or doing DIY. This division is still seen as unproblematic, whether it be a free choice based on practical reasons (such as the husband/male partner earning more), or as a 'natural' division of labour. The exceptions, however, are in those families where both men and women are highly educated. Sometimes these women have challenged the stereotypical roles and asked the men to do

more, or the men themselves have seen it as fairer to do more. In many such cases, however, the household jobs done by the man, such as cooking, are often done because they enjoy them anyway.

Differences in food consumption

The diets of the participants generally reflect shifts in national consumption patterns. Meals originating from other countries which once would have been rare and exclusive or only eaten out, such as spaghetti bolognese, pizza, curry or Thai cuisine, have now become so widely commercially available, affordable and accessible in pre-prepared forms that they were commonplace amongst the participants' diets. Spaghetti bolognese proved especially popular, with seven of the participating families preparing it once during the course of the research week as an evening meal – no other meal appeared so frequently. This is not to say that traditional British dishes (roast dinners, hotpot etc.) had disappeared, however, but just that they increasingly mingle amongst meals originating in diverse cultures in the week's menus.

Despite general changes, however, there remain considerable differences in food consumed, mostly revolving around social class. This is well established as a statistical trend in medical research, but the methodology of the Ordinary Lives project allowed a viewpoint on precisely how and why these differences appear in everyday life. Fundamentally, differences in routinely available financial resources had a massive impact on what people could and could not afford to buy and, therefore, what they chose to buy. Those who are more affluent can afford to be a little more spontaneous, buying items on impulse when they or their children see them – as when one participant bought a bottle of champagne for him and his wife when he went to the shop for milk! Amongst those with less money, however, there is a clear sense of constraint: food shopping has to be a very ordered affair, with detailed, budgeted lists from which there must be no deviation, in spite of their children's pleas for treats. In some cases such families shopped around multiple supermarkets to get the best price possible, bought in bulk, snapped up special offers and shared good deals with other family members.

Different resources and life circumstances also shape what people *want* to buy and eat. Amongst those struggling most with the pressures of lack of money, shortage of time and high output of energy in physically demanding jobs or childcare there is a tendency to choose

food that is cheap yet substantial. Fatty 'value' cuts of meat, potatoes, 'steaming mountains of pasta', frozen food, ready-meals and chips are thus favoured because they are easy to prepare and inexpensive to buy given very real pressures to fill up hungry children.

> It is all stuff that's quick food really. I mean it might be chops, veg and potatoes or it might be Spaghetti Bolognese, to me that's quick food. It's stuff which you can just pull something out of the freezer and defrost, quickly cook it and it's done. It's not cooking, really. I mean if you properly cook, innit Mr, it's not proper cooking what I do, it's just whatever's quickest and easy after a day at work […] You 'av about three-quarters of an hour, and the kids are starving when you come in. You gotta get it cooked and on the table in 'alf an hour really so even if it takes 'alf an hour to cook. (Ms Jeffers, secretary/cleaner)

> If there are microwave meals gone down quite cheap I'll grab them, cos sometimes I've got a busy night [of childcare and/or work] and you can get a half decent microwave meal, just makes it easier to sort that out for the kids. (Mrs Green, part-time saleswoman)

They do say they try to eat 'healthily', particularly those with a little more money (who felt they 'must try harder', as one woman put it), and they are all too aware of government efforts to promote healthy eating and five portions of fruit or vegetables a day, especially for children. Yet lack of money still acts as a constant barrier to achieving the officially approved diet. The Duncans describe fruit as a 'luxury' and often the only way it can be afforded is if they buy marked-down products close to their use-by date. Mrs Green also says:

> I know my kids pretty much always get their five-a-day, which I try, the thing is my mum always done it with me, so I try my hardest to do it with them. Obviously, sometimes it's quite expensive, that's why like last night as you'd seen I sort of said to uhh we'd go down to the reduced bit in the fruit and veg aisles to see what we can get.

