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Doing families in ecologies of care

Florian Eßer and Dominik Krinninger

1 Introduction

This contribution focuses on how ‘doing family’ processes are embedded in ecologies of care. Perspectives that focus on structure view the family in terms of its specialization on care and education and assume it is differentiated from or closed to other institutions or systems, in part based on an understanding of the constitution of families as a practical process. Such perspectives also emphasize that these processes include interactions with the pedagogical organizations that surround families. In contrast, we argue that with regard to care, families not only provide private care, they are also involved in shaping an overarching infrastructure in which different organizations of care are intertwined. Based on this understanding, the present article aims to further differentiate the conceptual debates on the doing-family approach. We consider this to be indicated because the moments of dealing with the boundaries between an “inside” and an “outside” of the family, and also the practices of families displaying themselves to their social environment, which are emphasized in this approach, point to a segmented view of the family in its social context. Furthermore, building on theoretical-systematic considerations, a relational research program will be outlined that makes families empirically accessible both as a constitutive part of care and as the result of a broader infrastructure. Accordingly, the contribution is structured as follows: In a first part, the article will review theoretical aspects and take up a socio-ecological perspective that diagnoses a growing fluidity of the boundaries between families and their social environment. In a second part, we will present some considerations on the heuristic use of the outlined theoretical positions.

2 Elements of an updated socio-ecological perspective on the family

2.1 Removing differentiations and boundaries

The perspective on the family proposed in this article takes up several recent social and academic developments. As a first step, aspects of current processes that are removing boundaries are discussed, becoming visible when presented against the background of historical, comprehensive processes of de-differentiation. Analyses that examine the changes in how families have been historically embedded in society across a long period of time show evidence of an extensive process of differentiation. For example, Ariès (2016) describes a historical transformation in relationships among generations, as a part of which the clearly integrated arrangements of adults and children living together developed into a separation of the generations (both in a more general societal dimension as well as in families).¹ This type of transformation has taken place in many parts of society. For example, the separation of production and households, the privatization and intimization of the family space vis-à-vis the public, and, finally, the relationship with the developing education systems. For Ariès, the decisive “main event” (ibid: 509) in history for the development of a modern understanding of the family was the “expansion of education at school” (ibid).²

Socio-scientific analyses that focus not on the *longue durée* but on more recent developments also show evidence of a functional differentiation of the family. Honig (2014), for example, takes up existing diagnoses on the differentiation between families and the educational system and points to the complex function of ‘care,’ which is distributed in many ways in the multi-referential organization of children’s daily and weekly schedules. Based on the economic and labor sectors’ dominance in society, when looking at the differentiation between family and paid employment Lange (2014) postulates that the demands posed by both areas lead to more difficulties in reaching a work-life balance.

How are these social relations reflected in current approaches of family theory? On the one hand, there are still positions that are based on Parsons’ structural functionalism. Funcke & Hildenbrand (2018), for example, describe the triad as an essential constellation in socialization theory of the ‘family’ as a way of life, a constellation that currently corresponds with a structural differentiation between diffuse and specific social relations and that is able to achieve individual reproduction and solidarity through its particular – diffuse – nature (on the triad, also see Schierbaum

1 The thesis linked to Ariès in this context is that there was no concept of childhood in the Middle Ages. It has been critically discussed by many (among others, see Baader 2015). Here, we refer especially to his tracing of the increasing differentiation between the generations in the modernization process.

2 All quotes originally in German have been translated into English by the author.

2023). These models are based on a way of life in families that has developed socially and can be described in socio-historical terms. Normatively, one could debate whether the diversity and dynamics of families should then also be included systematically even if this diversity seems almost marginal when taking a broad socio-historical viewpoint.

Even without entering into that kind of political debate, we see a certain lack of precision in the approaches discussed. What is key is that, from a structural functionalist perspective, the family appears as an effect of societal conditions. On the one hand, this perspective also states that the family has an effect on these societal conditions, but the interaction is seen on the level of the fit and differences between familial and social structures. The extent to which parents and children shape the lifestyle of their own family is ignored and thus also that familial (and social) structures act not only as conditions for family lifestyles but can also be the result of these ways of life. The theoretical approaches that then use this as the starting point for describing the concept of family can be summarized under the concept of 'doing family.' In this theory cluster, family is described as a sphere of specific practices (Morgan 1996, 2011) or specific relationships and their maintenance (Smart 2007), as dynamic relationship figurations (Widmer 2010; Schadler 2016), as a sphere of practiced parenthood (Ribeens McCarthy et al. 2003), as an object of representation practices (Finch 2007), or as a sphere of specific intimacy (Gabb 2008). These approaches, which were primarily developed within British and American family sociology, were also taken up in German-language family research. The works of the group led by Karin Jurczyk (Jurczyk et al. 2014, 2020, see also Jurczyk et al. in this volume) instead pursue a series of studies that understand the constitution of families as a process (among others, see Andresen et al. 2016; Müller/Krinninger 2016).

