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Kristin Beate Vasbø & Kristinn Hegna

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Feeling close, disclosing feelings – family practices and practices of intimacy in youth–parent relations across three generations in Norway

Kristin Beate Vasbø[a] and Kristinn Hegna[b]

[a]Department of Teacher Education and School Research, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway; [b]Department of Education, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

ABSTRACT

In this article we aim to understand how everyday family practices and practices of intimacy are connected in the formation of emotional ties in young people's family relationships, by examining their relationship with their parents across three generations. The analyses draw on qualitative biographical interviews conducted with women and men in intergenerational chains of 24 sons/daughters (born 1992–1993), 23 of their fathers/mothers (born 1963–1970) and 21 of their grandfathers/grandmothers (born 1931–1945). By first exploring the narratives of the joint everyday practices between young people and their parents and, second, examining the emotional reflexivity in these relational narratives, we highlight differences in young people's relations to their parents. Contrasting the oldest (1950s) and youngest (2010s) youth generations reveals joint activities and closeness to parents in both generations, while the degree of disclosing intimacy, individualised respect and shared interests marks the co-constructive nature of the youngest' parental relations. The middle generation's narratives are distinctive in describing themselves and their parents as living separate lives. This article contributes to the growing field of sociological youth research on family relations and the intimate aspects of the relationships between youth and their parents.

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Introduction

Over the past decade, researchers in the interdisciplinary field of youth studies have demonstrated increased interest in the relational dimension of young people's family lives (Harris, Cuervo, and Wyn 2021). In an effort to contribute to increased knowledge in this field, we examine three generations' experiences of and reflections on being young in a family and their relationships with their parents. In recent youth studies, young people's relationships and the nature and quality of the connections between youth and their everyday worlds are often framed through the notion of belonging

CONTACT Kristin Beate Vasbø k.b.vasbo@ils.uio.no Department of Teacher Education and School Research, University of Oslo, P.O. Box 1099, Blindern, Oslo 0317, Norway

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(Harris, Cuervo, and Wyn 2021). Young people's belonging and relationships to their parents provide emotional ties and meaningful interactions, representing crucial sources for developing their well-being and security (Cuervo and Wyn 2014).

In the present article, we focus on the everyday family lives of three generations in their youth in the 1950s, 1980s and 2010s, respectively, by analysing narratives of everyday family practices, emotional attachments and relational processes in youth–parent relations. Space does not permit an extensive sociohistorical contextualisation of our generations' youth, nor is that our ambition. Drawing on the concepts of 'family practices' (Morgan 2011) and 'practices of intimacy' (Jamieson 1998), we bring practice-oriented and relational perspectives to the foreground in examining the youth–parent relation and the role young people are assigned and claim in their families. In our analyses, we first examine narratives of the joint everyday practices between young people and their parents before exploring the discursive repertoires and cultural conceptions imprinted in their descriptions of youth–parent relations. In doing so, we aim to understand how everyday family practices and practices of intimacy are connected in the formation of emotional ties in young people's family relationships. Consequently, we hope to contribute to increased knowledge of how young people's family relations have changed, hence challenging the often binary conceptualisations of these changes.

Researchers have described Norwegian family cultures today as being marked by egalitarian values (Ljunggren 2017), gender equity ideals (Syltevik 2017), openness to negotiation between youth and their parents, and a relatively high general acceptance of involved and nurturing parenting ideals (Aarseth 2018; Stefansen and Aarseth 2011; Stefansen, Smette, and Strandbu 2018; Stefansen, Strandbu, and Smette 2017; Syltevik 2017). Recent studies of parents and parenting in Norway from young people's perspectives have analysed notions of self-reliance and autonomy (Stefansen, Smette, and Strandbu 2018) as well as parental involvement in academic achievement (Eriksen 2021; Kindt 2018) and in sports (Strandbu et al. 2019). These studies have described an autonomous and egalitarian youth role in the Norwegian family context.

From a different perspective, today's parenting ideals have been described as intensified (Hays 1996), involved and emotionalised (Stefansen and Aarseth 2011), and have been found in various social class segments (Dermott and Pomati 2016; Stefansen, Strandbu, and Smette 2017). Fewer studies have described how young people today see their relationships with their parents. Likewise, research on the transformations that these relationships have undergone, along with the changing ideals and practices of parenting, is largely lacking. Thus, the present article contributes to the growing field of sociological youth research on family relations, belonging and the emotional aspects of the social relationships between youth and their parents (see e.g. Cuervo and Fu 2020; Cuervo and Wyn 2014; Wyn, Lantz, and Harris 2012), particularly on parenting perceived from a youth perspective (Demant and Ravn 2013; Hegna and Smette 2017; Stefansen, Smette, and Strandbu 2018; Stefansen, Strandbu, and Smette 2017).