Moreover, those with few resources appear to work with a slightly different interpretation as to what a 'healthy diet' consists of compared to the official image. For them it means having 'square meals', i.e. cooked meals that are wholesome and filling, because the alternative –

which is considered unhealthy, and which did occur in some of the households in the research – is going hungry. Witness the Cavendish/Burton family talking about Ms Burton (a hospital auxiliary) preparing food for her daughter before she leaves for her evening shift as a domestic at the local hospital:

> Ms Burton: Just to make sure [their daughter] had some proper food instead of like noodles or something. You might have just like made a noodles every night so (laughs). I wanted to make sure that she had like, vegetables and things. Proper food.
>
> Q: And what's 'proper food', what types of things do you do?
>
> Ms Burton: It's like, you know, like meat, vegetables, potato. As opposed to sort of, like, you know. Just make sure she has some… [she seems unconfident on what to say]
>
> Mr Cavendish: Square meals.
>
> Ms Burton: Yeah just to make sure she has some healthy food. Make sure she's eating proper food.
>
> Mr Cavendish: Nutritional value.
>
> Ms Burton: Yeah, because [daughter] doesn't eat very well during the day.

Similarly, Mr Duncan, a former lorry driver now on disability benefits, states:

> There's hardly anything in them [cupboards], we're literally surviving day to day, and that is about the crook of it all, it really is difficult at the moment. We're having to go without aren't we [to his wife], so that the kids can have food and that?

The more affluent however, could afford to have the opposite relationship to food: 'healthiness' is *going without* – that is, cutting back, particularly on sugar, fat and salt. Chopping the fat off bacon before grilling it, poaching rather than roasting chicken to reduce the fat content and consciously limiting oneself to one chocolate bar a week were all habits observed in wealthier families. The only items to appear in abundance were precisely those the less affluent struggled to buy: fruit and vegetables. Some families even ordered large vegetable boxes to be delivered to their homes and then planned meals around them, making sure to serve a variety with each meal.

More generally, the more affluent often stated that they wanted meals and their ingredients to be 'fresh', 'really tasty', 'exciting' and, most often, 'good quality', demonstrating that food for them is (because it can be) more than just a practical job of filling up. 'Quality' tended to be measured primarily by monetary value:

> You should always try and go for the best you can sort of afford sort of thing, for flavour and everything like that. Why settle for something that's average when you can go and get something that's really nice basically, I suppose. For example, eggs with an incredibly orange yolk on them, and they're a lot tastier so again pay a bit more for something that's really nice. (Mr Tanner)

> I'd rather get decent mince from the Duchy brand there, which is nice mince. So I don't mind paying over the odds for something like that, and it will cost 60p more than cheap mince. Well maybe a pound more. (Mrs Williams)

There is, furthermore, a heavy emphasis on consistently buying free range eggs or chicken, Fair Trade items, organic produce and locally-sourced goods which reduce carbon emissions and support local independent traders. For those who have the luxury and resources to think about abstract issues of social justice and ecology, buying and eating food is not just a practical act but an ethical one too.

Finally, mention should be made of those with middling levels of resources. Their orientation was one of trying to maximise quality, health or ethics *and* economy at the same time. This might involve splitting the weekly shop between a mainstream supermarket (Asda, Tesco, Sainsbury's) and a more value-based retailer, such as Aldi or Lidl, to make sure that while 'basic stuff' or 'bits and pieces' like cleaning products or dried pasta are kept cheap other items, such as wine, meat or fruit and vegetables, are more expensive (indicating 'quality'). Others focus on keeping food fresh and locally produced but 'basic' and inexpensive – like the Michaels family, inspired by their youthful experience of penury when travelling France in a campervan.

The effect of the recession

The research took place at a very interesting time. The years before had seen economic crisis, recession and a new government seeking to implement a raft of austerity measures – cuts to public services, rises in VAT and so on – had recently been elected. The project was therefore well placed to explore some of the effects of the crisis and austerity on everyday life and its differing impact depending on resources possessed.

We found that almost all the families had felt some effect of the hard economic times. Even those on good incomes were aware of rocketing food and fuel prices and therefore that 'life has definitely become more expensive' (Mrs Carlisle, part-time secretary). In some such households where mortgage repayments are particularly high compared to household income, furthermore, there was worry and a keen eye kept on interest rates:

> I tend to watch that first Thursday of every month very carefully to see what's going to happen when they set the interest rates. I couldn't believe they kept it at 0.5% this week actually, I really thought it would go up this time. (Mrs Samuels, publishing manager)

As a result, many of these families reported the reluctant postponement or abandonment of specific projects, such as holidays or house extensions, or had started using the car a little less, eating out less frequently, or altering shopping practices to include cheaper products at their usual supermarket or even the occasional trip to so-called 'value' stores. Still, these changes within higher-wealth families were only moderate and there was no doubting they 'still eat well', as more than one of them admitted, compared to others. Some even acknowledged that the economic situation hadn't impacted 'in any major way', that they 'don't feel it', 'haven't changed [their] lifestyle much' and are even 'at peace' with the recession.

