

Leonore Davidoff obituary

Historian who put family and gender relations centre stage

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For almost four decades, Leonore Davidoff's groundbreaking studies unsettled received wisdoms and advanced understanding of women's history and the complexities of gender relations. Leonore, who has died aged 82, will be especially remembered for [Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850](#) (1987), co-authored with Catherine Hall. As Raphael Samuel noted in his Guardian review, it is a "subversive" book.

Family Fortunes rewrote the story of the industrial revolution and the middle class by putting the family, and an examination of male and female roles, at centre stage. At a time when labour historians and historians of women's history were overwhelmingly concerned with the politically active and the working class, the book focused on the middle class and the relationship between the family, the economy and religious belief. It provided two case studies – one rural (East Anglia), one urban (Birmingham) – and put forward new ideas about how men operated in the public world and women in the private domestic sphere.

Leonore's writing spanned the class system. Her first book, [The Best Circles: Society, Etiquette and the Season](#) (1973), analysed the social mechanisms by which the upper and middle classes regulated social mobility in Victorian society, using an elaborate code of etiquette that involved, for example, formal introductions and rituals for visiting, as well as controlling access to marriage, but she also wrote extensively about domestic service, including an article in 1974 on the relationship between the gentleman Arthur Munby and the servant Hannah Cullwick.

In her final book, [Thicker Than Water: Siblings and Their Relations 1780-1920](#) (2012), Leonore explored how sibling relationships helped to provide the capital, contacts and skills that could make the vital difference to the success of commercial and professional enterprises and so were crucial to the flourishing of middle-class society. She showed how these relationships adapted over time as family size diminished, used case studies of such well-known families as the Darwins and Gladstones, and examined the household and family relations of Sigmund Freud. The book was dedicated to Leonore's own siblings.

Born in New York, Leonore was the second of four children of Ida and Leo Davidoff, impoverished Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe. Her father became a neurosurgeon; her mother, an early supporter of women's rights, gained an MA in the early 1920s and later

trained as a marriage counsellor. The family moved from Brooklyn to New Canaan, Connecticut, when Leonore was eight, and she attended the local school.

She began studying music at Oberlin College, Ohio, but switched to sociology. Concerned about the increasingly repressive political climate of the US, Leonore decided to pursue her postgraduate studies in Britain, and in 1953 began an MA at the London School of Economics. Her dissertation *The Employment of Married Women* boldly addressed a neglected subject, introduced her to historical as well as sociological research and crucially triggered in her an awareness of the centrality of domestic service to the economy and the value of approaching past and present by examining women's lives.

During her first year at the LSE, Leonore met [David Lockwood](#), then a PhD student, later a sociologist whose research would have a huge impact on the understanding of class in Britain. They married in 1954.

Leonore taught part-time, briefly in Birmingham, then in London, as she brought up two young sons, and, after David was appointed lecturer in economics at the university, in Cambridge. A third son was born in 1963. Leonore found these years difficult; the role of traditional faculty wife was not her style. Eight years of being, as she put it, "around the colleges but not in them" gave her a sense of being marginalised, but fortunately in the late 60s she found like-minded people at the new Lucy Cavendish College for mature women.

In 1968 David became professor of sociology at the fledgling University of Essex and Leonore secured work as a part-time research officer in the sociology department, studying domestic service and household management. She became a lecturer there in the mid-70s, taught on the UK's first MA in women's history and in 1990 was made a research professor.

*Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on [Gender](#) & Class* (1995) gathered together her articles on the relationships between family, home and work since the late 18th century. With Megan Doolittle, Janet Fink and Katherine Holden, Leonore produced *The Family Story: Blood, Contract and Intimacy, 1830-1960* (1999).

Leonore believed in working collectively. In the early 70s she was a key figure in the Feminist History Group in London and helped to create the Women's Research and Resources Centre that later became the [Feminist Library](#). She was the founding editor in 1989 of the transatlantic journal *Gender & History*, and those of us on the journal's editorial team were encouraged to see ourselves as part of a collective that took a round-table approach.

Leonore held visiting professorships and fellowships at American, Australian and European universities and was awarded an honorary doctorate in 2000 by the University of Bergen. An

inspirational figure, she was sought out by research students and colleagues from all over the world, yet remained an accessible, welcoming figure.

David died earlier this year. Leonore is survived by their sons, Ben, Matthew and Harold, and seven grandchildren.