

Daly, Kerry

## "Negative spaces" in family theory. Using culture as a lens

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# Inhalt

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- 3 Sibylle Hübner-Funk  
PERSPEKTIVENWECHSEL INTERNATIONAL: NEUE ANSÄTZE  
DER FAMILIEN-, KINDHEITS- UND JUGENDFORSCHUNG
- 9 Kerry Daly  
»Negative spaces« in family theory Using culture as a lens
- 19 Martina Beham, Lieselotte Wilk, Ulrike Zartler und Renate Kränzl-Nagl  
Wenn Eltern sich trennen Bewältigungsstrategien aus Kinder- und Partnersicht
- 28 Julia Brannen  
Familienleben aus kindlicher Sicht Ein britisches Projekt zur Verbreitung von  
Forschungsergebnissen durch Video
- 39 Margaret Carr  
Wechsel des Blickwinkels Ein soziokulturelles Curriculum und die Erforschung der  
frühen Kindheit in Neuseeland
- 49 Elly Singer und Dorian de Haan  
»Zusammen machen«: Gemeinsamkeit herstellen und Konflikte  
lösen Beobachtungen aus der niederländischen Kleinkindbetreuung
- 57 Tom Erik Arnkil  
Institutionelle Barrieren intersubjektiv überwinden Sorgenbezogene  
dialogische Verfahren in der Frühintervention Finnlands
- 67 Katharine D. Kelly und Tullio C. Caputo  
»Straßenjugend« als Risikogruppe Ein Überblick zu den Forschungen im  
englischsprachigen Kanada
- 76 René Bendit, Kerstin Hein und Andy Biggart  
Delayed and negotiated autonomy Domestic emancipation of young Europeans
- 86 Torild Hammer und Helen Russell  
What are unemployed young Europeans up to? A comparative analysis of  
gender-specific differences in employment commitment

# »Negative spaces« in family theory

Using culture as a lens<sup>1</sup>

Kerry Daly

## »Negative Räume« in der Familientheorie

Vom Gebrauch der Kultur als Zoom-Objektiv

In meinem Beitrag »»Negative Räume« in der Familientheorie: Vom Gebrauch der Kultur als Zoom-Objektiv« gehe ich davon aus, dass es eine signifikante Diskrepanz gibt zwischen der Art und Weise, wie Familien faktisch ihr Leben leben und der Art und Weise, in der die Sozialwissenschaften über Familien theoretisieren.<sup>2</sup> Indem ich die (aus der Welt der darstellenden Kunst stammenden) Metaphern »positive« versus »negative Räume« benutze, demonstriere ich, dass es vielfältige »negative Räume« in unserer traditionellen Theoriebildung gibt – insbesondere bezüglich der alltäglichen Familienaktivitäten, die besonders viel Zeit, Energie und Aufmerksamkeit in Anspruch nehmen. Drei Arten von »negativen Räumen« verlangen vor allem vermehrte theoretische Zuwendung: der Bereich der Spiritualität, der Emotionen und Mythen; die Aktivitäten, die sich auf den alltäglichen Konsum und seine Objekte beziehen sowie Zeit und Raum. Mein Beitrag skizziert das Spektrum der mit diesen Feldern verbundenen Forschungsfragen und versucht, auch deren praktische Implikationen aufzuzeigen.

When we look at any family, including our own, we see that everyday life is shaped by the complex intersection of material concerns, health concerns, moral and spiritual concerns, temporal concerns, spatial concerns and/or relationship concerns. In spite of the fact that these concerns are pervasive, they often are missing in our formal theorising about families – a fact to which Marshall et al. (1993) refer to as the »elusiveness of family life«. I use the metaphor of »*negative spaces*« according to Edwards (1999) as a means of foregrounding the implicit theories of everyday family life: »Negative spaces« are the recessive areas (in drawing) that we are unaccustomed to see but that are important for the representation of the reality at hand.

There are several »galleries« for family theory that highlight the dominant and positive forms of our family theorising. For example, in its 2000 decade review, the

*Journal of Marriage and Family* has sketched the theoretical and empirical developments in areas of critical importance for understanding families, including domestic violence, gender, fatherhood, and the consequences of divorce for children. These are examples of the major »positive forms« in our theorising activity and an established part of our research tradition. As family scientists, we have a lot of preconceived expectations that enable us to see and comprehend the shapes, edges, data, and models that constitute these theories. In everyday family life, however, there are many activities that take up considerable time, energy, and attention but are poorly represented in our theorising about families, in particular:

- the realm of belief and intuition, consisting of emotions, religious and spiritual matters, myths and folklore;
- the world of material things and the activities of consumption, and
- the co-ordinates of time and space as a means of understanding »the here and now« of everyday family experience.