Others are less relaxed. Those with fewer resources have felt the price hikes and benefit cuts more keenly since they are losing a greater proportion of their income. Different strategies were employed to try to deal with this, including selling household items deemed less than necessary on eBay or taking on extra hours at work. The latter could be a real source of anxiety and unhappiness as it reduced the amount of time spent with family.

Even with these extra measures, lower-wealth families still had to go without luxuries previously enjoyed – holidays, family outings or toys for the children – or economise with food to a greater degree than previously, stretching leftovers over multiple days and searching high and low for bargains. Words like 'anxious', 'stressed', 'worried', 'unhappy' or 'feel a failure' were used to describe the situation, which in some cases is always in the back of the mind:

> Mr Duncan: So yeah, we do try to look at things that we can do to save money, and where we can save we'll save, we're always thinking of different ways of how to save money.
>
> Q: is it something that's in your mind all the time?
>
> Mrs Duncan: oh god yeah
>
> Mr Duncan: oh never goes out, never goes out. We never row over it do we? But we're always trying to negotiate what we're gonna do. Just this morning, that was one letter we had this morning [he picks a letter up off the floor], we've had a letter come through this morning from a store card which my wife pays for, [it's] another reminder.

> The pressure of everyday life knocks your happiness down a little bit I think. Worrying about the fact that I've got no petrol in the car and where am I going to get the money for that.
>
> (Ms Jeffers)

> Yeah we're always trying to think 'how can we save?' […] Get very unhappy every time I've shopped. The prices have gone up and up. We spend £30 extra on food a week, we've had to go without other things to pay for food […] You're always aware of turning the heating up. I walk around in a scarf and jumper. The winters are getting so cold these days as well. It does worry you.
>
> (Ms Kent, housewife)

What does the future hold?

As well as looking at how the recession and political austerity have impacted upon patterns of consumption and wellbeing, the research examined people's perceptions of the future in light of rising unemployment. It sought to explore the degree to which people were confident of a secure working future and, on that basis, could make plans or hold aspirations for the time to come. The context was the evident inequality at the national level in rates of job loss through the recession by occupation and educational qualification.[2] Amongst higher level professions, unemployment rose from 1.4% for both men and women in 2007 to just 2.2% and 2.7% respectively in 2011, whereas unemployment amongst routine workers rose from around 6% to 11.4% for men and 8.9% for women in the same period. Intermediate categories rose from around 3% to 5% for both sexes. Equally, while the unemployment rate amongst those possessing a degree increased from 2.5% to just over 4% between 2007 and 2011, amongst those with no educational qualifications the rate jumped from 11.1% to 16.3% for men and from 7.9% to 11.8% for women.

These inequalities in chances of job loss manifested amongst the research participants in the emergence of three distinct orientations to the future corresponding to the levels of resources they held. First, there were the 'future-proofed', as one participant put it: those who felt that, because of their valued skills, education levels, social contacts and financial security they were unlikely to be made unemployed. Even if they did lose their jobs, furthermore, they were confident that they would find a new one easily enough. That might involve a geographical move, but that was not seen as a problem.

> I've got too much knowledge to be let go, I bring a lot to the table […] I don't envisage that [unemployment] happening. (Mr Allen, telecommunications engineer)

> I feel confident that if I was made redundant then, you know, I'd get a job. I might not get a job in Bristol doing what I'm doing but I would have to move elsewhere but I would get a job, it'd be in a similar sort of thing. (Mr Williams, area manager)

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[2] The following figures are drawn from the government's Labour Force Surveys.