Previous research and recent developments in youth studies on youth–parent relations

Few Norwegian studies have focused specifically on youth–parent relations (exceptions are Gullestad 1996; Hegna and Smette 2017). Nielsen and Rudberg's (2006) study of

youth in three generations born from 1910–1925, in the 1940s and in the 1970s, respectively, included parental relations, but their focus on gendered processes and their psychosocial approach differ from our practice-oriented approach. However, two of their generations overlapped with this study's. Nielsen described how, in the 1950s and early 1960s, young people's activities were in line with, not in opposition to, their parents' interests and aims (Nielsen 2017). Notably, Nielsen and Rudberg (2006) identified a clear distinction between youth life in rural and urban areas, which suggested that young people in the urban areas represented a vanguard pointing forward to the next generation of youth. Their youngest generation, interviewed in 1991, were mainly from middle class and upper middle class backgrounds. They described their parental relations as 'good' but rarely open emotionally. In general, youth–parent relationships in the 1980s seemed less hierarchical than in previous generations, and Nielsen and Rudberg described intergenerational relations in terms of negotiation rather than conflict (Nielsen 2017).

An English study of youth and their parents from around 1990 (Brannen et al. 1994) found few youths reporting that they would talk openly with their parents about their own worries and emotions, even as the relation was considered to be 'close'. Similarly, Solomon et al. (2002) later described how communication was understood differently by parents and teenagers; specifically, some youths saw how parents could use youths' openness to reassert parental control, creating what Brannen et al. (1994) coined 'the Janus-headed character of communication' in this relationship (183). Both previous studies took a critical stance towards Giddens (1992) 'democratic' and 'pure' parental relation, showing how the youths withheld information from their parents to retain power.

The last decade has seen a renewed interest in young people's parental and family relations following Wyn et al.'s (2012) much cited call for moving youth studies towards a 'conceptualisation of youth that brings relationships with family into sharper view' (Wyn, Lantz, and Harris 2012, 3). Our scoping review of studies on parental relations from a youth perspective citing this call showed that later youth studies seem to fall into two categories. Some studies use family relations and youth–parent relationships as a *lens* to obtain a better understanding of the importance of these relationships for central aspects of *transitions* in young people's lives. These researchers use young people's family relations as a tool to understand transition through studies of educational biographies and school choice (Black and Walsh 2019; Butler and Muir 2017), home ownership and leaving home (Cook 2020; Nilsen 2020; Pustulka, Sarnowska, and Buler 2021) and transition into adulthood (Carbone et al. 2022; Cook 2020; Magaraggia and Benasso 2019).

The second category sees *family relations* as the unit of analysis, aiming to understand the nature of contemporary youth–parent relationships. In these studies, researchers have chosen the context of transition or family patterns as a case in order to contribute to a deeper understanding of young people's family relations (Nichols and Stahl 2017; Parker and Mayock 2019; Sørensen and Nielsen 2021; Vogt 2020; Wang, Satka, and Julkunen 2021). Through these latter studies, an understanding of young people's family relations – particularly their relationship to their parents – emerges and is set in contrast to not only old 'truths' about youth–family/parent relationships (Bengtson 1970; Davis 1940; Parsons and Bales 1956), but also to the more recent ones (i.e. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2004; Giddens 1992).

For instance, Lahelma and Gordon (2008) showed how late modern youth–parent relationships were marked by *interdependence* rather than the traditional dependent/independent dichotomy. In their recent study of young men's transition into further education, Nichols and Stahl (2017) expanded this knowledge by describing the complex balance and *interplay* between young men's dependent, independent and interdependent identities in their relationships with their parents. Similarly, Vogt (2020) aimed to contribute to a more dynamic understanding of the variety of roles family members can play in young people's lives at different times and in different situations where young people slip in and out of varying degrees of involvement and interaction. In an Australian context, Cuervo and Fu (2020) showed how young people are actively involved in co-constructing family practices.

A similar theoretical development relates to a claim made in the 1990s regarding the increasing role of intimacy, and democratic and 'pure' relationships in the family (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2004; Giddens 1992). Recently, Sørensen and Nielsen (2021) showed that *new* hierarchies and subject/object roles in the relationship between young people and their parents have followed the increased expectations of parents to be involved in the practical and emotional aspects of the lives of their young adult children.

These newer contributions to our understanding of youth–parent and family relations underline, first, the need for a relational analysis for grasping the complexities of youth–parent relationships and, second, the centrality of temporality and social change. Third, these contributions highlight the importance of moving on from previous programmatic (binary) statements about changes in the meaning of family and parental relations that have taken place from modernity into late modernity. New relational perspectives on authority, respect, intimacy, closeness and belonging may contribute to understandings that go beyond the often cited historical shifts from hierarchy to democracy, from obedience to negotiation, from distance to closeness and from respect to openness (Giddens 1992; Gullestad 1996). We revisit these dichotomies in the last section of the article.