### **Focusing on »negative spaces«: why, how and what for?**

There are several reasons for the presence of »negative spaces« in family theorising. Let me stress the major ones:

»Negative spaces« are a function of how we theorise and measure in family science. The dominant »positive spaces« usually are shaped by the (positivist) paradigms consisting of variables, models and predictability. The preoccupation with empirical measurement means that most of our research focuses on individuals, not on families as social systems. According to Marshall (op. cit.), our most powerful statistical techniques require that the units under observation be independent, which precludes the study of families as networks of genetically and socially inter-dependent individuals. Family life thus tends to be viewed in terms of statistical averages – around measures of central tendency – rather than in the diversity and complexity of *shared meanings* and *inter-related interactions*. Although new techniques – such as multilevel modelling – allow to analyse individuals *within* families, many »negative spaces« arise from the difficulty of understanding *how families work*, rather than how individuals within families think or behave.

»Negative spaces« reflect a disjunction between theory and practice. Ironically, many family scholars have deliberately

distanced themselves from the vicissitudes of normal family life and found success as scholars by examining families as »outsiders looking in«, rather than insiders looking out. Moreover, »negative spaces« are present in our family theorising because of our diverse disciplinary traditions. Family theorists have upheld the pretense that the work that they do is inter-disciplinary. However, many of the »negative spaces« in our family theories are a function of our failure to be *integrative* in our theorising. Thus, »negative spaces« arise from parallel disciplines that seek to explain this compartmentalised family reality. Our family theories have drifted away from what families actually do in their everyday lives. To deliberately concentrate on »negative spaces« therefore will produce better theories about families, i. e. theories more grounded in everyday experience.

Discovering, articulating and conceptualising these concerns of families may produce a sharper shared edge – composed of both positive forms and »negative spaces«. By making our theories more relevant and reflective of everyday reality, they will become more practical, too, as they will better manage to bridge the gaps between theory and practice. And by more closely examining the everyday motivations, practices, values, and beliefs of family activities, the theories can better understand the many »puzzles« of everyday living. This is not to suggest that we should examine families in isolation from the structural and cultural systems of which they are a part. Rather, we need to come to a better understanding of the ways by which personal and family meanings are influenced by – and have an influence on – these organisational structures.

By foregrounding the processes, negotiations, and shared meanings in families – rather than focusing on individuals within families or aggregate patterns in family behaviour – we can centralise the dynamics



of »family« in our family theory. As family scientists, we have placed considerable energy into the definition of what a family is, by focusing on who is in and who is out. We have examined what it means to *live in a family* at many levels – from the most micro (individual consciousness and subjectivity) to the most macro (demographic trends in religious affiliation, fertility, or marriage stability). The experience of *being family*, however, is one of the most elusive challenges – both experientially and theoretically. The important question therefore is: When and under what conditions do we invoke a consciousness of

- *being* a family,
- *living* a family experience or
- *doing* family?

To understand these family dynamics and processes means to examine how family members *navigate* with each other as they are situated in time and place. By focusing on the ways families live together – as a complex unity of experience – we can create descriptions and explanations of *family reality* that confirm better to interdisciplinary and practical standards.

### Using culture as a lens

To focus on the theories that families *live by* is to consider family experience as embedded in culture. Culture is a dynamic and changing system of meanings and symbols. Cultural categories provide us with the »fundamental co-ordinates of meaning« (McCracken 1988, p. 73). Because complex cultures contain diverse and often conflicting symbols, rituals, and guides to action, culture is not a straightforward blueprint for how to act, but is better viewed as a »tool kit« for constructing strategies of action. It is in this regard that people can be seen to use culture or to treat culture as a »pool of resources« (Swidler 1986, 2001). The relation between actions and culture is a recursive one insofar as members of a community culture are constantly playing out cultural distinctions, while they are constantly engaged in the meaningful construction and redefinition of the culture in which they live. This »*culture of the moment*« changes with new ideas, words, and ways (Douglas/Isherwood 1996, p. 37).