I'm also fairly, what do you call it, positive that I can work through it and I will always have work. It may not be so easy in terms of being able to walk to work, I might be having to work for an organisation in Bath or Gloucester or wherever and have to travel and commute distances, but if that's the case that's the case. But I'm sure I'll be able to, with my skill set, be able to find work. (Mr Tanner, housing association manager)

Indeed, some participants were so secure in their jobs and financial situation that they either assumed the future would be much the same as the past – saying they 'can't see it changing massively' (Ms Evans, hospital consultant), that they will 'stay what I'm doing' (Mrs Quinn, sixth-form teacher), or will be 'carrying on what I'm doing' (Mr Illsey, tax lawyer). With this platform of security, they contemplated deliberate career changes as a means of achieving greater happiness. Examples included undertaking religious work, taking up magistracy, practicing reflexology and pursuing doctoral study.

The second orientation to the future, found amongst those with middling levels of resources (such as technical skills or lengthy professional experience but not specialist knowledge), was a reasonable, but not firm, confidence in the future. In other words, they felt less secure that they would stay in work through the recession or find new jobs than the previous group, but were confident enough of the future that they did not have to worry about it too much.

Nobody else really understands what it is you do so you know it's served me well. And there's people in work being made redundant again left right and centre, but it seems to be *fairly* secure you know […] You know it keeps me employed. It's like you've always got to keep yourself employable all the time. You've always got to have something to offer employers someone else can't. I mean I can still fall back to my other sort of work. I can do contract CAD work. I can do electrical building services design work. All sorts of things like that. (Mr Daniels, electrical engineer)

[I'm] *reasonably* confident in my kind of work, I've got years of experience in working in the field, but I have no qualifications, I've got no professional qualifications at all in the field really, just sort of lots of years of experience in working in homelessness and related field. (Mr Michaels, support worker)

On this basis they could form aspirations for the future which, while not quite as definite as the plans of the future-proofed, were invested with a degree of confidence. Setting up a business of their own using their skills and available financial resources was a particularly common ambition.

The final orientation was found amongst those on easily-terminated job contracts and possessing least in the way of specialised skills and education, social networks and financial resources such as savings – in other words, those most likely to be made unemployed. For them the future is uncertain, insecure and precarious. The future is something over which they feel they have no control, and they spoke not of firm plans or reasonably confident aspirations, but of *hope*. Mr Green (plasterer's mate), for instance, states that 'if work goes quiet again then they'll have to make cuts again so..... […] I'm hoping that I'll stay down [employer] as long as I can really'. This hope is coupled with the wish for further training, but, he continues, 'obviously it is down to the company to choose that route for me, it's not something I can choose'. Similarly, Mr Collins (pub worker) declares his 'ambition' to own and run his own pub one day, but then it becomes apparent that this desire rests heavily on hope:

> It's very worrying hearing and reading like magazines, we get a few magazines at the pub, about pubs closing down everywhere, and breweries for instance closing down, thousands of pubs. It is worrying but touch-wood and luckily I haven't been involved in one of those pubs closing down, and hopefully I won't […] looking into the future at what I want to do, it's very worrying as something that you want to do like in the future, want to have my own pub, and if things are happening now hopefully it gets better.

The hope was often tempered, however, by a distinct cynicism bred by lack of control and negative experience. This can manifest in the feeling, detrimental to self-worth, that one is nothing but a 'throw-away object' or 'just a number at the end of the day'. Moreover, with so little confidence in the security of the longer-term future, these participants had no choice but to keep their plans for the future relatively short term, reflected in common sayings about 'living for the day' and 'for the now' but also more explicitly too:

To be honest at the moment I can only see what I'm doing now. I know like long term then obviously things may have to change because obviously you won't be getting jobs done quite as quickly as I would have been doing five years ago. I don't tend to look too far into the future but, you know, I've never really done that anyway, you know, it's always been quite short term. When me and Mrs Lyon got together obviously we always wanted to have children, but it was always like....still short term as in like "well let's get the house" you know, and then "let's get the house up together and then have children". So I don't ever plan too far in advance, and I think that's probably because you don't know what's going to happen in the future, you know. And I think if you don't plan too much you can kind of roll with the punches a bit more. Whereas if you've got a set aim, it can go completely upside down really. (Mr Lyons, painter/decorator)

Schools and education

In one sense, the future for a family hangs very much on their children, on how they are doing in school and therefore what they are likely to go on to do for a living. Differences in this regard were of particular interest, as evidence has consistently shown differences by social class in school outcomes and, despite increasing university places and efforts to widen access, unequal participation rates in higher education persist.

