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Practicing the family – Introduction

Sabine Bollig and Lisa Groß

1 The COVID-19 pandemic as a magnifying glass for the entanglement of the family and families life

This volume brings together research that focuses on the everyday practices of the family, asking not only about the ways in which family members shape and perform their family life in their everyday activities, but also about how these everyday family practices are related to the functional systems that support, supplement and control the reproductive work of the family in welfare states: public education and social work. To this end, the welfare state institutions of education and social work are not only considered as institutional contexts of family life, but also as sites and places where the social configuration and addressing of the family and particular families and the everyday practice of shaping and negotiating familial positions, relationships and mutual obligations converge in a very practical way. The articles collected here, therefore, unite by referring to at least some kind of praxeological understanding of the family (Finch 2007, Morgan 2011, Jurczyk 2022), which, starting from the diversity and complexity of modern societies and modern family life, understands the family as an societal institution and a way of life of families, held together by the interweaving of a multitude of discursive and socio-material activities, which make certain social practices recognisable as ‘family practices’ at a particular time and in a particular situation.

The close links between family practices and the policies and institutions of the welfare state have recently come to the attention of a wider public in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this respect, the sometimes drastic measures taken to contain the initial spread of the virus have particularly highlighted the inequalities and non-simultaneity between, on the one hand, the family as a regulated private sphere of welfare production, closely intertwined with markets and the services of education and social work (Daly 2022, Hank/Steinbach 2019), and, on the other hand, more fluid forms of everyday practice of actual families (Jurczyk 2022).

In particular, the social debates on and the individual handling of policy rules for ‘permissible contact’ in the context of ‘social distancing’, which in some countries was initially limited to ‘one’s own household’ and ‘immediate family’, highlighted

like under a magnifying glass, how differently family is understood and lived and how little ‚family‘ and ‚household‘ match in everyday life. For example, in Germany, where relatively strict contact rules were introduced at the beginning of the pandemic, exemptions had quickly to be made for children of separated parents, in order to enable them to travel between their different family residences and exercise their right to contact with both parents. Young people in residential care homes, however, had to wait longer for such exemptions to be made (Mairhofer et al. 2020). And transnational families, especially the migrant worker parents who regularly commute across borders between their workplaces and their families' places of residence, were also less fortunate, as air travel restrictions and border closures affected their physical contact with their multilocal families for long periods of time (Nehring/Hu 2022).

However, the vulnerability of the family to welfare state policies was also evident for families living in the same household. This was particularly the case with regard to the unequal ability and capacity of families to cope with the removal or shifting of spatial and temporal boundaries between work and family life (Gayatri/Irawaty 2022), which resulted from the combination of home office or more demanding working conditions for medical and care personnel with the simultaneous partial closure of crèches/kindergartens and schools (Vitória/Ribeiro/Carvalho 2022). Low-income families, so-called 'multiple-problem families', separated or single parents, and mothers in general were hit hardest by these boundary shifts (Goldberg/Allen/Smith 2021, Witte/Kindler 2022, Holztrattner et al. 2023, Hoskins/Wainwright 2023). And we have also seen how, in response to the situation, new family-like units have emerged, as the temporary limited availability of day care or leisure activities for children in youth and sports clubs has prompted parents to join forces with other families to overcome the isolation of children and parents as a 'family couple'. In doing so, these families practically translated the understanding of the 'nuclear or close family' under the conditions of COVID-19 into a 'closed private virus community'. However, educational and social work institutions influenced these adapted forms of family practice not only through their initial restriction of services. The switch to distance learning, counselling, etc., and the wave-like renegotiations of who can, may or must physically use the services of schools, preschools or child protection services, and under what conditions, also influenced further everyday negotiations about who, as part of the nuclear or extended family, was included in the necessary adjustments to everyday family life and duties, and in what way.

This COVID-19-related ‚relapse to the family‘ also had unexpected effects, including on families in contact with child protection services. In particular, in the early days of contact bans, professionals feared that the re-confinement of children within the family, combined with high levels of family stress, would further jeopardise children's wellbeing, especially in families that were already struggling

to ensure it. Despite conflicting findings from individual studies, recent reviews clearly show that this concern was not unjustified, as child maltreatment has increased worldwide (MCDowell et al. 2024), while disclosure and support structures have been limited. However, child welfare workers also report positive effects of the decoupling of family and school/social work institutions. For example, social workers have also reported that some of the families with whom the child protection services work have developed more satisfactory forms of everyday life precisely as a result of the closure of public life (Witte/Kindler 2022)(The sometimes perceived ‘exemption from compulsory schooling’ as a central stress factor in families could also have contributed to this). These findings are somewhat consistent with other studies of middle-class families, which show that although the COVID-19 pandemic placed a heavy burden on mothers in particular, under certain conditions they also reported positive effects such as greater closeness to their children, more harmonious family life and better quality of interaction with the other parent. Similarly, many parents used the experience of the pandemic to reassess the main stressors in their family life and to take advantage of more flexible and reduced working hours, although with significant differences depending on the overall wealth of the family and also according to gender (Cox et al. 2023).