Much of our traditional theorising in family studies has endeavoured to understand families as if they were suspended in time, space, and culture. Positivistic forms of theorising look for *enduring* patterns of explanation, while examining families as a

cultural form is understanding families as they permanently change and perform in relation to perceived collective codes and beliefs. Family members draw on the rituals, practices, and expectations that are available in the cultural »tool kit«. In the process they draw meaning from the cultural »matrix« of which they are a part and express meanings about the kind of family they wish to appear. Families do this in a variety of ways, e. g.

- they choose to mask or pronounce their racial or ethnic traditions and practices;
- they chose to follow or rebuke trends in the material world; or
- they create impressions about who they are as a family that either support or challenge dominant notions of family stability or *normalcy*.

Examining families as a cultural form allows us to look at the varied and unique ways that families *construct* their changing definitions. Theories of culture have emphasised the role of myth, folklore, and the sacred for understanding the evolution of human communities; material goods have always been a primary category of culture and serve a performative function insofar as goods are a vital and visible record of cultural meaning; and finally, culture as an organic and changeable process is firmly embedded in time and space. These key elements of culture constitute the »negative spaces« of our revised family theorising.

### »Negative space« No. 1: emotions, beliefs, and intuition

One of the central *paradoxes* of family science is that we have adopted the principles of rationalism to understand the complex, changeable, and largely unpredictable social form called family. The unpredictable flow of daily events and the inconsistencies of family behaviour have not been well accounted for in our traditional theorising. As Swidler (2001, p. 189) has observed, people who are asked to talk about everyday experience are »little constrained by logic«. This is the »wild card« of personal meaning when talking about family experience; it is difficult to capture in fixed-response categories (Marshall et al. op. cit., p. 58). The »negative spaces« of our theorising, however, harbour

**Recent theoretical efforts have begun to chart the underlying conceptualisations of emotions with particular attention given to the moral as well as the regulatory dimensions of emotions.**

a plethora of such phenomena. Shifting away from logical consistency and rationality brings attention to key issues in the realm of belief and intuition that hitherto have not been well addressed in family theory:

- emotions,
- religion and spirituality, and
- myth and folklore.

*Emotions* are rarely foregrounded in our theories, although much of the everyday rhetoric of living in families is about love, jealousy, anger, disappointment, hurt, tolerance, gratitude or care. Emotions are often difficult to track, as they involve expressions inconsistent with rational attitudes and/or behaviour. Yet, in all families there are cycles of emotional contagion where individuals – or events external to families – precipitate changes in the emotional climate of the family:

- A stressful day at work or school can create a family tone of tension or blame;
- the death of a parent can create an atmosphere of sadness, anger or relief;
- an impending wedding brings collective anxiety and hopefulness.

Recent theoretical efforts have begun to chart the underlying conceptualisations of emotions with particular attention given to the moral as well as the regulatory dimensions of emotions. Bahr (2002) has begun to re-specify the concept of »emotion work« within families so that it can be seen as activity or a type of *effort* that is visible in the daily processes of

family experience. According to Hochschild (1983), families are conditioned by unspoken *feeling rules* that are passed through the generations and that influence whether, how and when family members may express anger, joy, or sadness. Larson and Almeida (1999) have developed new approaches for understanding emotional transmissions within families by examining the ways in which certain emotions of one family member tend to affect emotions in other family members. Although emotions are embodied and expressed in individual family members, they are profoundly influenced by collective family rules and the family atmosphere.

Our Western-Christian culture dictates that families should be filled with positive emotions, but our research and theorising activities have tended to focus more on the negative emotions involved. In the 1970s and 1980s e.g., there was a concerted effort to understand emotions related to violence and abuse. More recent research on emotions in families focuses on the »work-to-family spillover« of negative emotions, such as stress and conflict. Other studies of the 1990s focus on the transmission of negative emotions from parents to children including anger, distress, depressed mood, and anxiety. In their review of the literature on emotions in families, Larson and Almeida (1999) suggest that negative emotions are *more contagious* than positive ones, and negative emotions appear to trump positive ones. On the other hand, terms such as *care* or *caregiving* are often associated with a *burdensome job* rather than with mutuality, relationship, and reciprocity. Similarly, when care is regarded in the context of childcare, it is often described as a form of »work« that is functional and demanding; and in the gender literature, the emphasis is on »emotion work« in families that mostly is invisible because of its *private* nature. Not only do we have a limited understanding of emotional processes within families, we also have a very limited understanding of positive emotions within this realm.