Before we link an additional theory onto this chain in the next section of this chapter, we must first discuss a second moment that causes us to question the idea that the differentiation between family and other social areas is static. Recent analyses of the relationships between the family and its social and institutional environment describe far-reaching processes of diffusion in the family environment (Jurczyk/Szymenderski 2012; Jurczyk 2023), as in the contributions from Honig (2014) and Lange (2014) described above.³ This affects in particular the areas of education and paid employment. When it comes to the former, a marked increase

3 When considered in more depth, these diagnoses do not contradict analyses that demonstrate societal differentiation. Particularly in more recent developments (for example the transformation of the welfare state or human capital policies of education and the labor market), boundary-eroding phenomena have been identified that also result in education policy shifts. In Germany, these shifts include the expansion and transformation of the preschool phase. In regard to these recent developments, one could also formulate the hypothesis that the phenomena of eroding boundaries mentioned above build on previous processes of differentiation.

in the commitment required by parents for the children's school education has been noted (Lange/Thiessen 2018). This not only refers to clear trends regarding the responsibility for education outcomes (Richter/Andresen 2012), but also an expansion of the demands place on parents regarding cooperation with educational institutions (Betz 2022). In the area of paid employment, the intense push in labor policy to enable dual employment for couples who are parents has been viewed as a decisive catalyst for the massive expansion of childcare outside of the family in Germany (Lange/Krok 2008; Klinkhammer 2014). These interests are linked to social investment motives that aim to encourage publicly organized early education as a way to counteract differences in education resulting from familial conditions (Farrenberg/Schulz 2021). Public childcare has thus become an essential element of family lifestyles.

Based on the phenomena of diffusion in the family environment mentioned above, we now aim to take the approaches that describe the family as a social world shaped by the family actors as part of their everyday life and link them to their entanglement with other social areas such as care. In practical terms, this means that we link a perspective of 'doing family' with a strong focus on the family as an element of social ecologies. In doing so, we can grasp not only what constitutes 'family-ness' (within the family), but also the family's participation in functional societal ties that extend far beyond that.

2.2 Families from a relational-pragmatic perspective

What we propose is a perspective that takes up the critical impulse of practically oriented 'doing' approaches in contrast to structuralist definitions of family and, in this, also capture the family's connection with and interdependence on its environment. In the end, the well-known socio-theoretical problems of the macro and micro or agency and structure can be seen here (Fuchs, 2001). A prominent contemporary response to this was formulated in the context of what is referred to as relational social theories (Dépelteau, 2018).

For theories of relational sociology, society is flat (Latour 2005: 165–172), that is, there are not two orders or mechanisms within a dichotomous social reality: While other socio-theoretical models situate the 'social' in a state of tension between actors and structures or in the interaction between the micro and the macro, relational social theories instead assume that the 'social' can be explained using relationships (Dépelteau 2013). From the perspective of social theory, the focus is not on identical actors who put themselves in relation to other actors. Instead, it is about the relationships among these actors, although these relationships are, however, never conceptualized as a fixed structure. In this interpretation of what is social, it is the dynamic and situational relations that define the actors and not the other way around (Fuchs 2001: 251).

This relational perspective opens up new ways of looking at families and their members in their family practices (Eßer, 2013). Relational theory perspectives also include how these social relationships and networks are situated in society, however. Families do not emerge from a vacuum but arise from the interaction with social discourses, legal institutions, materialities, etc. To include this societal situatedness as well as its meaning for individuals, we go back to the pragmatic tradition of relational social theories that take as their starting point the relationality of interpretations or of knowledge and the known. Dewey & Bentley (1949: 132f.) differentiate conceptualizations of knowledge in the three historically existing forms of “self-action,” “inter-action,” and “trans-action”: “Self-action” describes the idea that actors⁴ act under their powers and gain influence over others, while “inter-action” is based on the assumption that actors mutually influence each other. Dewey & Bentley set their idea of “trans-action” apart from these two established concepts: Where systems of description and naming are employed to deal with aspects and phases of action, without final attribution to “elements” or other presumptively detachable or independent “entities,” “essences,” or “realities,” and without isolation of presumptively detachable “relations” from such detachable “elements.” (ibid.: 133).

With this kind of epistemological perspective, families are not viewed as units or realities. They are not social containers that offer a frame for certain practices and are thus able to explain why these practices occur in this way and not another way. To put this in terms of research methodology: They are not the explanans, that is the explanatory statements, for the practices that occur within them. In a trans-actional perspective, however, they are also not just the explanandum – that is, that which is to be explained – in which the focus is solely on the creation of these units. Instead, in a trans-actional perspective, families are shifting units that represent powerful elements in social discourse and that are institutionally secured and passed down, but at the same time the actors are continually re-defining them within the network of actors and actants.