All families in the research wanted their children to do well at school and tried to give encouragement and support to ensure this. There were, however, very clear differences in how this was done in practice, with very different consequences for schooling. The first major difference lay in the amount and type of extra-curricular activities that children did. Those with many resources were keen to encourage their kids to do many such activities. They could afford to, even if sometimes it meant cutting back on other things to prioritise the children, and indeed the concern amongst many of these parents was that their children might be doing 'too much'! Furthermore, while many of the activities centred on sports or social activities – football, swimming, martial arts, Cubs, Scouts and so on – others were designed specifically to improve performance at school or provide extra, highly valued, skills. These included extra tuition in languages and maths or private music lessons.

Clearly, families with less money could afford to do fewer activities, and often relied on inexpensive classes offered at community centres or schools. These tended to focus on the sports or social side only and occurred in large groups, meaning that while the children would build confidence and specific bodily skills they were less likely to have a direct impact upon school performance.

A second source of difference was in the kind of advice and help that parents could give to their children in relation to school. Parents who had degrees themselves were able to give knowledgeable advice about what A level options or university courses to do, how university works, which universities are good and so on. They were keen not to push their children in particular directions, but merely being able to provide such advice freely meant that their children were able to see university as a familiar, available and navigable option that they could explore themselves. Moreover, parents who had higher education levels were much more able to help their children with homework or school projects, in some cases knowing how to get their children to work through the answers, in others taking charge and leading their children along. Interestingly, it was observed that those families with younger children were more hands-on, whilst those with older children were less so. It appeared that help in early years had built enough confidence and ability with schoolwork that older children could just 'get on with it themselves' and only ask for the occasional piece of advice.

In families where the parents had few qualifications the situation was very different. They were very keen to help and support their children, but they were unable to give the kind of advice described above on courses and university. It was an unknown world to them, and so it was less familiar for their children too. The advice they were likely to give was drawn from their own experience, and their own view of how to survive life with fewer resources, and so centred on fairly practical but secure options. Moreover, helping with homework was more difficult as they had less personal experience of the education system and less familiarity with what was being taught. Even when children were at a young age, it was observed that helping with homework was a struggle, which often meant that the whole experience felt more difficult and tense. Neither child nor parent found it a pleasurable experience and so sometimes sought to do other things instead. The result was that when children were older, though their parents still tried to get them to do their homework, they did not find it easy or enjoyable.

Of course not all learning is attached to schoolwork or specific activities. One final source of difference between families was in the kinds of knowledge that children picked up in the course of daily life with their parents and other family members. Many times it was observed that parents who had been to university would correct their children's grammar or knowledge of a particular topic (geography, maths, medicine and so on) and try to get their children to think abstractly about a topic simply in the course of a normal conversation around the dinner table, in the car together or wherever. This wasn't calculated – they knew these things, or valued thinking abstractly because they did so themselves, and so simply talked to their children in the way they were used to. The children then took on these facts and ways of thinking, which are valued in the education system.

Those parents who had few qualifications, however, were less able to correct facts or encourage abstract thinking because it did not match with their life conditions. Language was more likely to be straight, direct, clipped and efficient – a parent might say 'stop!' rather than 'will you please stop that!' or 'why are you doing that?' to a misbehaving child, or 'in or out?' rather than 'do you want to stay in or go out?'. They were also more likely to be interested in how something works in practice rather than abstractly because that was more relevant for them. Their children therefore pick up a different way of thinking and talking, but one which is less rewarded at school.

Travel and community

Developments in transport and communication technology have improved the chances of access to places far beyond where we live. Holidays abroad and moving around the country (or even the world) for work are a more common experience. However, there are clear differences in patterns of travel according to the resources that people possess. We highlight two aspects.

Firstly, those who have left the towns or cities they were born into are generally those who have been to university. Indeed, insofar as attending university was a taken-for-granted rite of passage, the overwhelming sense amongst these participants was that they were always going to leave their place of birth and youth: it 'never entered consciousness' that they would stay, they 'always had a sense of being able to move'. After university, they either stayed in the city where they studied (Bristol) or moved where jobs or partners dictated, eventually settling

in Bristol. As a result of the initial move, there was also a feeling that movement again for work was perfectly possible and acceptable – they had moved before, so they could do it again. As Mr Williams, an area manager, put it:

> it was the move away to university, and then that sort of opens up your horizons and then, I think, if you have that move and you meet people from all over the country and that sort of....yeah that's a good stepping stone for your sort of desires and aspirations to be more mobile.