Practices and narratives of intimacy in families

In the present study, we use in-depth interview data from three generations of men and women living their youth during three separate decades in Norway, aiming to shed light on the complex and changing character of youth–parent relationships. We are inspired by theoretical perspectives from family research pertaining to addressing change by focusing on relational practices, such as 'family practices' (Morgan 2011) and 'practices of intimacy' (Jamieson 1999). These perspectives are well-tailored for understanding intimate relations because they highlight the fluidity of family relations across cultures, time and space. Both concepts are frequently used in family research to explain how interdependence and connectivity in contemporary families are maintained through practice and emotional ties.

Jamieson defined practices of intimacy as 'practices which enable, generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other' (Jamieson 2011, section 1.2). With this practice perspective, we want to highlight the key aspects of young people's lives in the family and their relationships to their parents: an emphasis on the active or 'doing' and a sense of the everyday and the regular (Morgan 2011).

Family practices are the types of action and doing in everyday life that are 'oriented to other family members' (Morgan 2011, 111), have 'emotions in the heart of it' (111) and 'serve to define and establish practitioners as family members' (Phoenix and Brannen 2014, 13). Family members maintain and co-author 'sets of practices' (Morgan 2011, 6) by taking part in everyday family life. Thus, by definition, family practices are highly relational. The emotional aspects of family life are present, whether the individual is actively engaged in emotional exchange or not, but cultural and historical differences may exist in the way in which these emotions are expressed or controlled (Morgan 2011). With these perspectives, the present study fills a lacuna in youth studies through its relational and practice-oriented perspective on narratives of parental relationships from both young people's perspectives and from generations that were young in the 1950s, 1980s and 2010s. Family practices and practices of intimacy clearly overlap, but relatively few studies have addressed this overlap or have sought to understand which family practices produce intimacy and how (Zarhin, Karanevsky-Samnidze, and Aharon 2022). The current article examines young people's family lives and relationships with their parents to understand how everyday family practices and practices of intimacy are interconnected.

The study, research design and methodology

The data were collected as part of a research project designed to explore how young people negotiate 'modern' identities within their local contexts in China (see Liu 2019) and Norway. The study applied a biographical approach through a three-generational comparison For this article, we take our point of departure in the Norwegian sample, which consists of biographical interviews with 68 women and men in biologically related chains of 24 sons/daughters (born 1992–1993), 23 fathers/mothers (born 1963–1970) and 21 grandfathers/grandmothers (born 1931–1945). The youngest generation was recruited in their last year (2011–2012) of upper secondary school in six socio-economically diverse neighbourhoods in Oslo, and they further recruited their parents and grandparents. One selection criterion was that the youths' parents and grandparents were still living and had grown up in Norway, which enabled the study of social change in one society. The other criterion was that they attended a study programme for general studies, planned to enable a match to the Chinese sample. The level of education for the three generations mirrored general development in Norway. For example, while only one interviewee of the oldest and middle generations, respectively, had two parents with higher education (4%), 14 of the youngest generation interviewees had two parents with higher education (58%). Of the youngest participants, seven had one parent and three had two parents with no education above upper secondary school. Thus, the majority of the youngest generation had a middle-class background, while the previous generations were more often from other social backgrounds.

Biographical interviews aim to gain access to life histories told and saturated with meaning by the individual person, as influenced and coloured by structural contexts affecting individual lives (Plummer 2001). Liu (see above) and Vasbø developed an interview guide combining a semi-structured and broadly defined narrative form for the overall project to facilitate a context for individuals to narrate their life histories. The guide was structured thematically around open questions regarding parenting, family life and intergenerational relations, friends, school, leisure, social life, sex, gender,

intimacy, thoughts about the future, societal events, politics, inner life, education and work experience, among other themes mainly related to childhood and youth. In 2012, Vasbø conducted and transcribed the interviews, each of which lasted 2–4 h and were all transcribed. The interviews were precise in asking for descriptions of practice and lived experience, while encouraging both cultural ideas and emotional accounts (cf. Munkejord 2009), and interviewees often introduced narratives of parental relations during all parts of the interview.

A biographical narrative approach is efficient for studying the meaning of people's day-to-day lives and the voice they give to emotional and relational experiences in the family, especially in how family practices are encapsulated in cultural discourse and incorporated within broader social life (McLeod and Thomson 2009; Smart 2007). By applying biographical narrative methods to the study of generations (cf. McLeod and Thomson 2009; Nielsen 2017), the current study provides insights into how the everyday lives of generations and individuals unfold across changing contextual circumstances and broader cultural shifts (McLeod and Wright 2009; Thomson and McLeod 2015). This approach combines two temporal dimensions of young people's everyday lives: the time of their 'lifetime' and the time of their generation (Woodman and Leccardi 2015). We argue that such a methodological approach may generate accounts of young people's family lives from a broad perspective. Nevertheless, caution is warranted regarding the methodological issue of using memories to explore family practices and experiences of adolescence. Life histories make it hard to separate the self-reflexivity of past adolescence from the self-reflexivity of adulthood in the present (for a discussion, see McLeod and Thomson 2009), and particularly so in a three-generation study where life phases and family positions vary between interviewees. In our analysis, we did not treat what was remembered as truths about the past buried within the data (cf. Braun and Clarke 2019, 591), but as accounts from the past shaped by concurrent ideals of youth–parent relationships and in dialogue with the interviewer.