Furthermore, we have few models that direct us to examine emotional *contradictions*, e.g. when love coexists with hatred, competition with co-operation, and nurturance with self-interest. In a study on family care, Dressel and Clark (1990) conclude that family members hold to idealised notions of family care, while at the same time reporting situations of care that include negative thoughts or affects and ambiguities. In this vein, recent theoretical efforts by Connidis and McMullin

(2002) on the concept of *ambivalence* open pathways for developing theories of emotion that take into account the embeddedness of feelings in structurally created contradictions.

Perhaps our greatest taboo in traditional family theory is our reluctance to talk about love. Bahr and Bahr's recent review of the *Sourcebook of Family Theories* (2001) has pointed out that references to love in theoretical family debates is virtually absent, and Milardo's (2000) decade review in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* is not much interested in love or any of its related emotions either. Even the chapters on marital interaction or sexuality exclude discussions of love as an emotion. Here, the irony of our split between theory and everyday life is most glaringly apparent: Families are formed and broken in the name of love; family members live their everyday lives according to an ethic of love: parents are expected to show love to their children, children to their parents and siblings to each other; or people live their lives longing for »true love« to come or in an effort to recapture some love that was lost. Love permeates everyday family experience (even irrationally – in the face of inequity and violence) and is a salient motivating feature underlying care and cohesion in families.

Given the pervasiveness of love in the everyday experience of family life, it is very surprising that love is so recessed in our theoretical portrayals of families. There are some recent examinations of love in parallel disciplines that offer some hints for reforming our family theories:

- Swidler's (2001) ethnography of middle aged adults e. g. has tried to find out what love actually means to this group of people by focusing on their vocabularies and repertoires. This analysis provides a window on »culture in action«, as love lies at the root of so many of our cultural practices including our music, art, folklore, and popular beliefs.
- Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) e. g. have tackled the complexities and contradictions of love in families as they relate to a broad array of cultural processes including industrialisation, gender dynamics at home and in the work place, parenting, individuation, and loneliness.
- Empirical studies of love – like the 1998 report by Grote and Friese – have appeared in journals such as the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* but have traditionally focused on undergraduate samples of young adults in non-marital romantic relationships and only occasionally explore the meaning of love in marriage relationships.

Although these works provide an important ground for incorporating love into our family theories, there is very little attention to the more complex dynamics of love that are present in parent-child or inter-generational relationships. Like the analysis of family care by Dressel and Clark (1990), focusing on love would provide insight into complex motives for family behaviour or contradictions and irrational conduct in family relationships.

Although *organised religion* has declined world wide, the majority – e. g. of North Americans and Canadians – identify themselves as »religious«. Hitherto, belief, spirituality, and superstition have played an important role in the modes how families make their decisions, but this is largely unaccounted for in family theorising. Decade reviews of the relevant literature in the 1980s and 1990s have echoed a concern about the neglect of the study of the link between religion and family. Due in large part to the politicisation of religion and family

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values and the devaluation of religion in the modernisation theorising – emphasising rationality and the primacy of social, political, and economic forces in social change – theories which have to do with the spiritual or religious realm are often recessed in family theory.

In spite of this cautious distancing of many a family scientist, family members still tend to live their lives through some kind of religious or spiritual belief. Mostly, religion is woven into the critical family junctures of birth, marriage, and death. Moreover, the dominance of religious beliefs and practices in many family rituals is brought into sharp relief when their marginalising effects have been examined among, e. g. gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people attending heterosexual marriages (Oswald 2000).

In spite of the reticence to pay attention to religion, religious belief can play an important role in shaping both the ideological frameworks that families *live by* as well as the everyday practices that they exhibit in their behaviour. For example, religion can be important for the socialisation of values with mothers playing a key role in passing on religious beliefs and orientations to their children. In the development of a conceptual model between religion and family, Dollahite (2001) examines the linkages between spirituality and generativity. A number of empirical studies have drawn links among religious beliefs, parenting styles, and discipline approaches (cf. Gershoff/Miller/ Holden 1999; Gunnoe et al. 1999). Religiosity also has had a tradition of being associated with marital satisfaction. Gallagher's (Gallagher/Smith 1999) research has examined the way that religious ideology affects the negotiation of gender in marriage. Although such empirical studies highlight some of the ways that religion shapes family experience, they not yet have reached an accepted status in family theorising.