The COVID-19 crisis has thus not only reminded us of the ongoing pluralisation of the concept of family and the associated diversification of what families do to live their family lives – or, to put it another way, of the increasingly heterogeneous ‘doing family’ (Morgan 2011, Jurczyk 2020) in diversifying societies. The pandemic has also highlighted the close intertwining of these family practices with welfare state institutions of education and social work and their associated policies and discourses – or, to put it another way, with the socio-political and institutional ‘making of the family’ (Shorter 1977, Blo et al. 2003, Nienwenhuis/van Lancker 2020) in times of already changing welfare states (Dingeldey 2007, Ferragina 2023).

2 Family studies and the doing and making of family in welfare state contexts

It is not surprising, then, that these highly interdependent and complex entanglements of families and welfare states have always been one of the central focal points of the so called *family studies*, the interdisciplinary field of family research that extends across the academic disciplines of education and social work, sociology, cultural anthropology, political science, law, psychology, etc. The same applies to other fields, such as childhood, gender or inequality studies, which also examine the relationship of families and family practices to certain welfare or care regimes (e.g. Leitner 2003), not only with regard to the unequal social situations of different families, and the resulting social capabilities of their individual members to realise a good

and just life – which also highlights the family as a “central redistributive principle of the welfare state” (Frericks/Gurín 2023). The “family-welfare state nexus” (Zagel/Lohmann 2020: 119) is also of interest in terms of its fundamental role in cultural norms on gender, aging, childhood, etc. (e.g. Pfau-Effinger 2005), the normalisation and politicisation of parenthood (e.g. Richter/Andresen 2012) as well as of governing citizens and the self (e.g. Donzelot 1997, Duschinsky/Rocha 2012).

The profound influence of the welfare state on the family itself and the identities and loyalties of their members is therefore not only due to it as a system of production and distribution of social rights and services. Rather, welfare states and participating in its services shape the way we think, feel and care for family as a society and as individuals as an “overarching mode of societal organisation and socialisation” (Lessenich 2016: 874, “Vergesellschaftung” own translation). By balancing the duties and needs of reproductive work with the operation of both states and markets, welfare states, thus, creates powerful relationships between the individual and society and constructs and interrelates social groups, like women/men, younger/elder, immigrants/natives, as well as the reciprocal and intergenerational caring relationships (Leira/Saraceno 2004) that we understand – albeit historically and culturally differently – as the conceptual core of the family (Hantrais/Brannen/Bennett 2019, Ecarius/Schierbaum 2022).

In this line, especially studies in feminist and critical welfare research (for an overview, Boyd 1997, Jurczyk/Oechsle 2008, Daly 2022) have substantiated, that if the family is both, a product and medium of welfare state action, we have to move beyond the understanding of family and welfare state as separated spheres of social reproduction which influence each other. Rather, we need to conceptualize the private and the public as mutually interconnected opposites, deriving their meaning from context-specific distinctions which form powerful (in)visibilities, positions and relations (Gal 2002). Historically, these processes of differentiation can be traced back to the emergence of the bourgeois nuclear family, as Foucault (1997) has shown, for example, in his analysis of the masturbation discourse, which helped to establish the private sphere of the family as a physical space of intimate, responsible relations and control in interaction with the developing public regimes of medicine and education. To examine the current relational production of public and private spheres of care, Thelen and Albers (2018) use the term ‘border work’ to emphasise that kinship (in the sense of familial obligations) and state administration (in the sense of regulating and exercising public duties) are not separate entities, but deeply intertwined processes that are woven into the concrete physical and emotional practices of, for example, family care for the elderly: as relational practices of kinning/stat-ing. From this perspective, other welfare services and educational institutions, such as e.g. day-care centres and family counselling services, are to be understood not only as infrastructures of family life, but also as relays and arenas of power relations between individuals and the state. With this view of education and social work as

places where contested, confused and ambiguous boundaries between the private and public spheres are implicitly negotiated, the interactions of families in and with these services are receiving increasing attention in the research areas mentioned above, albeit to varying degrees and along particular disciplinary traditions.