We conducted a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019) combining inductive discovery of intermediate concepts emerging from the empirical data and deductive proceedings by engaging thoughtfully with the dataset through the theoretical concepts. Through our analytic process, we looked for generation-specific patterns of relations between youth and their parents across the narratives. We used 'family practices' (Morgan 2011) and 'relational narratives' – which can be defined as narratives reflecting in distinctive ways people's connectivity and 'experiences of kinship with others, as well as their sense of self' (Mason 2004, 167) – as sensitising concepts (Bowen 2020). We applied an interactionist theoretical perspective on emotions (Olson, Bellocchi, and Dadich 2020) that focused on how the interviewees described or expressed emotions verbally as well as their interpretations and reflections of other people's emotions (Holmes 2014). Thus, our analyses took a grounded analytical approach in which the narratives of practices and emotions as they were told by the young people, their parents and grandparents informed our understanding of intimacy, closeness and youth–parent relationships.

A strength of this three-generation study was that our generations may be seen as simultaneously representing *biological* generations (grandparents, parents and youth), as cohorts from separate decades (Ryder 1965) and, above all, as separate *social* generations (Mannheim 1952). In the following sections, we have structured the analyses of each

generation by family practices and relational narratives, respectively. The centrality of family practices for the positive feelings of closeness was evident in both the oldest and the youngest generations, while the middle generation paved the way for the new youth–parent relations and roles expressed by the youngest generation.

The 1950s youth generation

Work and useful activities as the foundation for closeness

The oldest generation was born between 1931 and 1945; consequently, they were teenagers in the late 1940s – 1950s, broadly speaking. Post-war Norway was marked by an egalitarian and fluid social structure, both economically and culturally, and a low but rapidly increasing degree of urbanisation and industrialisation (Featherman and Sørensen 1983; Featherman, Selbee, and Mayer 1989). Only 6% of married women had paid work outside the home (Lettenstrøm and Skancke 1964); accordingly, parents' everyday presence was striking across all interviews with this generation. Family practices fell into two distinct categories differentiated by growing up in rural (12 individuals) and urban (9 individuals) areas.

For rural youth, mainly living in farmer, fisher or smallholder homes, the main shared activity with their parents was to work together in the household. The youths participated in daily chores, along with school or permanent employment elsewhere. Helga (grandmother) recalled, '*My upbringing was actually about learning to work*'. Boys worked the land, did construction work and chopped firewood with their fathers. Girls mended, knitted, cleaned the house and prepared food with their mothers. Narratives from growing up in poor families and smallholder families recounted long days with hard work and little time for friends and leisure, underpinning austerity as a general value in working-class families. In rural areas, joint activities between young people and their parents were expressions of doing something useful and working together, and even leisure was often combined with work, as noted by Astrid (grandmother): '*when we gathered around [the radio], we always had something to work on*'.

Earlier generations described the emergence of the *leisure family* in the urban middle-class families of the 1930s (Nielsen and Rudberg 2006). Our urban youth's narratives of the 1950s accordingly contained rich descriptions of Sunday trips with parents and extended family, heading to nearby fields or the forest, with either the car, bike or tram. They described bringing along blankets, fishing poles, berry buckets and portable cooking stoves to prepare coffee and food. In the new urban leisure family, the father initiated and organised joint activities mainly based on his own interests (see also Nielsen and Rudberg 2006). Ines (grandmother) explained, '*My dad was fond of skiing. We often went to a cabin called The Nydalen hut because my dad was a member of the Nydalen Ski Association. We often stayed there from Saturday to Sunday*'.

Compared with the youth in rural areas, the urban youths described having more time with friends, and their narratives had more references to youthful fun such as music, clothes, style, romance and dance events out of the sight of their parents. Generally, the narratives showed how youth lived their lives in accordance with their parents and family and that joint activities with their parents abounded with both work and leisure normally initiated by the parents.

Tight knit and close relationships but not open

The Norwegian word '*samhold*' ('unity'/'bond'/'togetherness') emerged repeatedly in the narratives, describing a positive emotional climate of solidarity, loyalty and closeness in intergenerational relations in the 1950s. The informants who described their relationship with one or both parents as *close* in their youth also described everyday activities and leisure activities shared with that parent. Despite rich descriptions of joint everyday activities with parents in their youth, this generation's narratives were reticent of oral communication of feelings or expressions of emotionality towards their parents. Instead, their interviews contained a number of emotionally charged moments. These expressions of emotions worked as unspoken symbolic representations of emotions and deep emotional ties between the youth and their parents, as Ansgard (grandfather) described:

> *It was very sad when we fled to Sweden [during the war] and my father had to enter the military (…) When he left, it was a kind of farewell somehow. He took a pair of binoculars and dismantled them so that I could get one of the two parts; it was very touching.*

Warmth, love and admiration for their parents also shone through the stories of their parents' childhood, of relatives up north or of their fathers' achievements in particular. They recalled evenings of storytelling recounting the father's experiences as a whaler, a wartime sailor or a hard-working lumberjack. Norwegian academic discourse on child rearing at the time advocated the development of a more democratic, 'natural' and intuitive parenting style (Skard 1956), which contrasts the prevailing ideals reflected in our material. The youth–parent relationships were described as asymmetrical, and the majority of the fathers as authoritarian and uninvolved, although they were admired for being knowledgeable, clever, hard-working and trustworthy. Narratives of mothers were more mixed; the male informants were close to their warm, kind and devoted mothers, while the female informants described strict and dominant mothers.