Many family decisions are based on *inherited traditions, practices, and beliefs*. When family members live their lives in the taken-for-granted uninterrupted mode, they are – according to Geertz (1973, p. 218) – typically »guided, both emotionally and intellectually, in their judgments and activities by unexamined prejudices«. These prejudices not only reflect the degree to which culture is embedded in actions and beliefs, but also highlight the relative immunity of culture from routine scrutiny. As a result, many behaviours or beliefs that constitute proud family traditions stay

unchecked until there is a conflict or crisis that calls them into question. For example, family beliefs about the importance of spanking – »so that kids will turn out right« – will continue until these beliefs and associated behaviours are confronted or challenged from outside. When faced with new challenges and crises, families renew their awareness of their myths and ideologies. It is when the cultural guidelines for family behaviours are weak or absent that there is a call to rearticulate the standards and solutions for the path forward.

*Family stories* are one of the chief mechanisms for defining the identity of a family, including what the common believes and values are. As Patton (1999, p. 339) has argued, »myths that have survived and have been passed from generation to generation are inherently normative ... (and) provide a basis for interpreting highly particularistic life events, experiences and histories«. Although usually cloaked as »historical«, factual accounts of lives lived and family stories, as *social constructions*, are always partly mythical with some degree of manipulation – crafted »to favorably situate themselves in the topography of social life« (LaRossa 1995, p. 553). Family stories mediate culture in an immediate and concrete way. Stories serve as a way to »weave« meaningful plots that foreground family characters, events, and relationships into the »carpet« of cultural processes, values, and experiences. Stories also serve as standards by which people evaluate their family relationships. Furthermore, stories are not only constructed to distinguish meaningful family experience, they also are constructed to privilege the self in a way that is consistent with past events and prospects of the future. It is in this regard that story telling is part of a *political process* that shapes and controls relationships.

It is easy to accept story telling as a central and in some ways »natural« process



in the experience of being a family. It is more challenging, however – within the context of family science – to account for the way that stories can show blatant disregard for the values of scientific explanation that we hold so dear. Whereas stories are selective, manipulative and political, our scientific explanations rest on precise measurement through variables, control and prediction. To put it more openly: Scientific approaches of objectivity rely on »the truth«; while family stories are bound by pride, preservation, and the face work of being a »good family«.

Gillis (1996) has argued that everyone lives in two families: one to live with (in everyday reality) and one to *live by*. The families that we *live by* are imagined families, drawn from the past and constituted through myth and ritual – much simpler, less problematic, better integrated, untroubled by generational divisions, close to kin, respectful of the old, and honouring the dead. The persistence and tenacity of these images suggests that they play an important role in shaping how families live through the messiness and disorders of their modern routines. This nostalgic construction of family stability, strength, and cohesiveness plays a very important role in managing the tensions, conflicts, and disappointments that arise in the course of living *with* a specific family. Motivated by pride and protection, e. g. secrets of alcoholism, marital violence, or abuse are not carried forward in the stories. As a result, families create and maintain their own myths by what is included and excluded from the shared chronicles of who they are as a family. The way that families construct and manage their inherited myths deserves more attention in our family theories.

### »Negative space« No. 2: consumption and the meaning of things

In our family theorising, we have done a reasonable job of understanding the materialist underpinnings of family life through the examination of productive work outside the home. The literature on work and family has proliferated and is a highly rated topic. In spite of the historical linkages between family science and consumer studies, however, we have given less attention to understanding how spending behaviours and consumer goods are the basis for the construction of meaning in the everyday experience of family life. As DuGay (2000) has shown, the lack of attention to families as *consumers* is part of a marginalisation of consumption from the research agenda in favour of a greater emphasis on the productionist orientation.

Given the proliferation of goods in the marketplace of Western societies, our almost constant exposure to commercial messages, and the energy we invest in acquiring consumer goods, one could argue that consumption related meanings and activities dominate much of our everyday lives. Globalisation and the increased pace of life have given rise to the quest for intense experience and a corresponding attachment to »the new«, which has fuelled our consumption activity. Nevertheless, family theory seems to treat family

dynamics as if they were unmediated by material needs and strategies. Consumer goods and material things shape values and beliefs in families, mediate family relationships, create conflicts in families and are part of the process of »identity work« and »dream management« in modern families.

