Recognising Change: What Families Can Teach Social Science About Relationships

Brent Plant
PhD Candidate, School of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Roehampton, United Kingdom
plantb@roehampton.ac.uk | brentroehampton@gmail.com
ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-9436-7867
LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/brentplant

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I still remember the phone call.

At the time, I was working as a family practitioner supporting parents and young people experiencing persistent family conflict. I had been working alongside one mother and her fourteen-year-old daughter for several months. Their relationship had been under considerable strain, and our work formed part of a broader process of support aimed at understanding what was happening between them and creating opportunities for them to experience their relationship differently.

Throughout our work together, the mother often asked me the same question:

"How will I know when things are getting better?"

Each time, my answer was similar. I told her that she was the expert in her relationship with her daughter. Professionals could offer support, theories and ways of making sense of what was happening, but she lived the relationship. I believed that when something genuinely shifted between them, she would recognise it.

One afternoon, she phoned me in tears. My mind immediately went to the possibility of another difficult incident. Instead, through the crying, she told me she was sitting on the stairs watching her daughter in the kitchen. Her daughter was making food, singing and dancing around as she cooked.

Her mother did not know what to do. This was what she had wanted. Yet after living for so long with tension and conflict, seeing her daughter relaxed and playful felt unfamiliar. She sat on the stairs crying, watching something she had desperately hoped for but seemingly unsure how to step into it.

I told her to go and join in. I reminded her that her daughter had already done some difficult and, at times, frightening work with me. She had entered conversations and explored experiences that had not been easy, including moments of frustration, hurt and regret that she had carried for some time. Now it was her mother's turn to do something that felt difficult: to take a small relational risk and enter the moment with her.

Later that day, she phoned me again. This time she was laughing. She thanked me and told me that she had gone into the kitchen. They had spent time dancing and singing together, being silly in a way that had not felt possible for a long time.

What has stayed with me is not simply that a fourteen-year-old girl danced in her kitchen. Families do ordinary things like this every day. What stayed with me was that her mother immediately recognised its significance. Before an assessment could identify change, before an outcome measure could record it, and before a professional could tell her that things were improving, she knew.

Something between them felt different. The significance of small moments. For this family, dancing together in the kitchen was huge. For another family, it might mean very little. That distinction matters.

Over years of working with families, I have come to recognise that every family has its own versions of these moments. They may be positive or painful, and they rarely look significant from the outside. A shared joke after weeks of tension. A young person staying in the room a little longer. A parent and child managing a disagreement differently, sitting together to watch television and eat a meal without conflict. A conversation that feels easier. These moments are meaningful not because of what happened, but because of what they mean within that relationship.

Think for a moment about your own family. Some of the memories that carry the greatest meaning may not be the events that another person would consider important. They may be a joke that nobody outside the family would understand, a familiar routine, a conversation in the car, a particular meal, or something someone once said. To an outsider, they might appear insignificant. Within the relationship, they can mean everything.

The same is true of change. Family relationships are not static. They accumulate histories, routines, expectations and memories. When relationships have become organised around conflict, fear or vigilance, family members learn to anticipate what might happen next. A small departure from those familiar patterns can therefore carry considerable relational meaning.

The mother sitting on the stairs was not simply observing her daughter dancing. She was recognising that, in that moment, her daughter was relating to the family environment

differently. Her uncertainty about joining in was meaningful too. After becoming accustomed to conflict, positive change itself had become unfamiliar.

This is what that small moment taught me beyond the experience of one family: families often recognise relational change through changes in the ordinary before it becomes visible in the extraordinary.

Recognising relational change

That experience changed how I thought about both practice and research. It made me question not only how relationships change, but how researchers decide that change has occurred.

This has become particularly relevant in my research into Child and Adolescent to Parent Violence and Abuse (CAPVA). I understand CAPVA as patterns of aggression, coercion or intimidation by a child or adolescent towards a parent or caregiver that emerge within strained caregiving relationships and reflect attempts to manage perceived danger, loss or control within the family system. Within such families, attention understandably gravitates towards the visible episodes of conflict and harm.

Yet relationships continue between those episodes. Care continues. So do fear, humour, frustration, affection, avoidance, protection and attempts to reconnect. If research concentrates only on the most visible behaviours, it risks overlooking how family members experience the relationship around them and how they recognise when it begins to change.

This leads to a simple proposition that now guides my work: Problems that emerge in relationships can only be understood through relationships.

For me, this means engaging with families as relational systems, where parents, children and their interactions are understood together rather than examined separately. It also means treating family members not simply as sources of data, but as people who hold knowledge about their own relationships.