Looking back, the oldest generation reflected on the lack of verbalised expressions of emotion between them and their parents in their youth. Different explanations surfaced, such as normative boundaries of emotional expression generally – '*No, we did not talk about such things. If someone had said "I love you", you would be embarrassed*' (Kari, grandmother) – or of venting negative feelings in a quarrel – '*No, I had too much respect for him to do so*' (Karl Ove, grandfather). Thus, stories about youth and parents expressing their feelings, sharing or discussing problems and even quarrelling were rare. Cato (grandfather) recalled, '*You never raised problems with parents. Those were different times completely when it came to closeness to parents. Yes, completely different*'. Kari explained, '*We were as close as we were back then*'.

Cato's and Kari's reflections indicate how the underlying norms shaped relational bonds; specifically, closeness to their parents had its limits, and the main difference lay in the lack of verbal expression of feelings. The rural youth spent most of their time with their parents doing chores at the farm or in the household, while the urban youth described leisure activities with their parents. In the oldest generation, youth and parents *spent time together to do activities*, forming a work-based or leisure-based collective family bond in which the parents defined the activity.

The 1980s youth generation

Living in different generational spheres

The informants of the middle generation were born from 1963 to 1970 and thus lived their youth between the mid-late 1970s through the 1980s. The share of women in paid labour escalated markedly in Norway during that period (Bojer 2006), pushing forward the inclusion of kindergartens in welfare state legislation in 1975 and a growth in the provision of public childcare (Ellingsæter and Gulbrandsen 2007). In this generation, four of the 23 informants went to kindergarten for a few hours each day. The majority of their mothers still stayed at home in their childhood, transitioning into working part-time or, more rarely, full-time later. Pocket money, which was not mentioned by neither the oldest nor youngest generations, was used in families where the mother worked outside the home to motivate teens to do chores like cleaning, making dinner and taking care of siblings. As a result, household work was no longer a mutual activity between parents and teens. The fathers worked full time, and many fathers in the military service, fishery or marketing business stayed away for longer periods.

The most obvious difference between the middle generation's narratives and those of both other generations was the *absence* of parents in the adolescents' stories of everyday life. When asked about activities with parents during his teenage years, Paal (father) described a certain disinterest on both parts. He stated, '*[My parents] kept on with their adult stuff, and we kept on with our youth stuff, whatever that was. But we didn't talk so much about what we were doing in our separate worlds*'. Organised leisure activities such as choir, sport, scouts and even informal activities like being with friends, hanging out or at parties without parental involvement, took precedence over spending time with parents in both rural and urban settings. This generation lived their youth life beyond the family sphere and parental control, as was underlined by Radka (mother): '*When I walked out the door, I walked out of their sight. They had no idea about what I was doing, who I was with*'. Whilst the oldest generation showed a sense of familial solidarity, unity, common activities and collective experiences with their parents, the above extract illustrates the contrasting bilateral *distance* between the middle generation youth and their parents in the 1980s, jointly shaped through what we interpret as a mutual disinterest and disinvolvement in each other's life worlds.

Relational distance, lack of trust, and fiery communication

These separate worlds represented a kind of freedom for youth, but their narratives also exposed feelings of insecurity and unsafeness because of this distance. About half of the middle generation women had experienced emotional problems, violence, or sexual abuse in their youth. Still, they did not see disclosure to their parents as an option. The distance Snefrid (mother) felt between herself and her mother had a grave impact on her well-being as a young girl: '*I was not able to talk with my mother about anything when I grew up, so I felt very much alone, and I thought it was so tough that I decided to end my life*'. Others, such as Inga (mother), did not involve their mothers in their emotional problems because they did not trust them to be able to help out: '*She was such an anxious person, always worried too much. It was better not to ask for help somehow because then, I did not have to deal with nagging and her getting upset or scared*'.