Of central importance for understanding consumption as a force that shapes how families live their everyday lives is to examine how the acquisition of goods reflects the way families participate in the cultural system of values. In the Western world, dominant cultural values still coalesce around an external reward system of money and status. Through measures of conformity and demand, most parents still endeavour to cajole their children onto a path of social success guided by the cultural supply of external rewards. This »*homo oeconomicus*« model involves the allotment of differential rewards to individuals and the maintenance of a complex social and economic hierarchy at the structural level (Csikszentmihalyi 1975). Although it would be folly to claim that all family behaviour is guided by external, materialist rewards, it is also folly to ignore the power that these rewards have for shaping family interactions.

Things play a critical role in shaping both what families do and who they are. The things that a family possesses have a performative function insofar as they are part of a process of family identity construction whereby they create fences and establish boundaries through their material goods. Houses, cars, clothes, and household

effects are all ways of setting markers and divisions in the broader matrix of cultural meaning. As Veblen (1899) argued more than a century ago, the consumption of goods is *conspicuous* and communicates in a very public way the organisation of social class in our culture. The activities of »conspicuous consumption« serve to reinforce the boundaries of social class, communicate »reputability« and set the leisure ideals of »pecuniary ability« (Veblen 1899, pp. 63–64). This display of possessions is a way for families to have their possessions ranked and evaluated, and used to portray their hard earned final composite identity. So, things have the dual function in families of creating both solidarity and a set of »keep out« signs.

Things are also the basis for creating divisions and positions within the home of a family. Because individuals cultivate different objects, conflicts over material objects constitute a central dynamic in family experience. Separation after divorce e. g. brings into sharp focus the attachment that partners and their children have to certain things in the home when they must be divided into separate ownership. Goods are expressed through age, sex, ethnicity, class, and occupation, and as a result, the order of goods in the home reflects both the order of the person and the order of the culture. This order is established not only by categories of meaning, but processes of negotiation, conflict, and boundary vigilance. Although possessions are communicators of meaning for the individuals, Douglas and Isherwood (1996) argue that material goods are central to managing relationships and can serve as an important lens for understanding conflict and division in families.

Things also serve as a medium of play and leisure in families. This is an area that has been largely neglected in family science. Although there is considerable research in the child development literature on the meaning of toys and their role in the socialisation and development of children, little attention has been given to the way that families purchase and use things for their pleasure and enjoyment. Even in the »*Leisure Studies*« literature, the emphasis has been almost entirely on the individual as the unit of analysis. One of the major costs in this pursuit of goods, however, has been the loss of free time. For many families, the current malaise is an »ironic sense of scarcity in the midst of plenty« because »goods create scarcities of time« (Cross 1993, p. 1). It is in this regard that consumption, work, and time are braided tightly into the spine of everyday family life.

This brief overview of the meaning of consumption for families highlights many possibilities for understanding the theories that families *live by*. The dominant view of consumption in our culture tends to focus on the hedonistic individual, motivated by greed. A theoretical focus on consumption and families would lead to a better understanding of the process of family identity construction through the internal dynamics of power, gender, and conflict that are played out in the pursuit of goods.

### »Negative space« No. 3: time and space

At a very basic level, home and work are *territories of self* that show how we use time, space, and artifacts to manage our existential boundaries in everyday life. *Time and space* serve as multidimensional axes that involve both structural boundaries and processual movements and transitions. Distance between the sites of home and work has a direct effect on time (how much time is required to get to work); resources (the need for a car, energy costs); and emotional well-being (stress, anxiety, proximity to children during the day). Whereas those who commute back and forth are likely to encounter more »experiential discontinuity between realms« (Nippert-Eng 1996, p. 223), those who work at home face the challenge of creating and maintaining boundaries between space for work-related activities and materials on the one and space for family routines and relationships on the other hand. With regard to the latter, the physical layout of space in the home shapes and constrains the presence and visibility of work artefacts, which in turn determines the probability of being interrupted in any continuous activity. Families socially create spaces that are meaningful to them, and in turn these spaces constrain, mediate, and reflect family identities and relationships (Allen 2001).

The relation between the family home and the surrounding community has changed tremendously over time – with profound implications for the organisation of space and time, as Gillis (1996) has described in historical detail. Since the mid-1960s, with more and more women in the paid labour force, the everyday family routine follows a *ritual of dispersion* that leaves the house – and the neighbourhood of which it is a part – most of the time empty (cf. Daly 1996). Thus, the pattern of everyday experience for many families is that members are independently positioned on their own co-ordinates of time and space



during day-time. In this regard, the ways that families manage these transitions of dispersion and reconvergence, is of particular interest for family research. Larson (2001) has begun to explore this daily reconvergence in »dual earner families« and has called it the »5 o'clock crash«.