His wife, originally from Northern Ireland, adds that everyone in her family

> went to university over in England. So maybe in that respect it kind of opened the doors for me…I was never brought up with the idea that I was going to live down the road from my parents.

This was often coupled with possessing enough resources – money but also valued work skills – to make a move, including abroad, unproblematic, though in some cases factors such as their children's education or participation in community groups acted as barriers to relocation.

In contrast, those who did not go to university tended to stay in the city, if not the neighbourhood, where they were born and brought up. They had no reason to move and so it never came to mind. The exceptions were where housing was unavailable, pushing them into other areas in the city that were affordable, or where there were desires to 'escape' areas that were seen as in decline:

> It was quite a rough council estate. Nothing wrong with that because that makes you the person that you are, but I knew that I didn't want to stay there. But dad still lives in the house we were brought up in, and when you go back there, you know, just sometimes you think "oh I'm so glad I got out of that" really. Don't know why. I don't think I'm a snob, I didn't think I was, but just glad to be away from it. You see the massive gangs of kids on corners dealing drugs and smoking drugs and....I know you get it everywhere but it just seemed too much in your face when you lived there, there was always lots of theft going on, lots of drugs, people had nowhere to go, there

was no youth clubs there, there was nothing for them to do so it just....you know, as soon as your car was parked up the window was smashed and whatever was inside was stolen - there was nothing there, and I didn't want to be brought up in that and I didn't want any children of mine to be brought up in that.

<div align="right">(Ms Jeffers)</div>

Movement in the future was not seen as likely or desirable, not only because it would be financially difficult but because they were reluctant to leave behind family members or familiar areas:

I had a lovely childhood and a lovely upbringing and my surroundings were very enjoyable and very nice, so I'd had no reason to want to move, or had that in my thoughts. I never come across moving. [I] grew up here all my life and I wouldn't change it […] Back alleys sort of things, all the routes, all the woods, I know them all.

<div align="right">(Mr Taylor, barman)</div>

Q: So you always saw yourself as, when you were younger and growing up, you saw yourself as staying in the area you grew up in sort of?
Mrs Nash: Yeah, yeah.
Mr Nash: Yeah.
Q: Didn't see yourselves as moving.....
Mrs Nash: Even further afield, no.
Mr Nash: No. Unknown territory, no.
Q: Was that how you would see it, unknown territory?
Mr Nash: Mmm. You get to know your....when you start moving, obviously we knew the people here before we moved in - well we knew [female neighbour] but we didn't know [her husband]. But you get to know the people you live around and it was just comfortable, I mean it felt comfortable.

Another area of considerable differences is leisure travel. There are several differences in play here, but again they correspond more or less with social class. First, there is a division between those who frequently take foreign holidays, and have the freedom to spontaneously make plans for holidays, and those who don't and have to plan and save for them. Next, there is a distinction among those who go abroad on holiday between those who tend to go on city

breaks in search of 'culture' (art galleries, architecture and music) and those who go for 'sun and fun' in places like Spain, Portugal or Greece as an escape from hard work and chores. Finally, different types of holidays are taken within the UK: on the one hand, camping or cottage based holidays, and on the other, trips to Butlins and other family-friendly complexes.

Conclusion

In this report we have highlighted differences among families with different financial resources and educational and occupational backgrounds (which sociologists designate by the term social class), but we have also pointed out that the families we studied had things in common. There were strong attachments and affection displayed within them, much importance attached to being part of a family and a great concern to do well by one's children. In this research we found little sign of the 'breakdown of the family', 'broken Britain' or 'irresponsible parenting' which are so often mentioned in the media or by politicians or social commentators. It is true that our small study does not fully represent the wide diversity of family types in contemporary Britain. We deliberately avoided exploring the lives of the 'super rich', as they are currently being labelled, or of the most underprivileged families, and we only looked at families with children. However, we are willing to bet that our families do reflect the experiences and practices of a vast proportion of people: they do, in fact, represent 'ordinary lives'. Some of the families we spent time with were struggling with low incomes, rising prices and the impact of austerity measures imposed by the government: they were under strain, but showed no sign of breaking. We can conclude that the family is alive and well – at least in Bristol.