The males' narratives included few stories about communication and interaction with their parents, perhaps explained by experiences like Terje's (father) lack of interaction with his father: '*We never had any communication at all, neither about what [my father] was doing nor about what I was doing; it was mutual. He was very little or not interested at all, at least from my perspective, in what I was doing – and neither was I, in what he was doing*'. The female narratives, however, described widespread communication in the form of quarrels about boundaries or sometimes lively political discussions with their parents. The 1970s and the 1980s have been described as an era of youth subcultures characterised by resistance towards the established society represented by adults (Øia and Vestel 2014). In general, the communication that took place between the middle-generation youth and their parents in the 1980s was fiery and characterised by a lack of trust and openness, which was precisely described by Leonard (father): '*I talked with my friends because I did not want to tell very much to my parents. You had to be careful about such things at the time*'. In sharp contrast to the older generation, the middle generation seemed to take an active role in creating distance from their parents. Additionally, the absence of trust seemed to push their detachment.

Compared with the oldest generation, the narratives of the middle generation contained more descriptions of talking with parents, but mainly in terms of quarrels and loud discussions. The Norwegian Children's Acts, which defined children's right to express their opinion and be heard, were adopted in 1981, before the *UN Convention on the Rights of the child*, for which they served as an indirect inspiration (Smith 1999). These forms of communication may indicate that the youth and their parents were fighting for control and defining new roles during the 1980s. Despite the increased level of conflict, the majority of narratives from this generation included at least one parental relation described as close, although not open. The majority of the women seemed to have been more strongly related to their fathers, who they described as being warmer, more attentive, easier to talk to and more emotionally responsive than their mothers. Many of the female narratives contained descriptions of dominant, emotionally cold, strict, invading, self-centred or even weak mothers who were unable to talk about feelings. Inga explained, '*I think it has been difficult that I have not been able to talk to my mother about emotional issues. It does mean that you do not get a very close relationship*'.

At least in hindsight, both men and women in the middle generation expressed a feeling of being left alone and having to cope on their own, and they were concerned about the lack of emotional openness in communication with their parents. It is hard to know whether these middle-generation men and women missed their parents' interest and empathy *then* or just now, in comparison to their parenting of the youngest generation.

Nevertheless, some male and female narratives referred to close and, in a few cases, open youth–parent relationships in this generation. The few who experienced their parents as warm, supportive, involved and interested were more satisfied with their parents than those who experienced their parents as strict, uninterested or authoritarian. However, disclosing intimacy or open communication with parents was quite rare in the 1980s narratives. In contrast to the warmth, trust and admiration of the older generations towards their parents, relational distance and lack of trust was this generation's modus operandi, and joint activities were few.

The 2010s youth generation

Talking and dyadic activities as the foundation of closeness

The youngest generation was born in 1992–1993, and they all lived in Oslo in single-parent or stepfamilies (10) or with both parents (14). They were 18–19 years old at the time of the interview and had their teenage years from 2006–2012. At the time of their childhood, eight out of 10 Norwegian children had mothers in full- or part-time employment (Bø 2004), were enrolled in kindergarten (Stabell 2017), and had fathers taking paternity leave (enacted in 1993; Brandth and Øverli 1998). Nordic parenting ideals of this period were described as intensified and involved (Forsberg 2009; Widding 2014) resting on a strategy of enriching intimacy (Stefansen and Aarseth 2011), while youths have reported increasing family time and contentment with parents from the 1990s to 2020s (Bakken, Hegna, and Sletten 2021). All the informants of the youngest generation had mothers in paid full-time jobs, and unlike both previous generations, all spent some years in kindergarten and after-school care. The youths expressed that both parents were involved in their care and upbringing, and they described extensive parental involvement in organised leisure activities in childhood and early adolescence, which continued even at the ages of 18–19. The informants described home-based parallel activities like studying while parents were working in the same living room or online on their separate computers, but they more often highlighted *joint* activities like preparing food, eating together, watching television or talking together. Doing chores and working together in the household had largely disappeared, while just *being* together seemed a common way of spending time, as noted by Nils Petter (son): '*We're not doing much together during the weekdays other than being at home together*'. The majority of the adolescents had dinner with their families almost every day. Randi (daughter) explained why dinner seemed to be so important: '*The fact that we sit down and have dinner together makes us much closer*'.

Regardless of gender, *talking together* was the most common activity. These conversations varied from intimate talk about small or big problems, emotional issues and important life choices to everyday chat during dinner, as Sebastian (son) explained:

> *We often gather around the table talking about all sorts of things, but for very private matters, we will not talk about that during dinner. We are often together, and we talk a lot about everything – how our day went, how we are doing and different stuff.*

The dinner table worked as a highly valued social arena for being together as a whole family. Similar to the oldest generation, the youngest generation described how mutual activities with their parents strengthened and maintained their sense of family community and closeness to their parents. Here, *talking* has replaced *working* together as the main basis for closeness.

In contrast to the oldest generation, the youngest generation described highly valued interactions in *dyadic* relationships with one parent or the other, independent of gender. Their narratives included spending time with one of their parents, watching movies, going skiing, biking or running, attending concerts, cooking, rehearsing for a driving test, shopping, making things together and going out to eat. The only typical gendered activities included doing maintenance work in the cabin (the sons with their fathers) and going to a café (the daughters with their mothers).