In recent years, for example, studies on childhood and family in the fields of education and social work have focused intensively on the changing private and public responsibilities in education and childrearing, analysed as a dynamic interplay of de-familialisation and re-familialisation of childhood (Zeijher 2009; Oelkers 2012), which has emerged in the wake of the increasing dominance of social investment strategies in (European) welfare states (Betz et al. 2017). The associated expansion of educational institutions (kindergartens, pre-schools, all-day schools) that start earlier and earlier, as well as services which combine support for and control of parents from pregnancy and birth on („no child left behind“, Daly 2015), is therefore being discussed as a “de-privatisation of the family” (Hünersdorf/Toppe 2011, own translation). The associated shift in public perceptions of the family “from function to competence” (Gillies 2011) is reflected not only in new cultures of intensified parenting (Faircloth 2013, Lee et al. 2023), but also in other forms of “investive social status work” (Gülzau/Mau 2020) that middle-class families undertake for their children in interaction with those institutions (Vincent/Ball 2006, Lareau 2011). With regard to young children in particular, these studies suggest that, through this interplay of welfare state policies, related discourses and (dominant) family lifestyles, the family with young children is increasingly transformed into a semi-public educational space that fulfils a co-productive role for the public upbringing of children from birth (e.g. Baader/Bollig 2021). However, this de-privatisation also goes hand in hand with a re-familialisation of childhood: while the state increasingly assumes responsibility for well-being and good upbringing of the youngest, families are simultaneously more and more held accountable for the educational and life success of their children. Gillies (2005) has analysed these new parenting discourses, among other things, as a way of individualising social classes and thus as a new form of legitimising economic class differences through the moralisation of parenthood (see also Dermott 2012). Drawing on the recent history of US social policy, Cooper (2017) has shown that this imperative of familial responsibility and investment in kinship obligations, even beyond childhood, forms the interface of an invocation of ‘family values’ across neoliberal and conservative positions in order to stabilize socio-economic inequalities through the dismantling and restructuring of the welfare state.

However, due to these shifting and complex boundaries between private and public education and support, many encounters between schools, social work and youth services as well as family members involve not only practices in which the family/families/family members are addressed and positioned in line (or even in active contradiction) with current dynamics in the welfare state regulation of certain individuals/collectives and the state (e.g. Jäppinen et al. 2024). These encounters be-

tween the family/families and the welfare state organisations are also increasingly characterised by negotiations of the mutual distribution of tasks and responsibilities between the respective parties, whereby the 'border work' and creating relational boundaries between the family and these institutions themselves becomes a site of subjectivisation of parents and children (Bollig/Sichma 2023; Bundgaard/Olwig 2018). Thelen and Coe (2017) have shown, using the example of care for the elderly, how deeply this border work between kinship and the state is embedded in the concrete care practices for the elderly, and in a way that integrates central processes of the social order and thus leads to specific and multi-level political affiliations that interact profoundly with the abilities and opportunities of families to act as a caring network. Similarly, Koning et al. (2022) focus on 'parenting encounters' of migrant/refugee parents, i.e. encounters that people have with a variety of non-institutional and institutional actors (in education and social work) in relation to their parenthood. They understand these 'parenting encounters' as a central governmental domain, where concerns and hopes for the future of society intersect with citizenship agendas (De Koning et al., 2015) and notions of family care, welfare and the deservingness of public resources. This is because in these encounters issues of belonging, citizenship and the role of the family in shaping community and society are negotiated, embedded in complex relational landscapes that encompass complex institutional and social worlds characterised by conflicting welfare rationalities and practices. These encounters therefore represent highly dilemmatic spaces (Kronig et al. 20–22, citing Hoggett et al. 2006), where the re-articulations of the public and the private within these encounters of migrant parents and, in particular, education and social work professionals are intertwined with corresponding paradoxical tensions, namely those between universality and difference, as well as irreconcilable social and institutional demands. The author argues, that the focus on such encounters, takes us beyond the study of street-level bureaucracies that highlights discretionary space (Lipsky, 2010), and state governance and its social effects. It, instead, highlights the negotiated, ambiguous, and paradoxical nature of attempts at governing families life.

3 The praxeological turn in family research and welfare research

This powerful and yet ambiguous and contradictory interrelations and interactions between the welfare state, its institutions and services on the one hand, and the family and family life on the other, as described above, are linked to an increase in praxeological understandings of the family and its relationship to the welfare state that can be observed since the 1990s. However, this rise of praxeological understandings of the family and its ecologies has developed not only in line with the so-called practice turn in social and cultural studies (Reckwitz 2002, Hui/Schatzki/Shove 2020),

but also with profound changes in everyday family life and the associated political governance of it.