This position has deep roots within social science. Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory placed relationships between children and caregivers at the centre of human development. Crittenden's Dynamic-Maturational Model extended this thinking by examining how children and caregivers adapt their protection strategies when they perceive danger (Crittenden, 2006). From this perspective, behaviour cannot always be understood separately from the relational and environmental conditions within which it developed.

The kitchen moment made this theoretical point tangible for me. If relationships can become organised around perceived danger, family members may become highly attuned to signs of threat. Yet they may also be particularly sensitive to moments when the familiar pattern changes. The mother's tears were therefore not simply a reaction to her daughter's

happiness. They reflected the unfamiliar experience of encountering something different within a relationship that had become accustomed to strain.

What different methods allow us to see

Social science has already contributed enormously to how we understand families. Quantitative research can identify patterns across large populations. Surveys can reveal experiences that might otherwise remain hidden. Observational research allows interaction to be examined systematically. In contrast, family systems and attachment research have demonstrated that individuals cannot be understood entirely separately from the relationships and environments in which they live.

Relational research does not need to replace these approaches. Rather, different methods allow us to see different things. Large datasets can tell us whether patterns exist across hundreds or thousands of families. Structured measures can identify change across time. Observational approaches can reveal recurring patterns of interaction. Close relational research can contribute something complementary: insight into what those patterns and changes mean to the people living them.

The distinction matters because the same behaviour can carry different meanings within different families. Dancing in a kitchen is not an outcome measure. It cannot be assumed to indicate relational repair. In this family, however, it mattered because of the history that preceded it and because the mother recognised it as a departure from what had become normal. Relational meaning therefore depends upon context.

This has shaped the design of my own research. Rather than focusing solely on one member of the family, I seek to understand experiences across the family system. Parents, children and family interactions are explored together, recognising that people can experience the same relationship differently. The purpose is not simply to gather more perspectives, but to understand how those perspectives relate to one another.

Working in this way requires a degree of proximity. Researchers need not become members of the families they study, nor abandon the boundaries that protect both researchers and participants. But when the subject of research is relational, there is value in spending enough time with families to understand something of their histories, interactions and meanings. For me, this is what it means to remain close to the relationship: staying close to imperfect family life

Proximity also makes family life harder to simplify. Listening closely to parents and young people speak about fear, responsibility, anger, love, and hope makes it difficult to divide relationships neatly into categories of success and failure. People may care deeply for someone they also fear. A young person may reject a caregiver while still needing

reassurance that the caregiver will remain available. Parents and children may both act in ways that hurt the relationship while simultaneously trying to preserve it.

Care ethics offers a useful way of thinking about these tensions. Gilligan (2023) and Tronto (1998) position care within relationships of dependence, responsibility and responsiveness. From this perspective, care does not occur only when relationships are harmonious. Much of the work of caring takes place under conditions that are uncertain, constrained and far from ideal.

Close relational research makes these conditions difficult to overlook. It asks researchers to remain with contradictions rather than resolving them too quickly: connection alongside conflict, protection alongside control, fear alongside love, and progress alongside setbacks. These are not necessarily failures of family relationships. They are often part of the imperfect conditions through which family life is lived.

Perhaps this is another reason why small moments matter. They do not tell us that a family is fixed or that an intervention has succeeded. They tell us that, within an ongoing and complicated relationship, something became possible that had not felt possible before.

What can families teach social science?

The future of social science will undoubtedly include new technologies, larger datasets and increasingly sophisticated ways of identifying patterns. These developments can extend what researchers can see. Yet the future of social science may also require us to become better listeners to forms of knowledge that are already present. Families know things about their relationships that researchers cannot know from outside them. This does not make family accounts infallible, nor does it remove the need for systematic research. It means that lived relational knowledge deserves to sit alongside other forms of evidence.

I still think about that mother sitting on the stairs. The moment itself lasted only a few minutes. To anyone outside the family, nothing remarkable was happening. A teenager was making food and singing in the kitchen. Yet her mother recognised that the familiar pattern had shifted. She recognised that her daughter felt different in that moment. Perhaps most of all, she recognised that their relationship offered an opportunity to be together differently.

My role was not to tell her that change had happened. She had already recognised it. My role, in that moment, was to encourage her to trust what she had seen and join in.

Perhaps this is what families can teach social science about relationships. Change does not always announce itself through dramatic events, measurable outcomes or headline moments. Sometimes it first appears through ordinary interactions that carry extraordinary meaning to the people involved.

If the future of social science is to remain close to the lives it seeks to understand, our task is not to choose between large-scale evidence and small relational moments. We need both. One can show us patterns across families; the other can help us understand what those patterns mean within them.

Problems that emerge in relationships can only be understood through relationships. And sometimes the people living those relationships are the first to recognise when change has begun.

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