Structurally, Norwegian families have changed from the nuclear, male breadwinner family with a stay-at-home mother as the norm (Syltevik 2017) to increased cohabitation (Noack 2010) and divorce rates, as well as new family constellations like single-parent, stepparent and same-sex households (Nilsen et al. 2018; Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs 2020), creating a more diverse family environment for children. The youngest generation intentionally *cultivated* shared interest and initiated activities, like Michelle (daughter), who spoke about how she spent time with her father: '*He does not watch many movies himself, but this is something we can do together because we share the same taste in film; [we like] a lot of action'*. The recognition of the parent as an equal person with whom they shared mutual interests underpinned their perception of the parent as an individual. Both girls and boys took an active part in forming their parental relations, as shown when Jane (daughter) described her active role in improving her relation to her father: '*It is like, we can go snowboarding together and, in a way, nurture our relationship*'. In the youngest generation, youth and parents *did activities together to spend time together*. Their relationship with their parents was sustained by will, looking for shared activities that could strengthen their dyadic relationships, and these shared activities were based on common individualised interests.

Relational expectations of mutual openness and closeness

The youngest generation, much like the oldest, described youth–parent relationships as close and warm. Their stories of parental relations were characterised by love, trust and admiration. However, the youngest generation's intimacy and love for their parents were verbalised and expressed physically in a way that would be unthinkable for their parents and grandparents. Most of the adolescents described their parents as available for them physically and mentally, as people who listened, did not condemn, loved them and shared their own experiences. They described how their parents '*understand me better than many other parents do'* (Michelle, daughter) and how '*if something happens, they are always there for me'* (Bjørn, son). Dina (daughter) summed up this sentiment by describing her parents as '*wonderful parents. I love them very much! They have different personalities, but they are both very patient and kind*'.

Two girls and two boys in the youngest generation experienced not having close parental relations. They all described '*not being able to talk openly*' with their parents as the main reason for not defining the relationship as *close*. They still appreciated spending time with their parents, but they perceived their parents' lack of understanding as a hindrance to close relationships. Openness, in the sense of safely being able to talk about one's inner emotions and thoughts, appeared as a central relational norm and as the premise and condition for defining the relationship with parents as close for the youngest generation. Without disclosing intimacy (Jamieson 1999) from both parts, the relationship would not be classified as close. Morten (son) described such a relation to both his parents: '*We share a lot, and we tell each other a lot, about what has happened during the day. We are very close; we really are'*. Dina also emphasised mutuality in her description of her open relationship with her mother: '*We have a very good relationship. I can tell her things and she can tell me things*'. This reciprocity goes beyond the openness described by Brannen et al. (1994) and Solomon et al. (2002) in the UK 20 years prior.

This generation described their parental relations in terms of friendship by underlining dyadic, equal and intimate relationships. For example, Calle (son) said, '*I feel like I have a bit of a joke-like friendship with dad. Not that he is more like a pal than a dad, but he is a pal in a way, too. I can even talk to him about my friends*'. The desire for mutual openness in a friend-like relation was driven by the youths and constituted the basis for feeling close, safe and emotionally connected with their parents. The shared activities, emotional openness and respect they had for their parents were based on an individualised knowledge of each parent's unique qualities.

Discussion

The current study aimed to understand how everyday family practices and practices of intimacy are linked and, potentially, produce bonds and emotional ties in young people's families. By comparing the three generations, we also showed how young people's relations with parents have changed. Based on our findings, we will discuss two questions: First, how should the changes found in youth–parent relationships be conceptualised? Second, how should we understand the mutual connection between family practices and intimacy in youth–parent relationships?

Youth–parent relationships from accepted to negotiated to co-constructed

Gullestad (1996) described the change in youth–parent relationships in the early 1990s as a transition from parental 'requests for obedience to complex negotiation' (Gullestad 1996, 36). These negotiations rested on youths' 'being oneself', emphasising 'separateness and discontinuity' and 'struggle against some externally imposed rules' (Gullestad 1996, 36), where young people would resist and reshape the influences of their parents. The middle generation of our study would seem to be covered by Gullestad's (1996) notion of a 'transformed modernity'. The oldest generation's normative respect, trust, admiration and the taken-for-granted close bond to their parents (cf. Nielsen and Rudberg 2006) was substituted by disinterest, lack of trust, unsafeness, conflict and distance in the narratives of the middle generation. This is a narrative of constraint and conflict (Mason 2004) where the middle generation strived for normative independence and a new relational space, and where negotiations for autonomy were central. As such, the middle generation embodies a generation gap in both cultural and *emotional* distance. This finding differs from Nielsen and Rudberg's (2006) accounts of the same generation 20 years prior, which may be related to their 1980s youth informants representing more academic middle-class and/or our 1980s youth informants reflecting on their position as parents to the youngest generation.