This, firstly, concerns the increasing heterogeneity, diversity and fluidity of the family today, as well as the variety of forms in which families are formed and lived in everyday life. Historical research on the family has shown that family life has always been more plural than the socio-political and discursive idealisation of the heterosexual standard family with a married male breadwinner in the 20th century would suggest (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). However, this plurality is receiving more attention and social acceptance, creating new possibilities for “post-family families” (ibid.). This is reflected in the introduction of policy provisions for same-sex marriage, greater protection for single parenthood, unmarried parenthood and continuation families, or the emergence of new forms of active kinship formation that go beyond traditional forms of physical reproduction, such as the increasing use of reproductive technologies (Bernard 2020). Furthermore, globalization and (forced) mobility has feed into the plasticity of the family in a way that family lives transpires more then ever through transnational, multi-local and virtual spaces (Merla/Kilkey/Baldassar 2020; Heidinger 2024). And this blurring of fixed time-space-constellations of family lives is further fueled by the highly flexibilized labour worlds and the associated resource constraints on families’ reproductive work. Together with the cultural diversification of post-migrant Western societies in general and the necessity of the double employment of parents (and grandparents) across broad sections of society. All these developments have increasingly opened up the common and restrictive notions of a ‘proper family life’.

This diversity and complexity of contemporary family life has contributed significantly to the establishment of praxeological concepts of the family that understand family as a quality rather than a thing, or, as Finch (2007) puts it, as an “adjective that gives a certain quality or character to a set of practices” (ibid: 66). Given the everyday need to implicitly negotiate and represent, both internally and externally, which people, activities and reciprocal obligations belong to one’s family life and how these relations can be distinguished from other forms of social life, the concept of family should therefore be used “more as a verb than a noun” (ibid.). In line with the conceptual developments of so-called practice theories, which see culture and the social as anchored in bundles of interconnected everyday activities (Bourdieu 1990; Giddens 1993; Reckwitz 2002; Hui/Schatzki/Shove 2020), the family is now widely understood as an everyday achievement that requires ongoing practical efforts to maintain, or as Morgan (1996; 2011) has put it, “family practices“. With this concept, Morgan argues for a decentralised understanding of family life, conceived as ongoing practices that depend not on specific places, but on being carried out in order to affect each other. Familial practices are, thus, to be understood as practical arrangements of time, space, bodies and emotions that relate persons to one another and thus simultaneously identify certain physical and communicative activ-

ities as familial and establish the other, on whom these activities are focused, as a family member. In this context, both spatially and temporally bound activities such as cooking, cleaning and domestic childcare, and less localised activities such as the maintenance of ongoing communication, emotional bonds and shared values and everyday ethics, as well as a multitude of articulations of work/family boundaries, come into view.

In German-speaking countries, the related concept of “doing family” was particularly influenced by the work of Jurczyk (2002) and Jurczyk/Lange/Thiessen (2014) and other colleagues in a working group at the German Youth Institute. For them, ‘doing family’ encompasses two groups of practices that are open in terms of content but formally include, on the one hand, the balancing of interests, duties and needs between people who are considered family members and the associated boundary work between family activities and other areas of life, especially working life. On the other hand, ‘doing family’ consists of constructing communalities and mutual obligations by creating social ties. Both forms of action are determined by care as the core of familial action, whereby this focus on care rather than on biological or legal affiliation makes it possible to go beyond the family as a highly normative construct, or rather to regard the normative framework conditions of ‘family’ merely as contexts, features and effects of ‘doing family’ themselves. And, as Jurczyk (2022) has recently emphasised, this also includes the active ‘suspension’ of doing family, which highlights practices ranging from the active forgetting and neutralisation of familial bonds and boundaries on the one hand to conscious distancing, damaging and even the dissolution of familial relationships and obligations on the other.

Both research perspectives, however, emphasise that doing family and family practices are closely intertwined not only with labour systems and care regimes, but also with the welfare state institutions and services created to complement and support them, particularly in the areas of education and social work. Schools, youth and social work services play a crucial role here, historically and currently, not only in the social making of ‘the family’, but also in the everyday practices of individual families, facilitating or constraining their everyday lives through resources, expectations and interventions, and thus helping to shape everyday family life as a socially embedded practice. On the other hand, however, the changed forms of familial practices also characterise these services, whereby schools and social work services differ in the way they adapt to changed family life, in line with their different institutional stability and functional relationships to families (Cline et al. 2009). In this book we are particularly interested in the practical interfaces and relational aspects of families and public education and social work along these praxeological perspectives. Consequently, this also means understanding not only the family but also education and social work as ‘doing’.