The changing organisation of space in the home has direct repercussions for the organisation of time in families. Space that is increasingly specialised within the home results in a predisposition to time devoted to individual pursuits as opposed to communal ones. Larger homes mean more time devoted to physical upkeep, routine housecleaning, or the purchase of services to address these growing maintenance demands. Greater privacy within the neighbourhood means more insularity and less time given to the nurturance of community ties. Whereas the togetherness of family time is longed for, individual demands and interests often take precedence (cf. Daly 2001).

*Technology* has also had a major impact on the organisation of family time and space, as it gives rise to a contradiction between the breaking down of time and space boundaries on the one hand and the growing need by families to protect and reinforce these boundaries, on the other:

- For example, pagers and cell phones are increasingly used for family purposes as a way to maintain contact in time when family members are spread out over different spaces.
- E-mail is increasingly replacing letters and long distance phone calls as a way to maintain ties with extended family.

In both examples, technology serves as a bridge across the boundaries of space and time. Simultaneously, however, these communication technologies increase the degree to which family members are accessible and able to be interrupted by the demands of work. Sitting down quietly to send a personal E-mail to a sister across the country means looking at the professional E-mails having arrived in your mailbox. Although this example is but one illustration of this boundary paradox, the new communication technologies present us with this dilemma on a routine basis.

Time and space are both tethered to the cultural process in so far as the ways in which we conceptualise and categorise them are laden with meaning. We take for granted fundamental terms such as *family time* and *home*, but they are complex cultural phenomena that reflect changing ideals and

realities. Actually, they reflect theories that families *live by*, but theories we have not adequately addressed in our traditional family theorising activities.

## Conclusion

Theories are not ends in themselves, but rather a lens meant to magnify some things and minimise others (Bahr & Bahr 2001). The articulation of »negative spaces« in our theorising can serve as a basis for seeing more clearly some of the hidden, but pervasive dimensions of everyday family life.

In order to bring more »negative spaces« into our family theories, we may need to give some thought to the form that our theories take. If our goal is to create a theory that comes closer to understanding what goes on in families, then we should create theories that capture how families live their everyday lives – their values, operating assumptions, guiding philosophies, and decision-making processes. As Swidler (2001) argues, when talking to »ordinary people« about ordinary experiences in life that matter to them, their responses are often »disjointed, self-contradictory or fragmentary« (ibid., p. 181). Therefore, we may need to think about theories that reflect the contradictions of everyday living, that are incomplete and yet provide portraits of »*culture in action*«, and that use vocabularies that are recognisable in the worlds out of which the theories are fashioned.

In spite of the enormous diversity that exists when we look across families, there is still something that draws us to understand how families »work«. We need to articulate their »logic of practice« (cf. Bourdieu 1990), whereby the experience of everyday family life can be examined in terms of (ir-)regularities and even incoherences. In order to take into account the competing and myriad meanings of *family* in Western societies, it is necessary to conceptualise family as a *socially constructed*, situationally contingent cluster of meanings that presents family activity as a constellation of ideas, images, and terminology. To understand families »in action« is to get beyond the emphasis on rational and logical behaviour in families, in order to understand the »logic of practice«, whereby families make instantaneous judgements, assessments, and urgent decisions that often preclude the orderly logic of detachment and reflection.

We need to pay greater attention to change and transformation through the use of a »multiplicity of accumulated glimpses« in order to create complex composites of emerging reality (Bahr 1994, p. 57). Hitherto, the majority of our accounts of family reality are divorced from space and place. Instead of presenting our results as almost »universal« experiences without spatial roots, we need to attend to the nuances and idiosyncrasies that accompany a family's place-based reality. By grounding our theoretical accounts more directly in mundane experience, we also reach the position to make our theories more pragmatic and useful.

## Annotations

- 1 This paper is a massively shortened and revised version of the article originally published under the title »*Family theory versus the theories families live by*« in the Journal of Marriage and the Family (JMF) 65, 4, 2003, pp. 771–785. The National Council on Family Relations has kindly granted the reprint permission of this revised version (realized by Sibylle Hübner-Funk, DISKURS editor in charge).
- 2 Die deutschsprachige Fassung dieses Artikels ist als Download unter [www.dji.de](http://www.dji.de) verfügbar.

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