We do not see such overt negotiations for autonomy in the youngest generation. This generation defined the youth role as equal and nonconflictual with the parents (in contrast to Solomon et al. 2002), and they claimed and were given space in the relationship to actively co-produce their mutual roles through relational practice. As a result, a high degree of relational agency formed part of the youth–parent relationship, not in the form of an individualist striving for autonomy but as an integrated and shared responsibility for their mutual bonds. This finding adds to recent understandings of *inter*dependence and co-construction of the youth–parent relationship (Cuervo and Fu 2020; Nichols and Stahl 2017) while underlining how this co-construction is not 'new'. Specifically, the middle generation also co-constructed

the parental role by being agentic in their distancing and autonomy, whereas the youngest generation did so by enacting relational agency towards closeness and shared intimacy. In contrast, the oldest generation – who explained that 'it was just the way it was' – forms a non-co-constructing and, as such, complicit youth role.

In the youngest generation's mutuality and (seemingly) equity between youths and parents lies the basis for individualisation simultaneously. However, the contrasts between the generations break with the often-used dichotomies of transformation from distance to closeness and from respect to openness (cf. Giddens 1992). The youngest generation described a closeness that differed from the oldest generation's closeness in their disclosing openness (cf. Jamieson 1999) but also showed a different type of respect towards their parents.

For the youngest generation, respect towards the parents was individualised and non-hierarchical. This form of respect seems to rest on youths' knowledge of their parents as individuals, and it is relational in nature. Youths and parents intentionally shared lifestyles and interests and took part in activities previously labelled as 'youth culture'; thus, the dividing line between youth worlds and adult worlds was blurred and unimportant. Our analysis may point to a new, relationally responsive youth generation that not only shapes their own parental relations, but also parental roles.

The current study had some limitations regarding the sample, particularly our anchor generation. One limitation was related to socioeconomic and cultural diversity. A majority (58%) of our informants in the youngest generation had middle-class backgrounds, and all had parents and grandparents born in Norway. More diversity could have yielded other results and strengthened our study. However, we found no difference in the youth–parent relationship between the middle-class and lower-class informants. Second, increased divorce rates in Norway from 2000 onwards (Tjøtta and Vaage 2003) have led to new family constellations among the informants in the youngest generation. This variety could increase their need for active nurturing of the relationships with those parents with whom they do not live. However, we found no differences among the interviewees in this matter based upon their parents' marital status.

The role of shared practice and intimacy across generations

Giddens (1992) described the transformation of intimacy 30 years ago, proposing that the stage at the time was 'set for a further transition: the translation of the child's ties to its parents […] into a relationship in the contemporary sense of the term' (Giddens 1992, 107). The pure relationship in his definition – a relationship based upon communication, equal rights, emotional give and take and mutual respect that is entered into for its own sake (Giddens 1992; 2000) – certainly bears the characteristics that we recognise from our youngest generations' narratives 30 years later. Previous studies (Brannen et al. 1994; Solomon et al. 2002) identified a struggle for power where youths would withhold information to retain their position vis a vis their parents. In our youngest generation the disclosing intimacy is not problematised nor is restrictive openness seen as a means of power. One conclusion could be that young Norwegians' relationships with their parents follow the logic of the pure relationship model.

In her critique of Giddens, however, Jamieson (1999) argued that his theory describes a transformation of intimacy – as shared intimacy and *ideas* of pure relationships and

confluent love (Giddens 1992) – freed from the practices 'which enable, generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other' (Aarseth 2007; Jamieson 2011, section 1.2.). For our youngest generation, openness and mutual disclosure was only one of the joint practices of intimacy in the youth–parent relationship, but it was *the* central aspect symbolising the new type of closeness for our informants. The equity in their relationship seemed to manifest itself in practice and in 'pure relationships', thus exceeding that of ideology or ideals (cf. Jamieson's [1999] critique of Giddens [1992]). Our study has shown that family practices and practices of intimacy intersect in the form of 'joint projects […] infused with emotional investment' (Aarseth 2007, 139), thereby *producing* closeness and commitment in both the oldest and youngest generations of the current study.

This argument gains strength through contrast with the youth generation of the 1980s. The middle generation's narratives seemed to lack the basic building blocks for the formation of a strong youth–parent bond and a feeling of belonging to the family. The absence of shared family practices, shared arenas of work and leisure, and shared interests was a serious hindrance for building cohesion. The 1980s generation described the family/everyday life of youth and their parents as living in different spheres and different social locations, hence not seeing their relationship as close.

Conclusion

This study documents how closeness and intimacy between youth and their parents are intertwined with family practices in the form of joint projects – whether these are by parental initiative and grounded in necessity, as in the oldest generation, or by mutual initiative and grounded in dyadic relational goals, as in the youngest. In the current article, we have combined concepts from family research and perspectives from youth studies to explore the relationship between youth and their parents. By using the concepts of family practices and practices of intimacy, our analysis brings nuance to and highlights the importance of understanding how joint projects and activities with parents form the foundation for receiving and giving care, love and disclosed intimacy in the relationship. The degree of disclosing intimacy, individualised respect and shared interests marks the co-constructive nature of the youngest generation's parental relations; all changes reflected in the narratives of youth generations from the 1950s to the 2010s.

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