In contrast to the work that considers the welfare state and the organisations of education and social work as institutional and/or organisational contexts of the

practices that take place within or in relation with those (Smith/Donovan 2003, Eggers et al. 2024), other practice theories take a sharper perspective here on the interweaving of policies, institutions, organisations and concrete activities of families and professionals as equally practised phenomena. This means that the ‘practicing of family’ takes place not only in concrete families and not only between family members, but also *in, with* and *through* the social sites of education and social work, where diverse practice complexes meet. The latest theoretical conceptualisations of these interrelational interdependencies of family practice and social work/education go far beyond the understanding of the interdependence of structure-agency, which has characterized earlier praxeological approaches like Giddens’ (1984) understanding of the duality of structuration. Rather, these conceptualisations use theories of practice from the field of so-called flat ontologies (Schatzki 2016), to see the social as a whole as an interwoven context at one level, i.e. to dissolve the oppositions of macro and micro phenomena and, thus, imply that objects, subjects, things, or substances don’t exist as units beyond the relations in which they are shaped. In this view, families exist in multiply and the intersections of family and social work/education only in their relational emergence (Kane 2019, Webb 2021).

4 Practicing the Family – this book

This volume, entitled ‘Practicing the family’, is situated in the context of the above praxeological approaches and aims to explore the complex and relational entanglements between public education and social work, on the one hand, and the heterogeneous practices through which families produce themselves in their own ways, on the other. The range of praxeological approaches used by the authors we have brought together ranges from Giddens’s theory of structuration, Schatzki’s theory of practice-arrangement-bundles and Star’s ecology approach to more discursive and figurative understandings of practices and their sites and contexts. However, the practices examined are equally diverse, ranging from family-related collaboration or institutional diagnosis procedures enacted by professionals in social work, to the sociomaterial negotiations of shared care between family and day care, media representations of adoptive families and family-related tattooing as means of creating belonging in youth care homes. Other articles in this volume deal with the discursive invocations of ‘the family’ and practices of re-establishing residential family life in the era of COVID 19. Through this diversity, questions of care, recognition, difference and inequality are discussed as central issues in the interrelationship of families and public education and social work, as well as the normalisation of certain figures of the good family and proper parenthood. Furthermore, like in the practical and discursive ‘othering’ of particular families, such as migrant and queer families, these addressing of families by organisations of education and social work and the

interrelated practices responding and also resisting them are also shown to be not only particular processes of subjectivation, but forms of particular family practice as well.

Given this diversity, we use the term '*doing and making*' in the title of the book to emphasise these practicing of family and families as a multiplicity of interrelationships described in more general terms above, which stems from the fact, that some of the empirical articles collected in this book examine these relational connections more in terms of the ways in which families and the 'doing family' of their members are lived in the context of social state action, while others take a more 'making-of-family' perspective, examining the practical contexts in which 'the family' or particular families are addressed and engaged in particular ways by organisations and professionals in education, social work or other forms of social action. In this sense, many of the empirical contributions in this volume enter into the practical relationship between family practices and welfare institutions more from one of these perspectives, while the more theoretically and conceptually oriented contributions in the first section of the book focus more on the question of how to conceptualize this relationality of the family's doing and the making of family in their encounters and interconnections with educational and social work institutions. In addition, the final section of the book considers innovative ways in which these relational practices of family practice can be explored methodologically, and how research also becomes a site of family practice.

The collection of articles in this book has its origins in a conference we held at the University of Trier/Germany in 2021, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. We took advantage of one of the time slots in which the contact rules in Germany could be relaxed enough to allow us to meet for this conference on site and with other guests in a virtual space on gloriously sunny September days. The relief and joy of the on-site participants at being able to meet again in 'normal conference formats' was coupled with the challenges of doing a hybrid conference, which occasionally demanded a little patience from the remote conference participants in particular, but nevertheless enabled a good exchange between all participants. In those days of September 2021, it was not yet possible to foresee how long the COVID-19 pandemic would last and what challenges would arise from the constant changes to contain it, the ever-changing care practices for research communities, students and one's own families. In view of the prolonged organisational, health and social burdens related to that extraordinary circumstances the completion of this book also took longer than expected. Therefore, even though this book is being published in 2024, only a few contributions in the volume refer to the situation during the pandemic, while others refer to empirical research conducted before that.

We would especially like to thank the authors of the volume for their great contributions and also for their patience and trust. Furthermore, we are also grateful to the publishers, transcript in Bielefeld, who also showed great patience and were

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