This trans-actional perspective is continued in the theory of social worlds and arenas as developed especially by Adele Clarke and Susan L. Star (Clarke & Star, 2008) based on Anselm Strauss’ work. Here, social worlds are understood as “universes of discourses” that are brought forth by the practices of actors and groups as they deal with objects in connection with and opposed to other social worlds. Social worlds are thus fluid constructions that overlap with other social worlds, join up with these, or go through a process of internal differentiation and dissociation.⁵

4 In contrast to Dewey and Bentley, who speak of “things,” here we use the term “actor” as a reversal of the actor-network theory to make clear that human actors are meant in addition to non-human actors (Latour 2005).

5 These differentiations can lead to conflicts that can be traced back to differing perspectives and interpretations of the actors as well as disagreements about resources or other matters.

In social worlds, common worldviews develop that form the basis for individual or collective identities. And conversely: As the participants get involved in these social worlds, access common resources and orient themselves on particular worldviews, they develop this discursive universe⁶ that is, of course, also always in flux.

By understanding families as social worlds, we first tie in to network-theoretical positions as they were discussed in the second step. However, in the theoretical discussion, these are often explained using Bruno Latour (2005) and the actor-network theory or Karen Barad (2008) and new materialism, both of which focus on the agency of non-human actors. We therefore start our argument here, but base it on a pragmatic tradition according to which social worlds are defined in part by objects that acquire meaning in the interactions of human actors (Blumer 2013: 75f.). This perspective offers two advantages: Firstly, that we can combine this with the aim of looking at human actions and assess the importance of networks for human actors giving meaning to something (Gießmann/Taha 2017: 41). Secondly, the networks' embeddedness in additional societal contexts or social arenas can be acknowledged. The pragmatist Howard Hughes (1936) called this the "ecological" approach, which should not be confused with the socio-ecological approach of Bronfenbrenner (1989) that is widely used in German-language family research, despite its terminological similarity.

With this, Hughes (1936: 183f.) was highlighting that institutions (or organizations) may be distinct if they have their own accounting system and use certain rooms for themselves. However, this does not mean that they can be clearly differentiated from their environment: "Most institutions cannot be bounded in any such mutually exclusive way. Their seats can be located, and their constituencies plotted with reference to them. But their space is, so to speak, open" (ibid.: 185). Using modernization theory, Hughes argued that institutions in the 20th and 21st century can no longer be "sacred" but always also display "secular" aspects that lead them into interactions with their environment, where they then change (ibid.: 188). In the terminology we use, we would say that they represent social worlds. Following Hughes, Susan L. Star put a point on the term "ecological" by stating that even the boundaries "between the system and the environment, between living and non-living entities" (Gießmann/Taha 2017: 41) blur and neither can nor must be precisely delineated for analytical purposes: "If one adopts an ecological position, then one should include all elements of the ecosphere: bugs, germs, computers, wires, animal colonies, and buildings, as well as scientists, administrators, and clients or consumers" (Star 1995: 13).

Social arenas are thus the counterpart to the social worlds: They emerge from conflicts that arise between various social worlds about their interpretations, resources, etc.

6 This pragmatic concept of discourse is quite different from Foucault's "discourse" (Foucault, 1969/2002).

The advantage of this ecological relationalism is that we can reconstruct families without needing to substantialize them. Instead, we view them as a relationally arising entity that is embedded in society and can be described in socio-pedagogical terms. In line with Hughes, we can argue that family as an institution is no longer sacred but instead includes a diversity that comprises the reality of the participating actors.

2.3 Children in familial care ecologies

We follow current approaches of (post-)family research to the extent that we state that ‘family’ does not necessarily refer to the intergenerational care relationships between children and adults (Smart, 2007). At the same time, and despite all necessary skepticism regarding essentialist understandings of the family, our preferred socio-ecological perspective must also consider the structuralist argument according to which, when viewed from a historical perspective, the organization of the care of children has been gaining in importance for families (Honig & Ostner, 2014). We understand ‘care’ in the tradition of feminist theories, which have already been prominently integrated in family research (DeVault, 1991; Jurczyk, 2010). Here, care refers to often invisible (and unpaid) reproductive work (Tronto, 1993/2009).

Star (1999) also explicitly developed her concept of infrastructure from a feminist perspective. We believe this is suited to analytically examining family care work (but also the care work done by other public and private institutions of childhood) (Eßer et al. 2022). In turn, Star (1999) takes a pragmatic viewpoint and critically revises the approaches of science and technology studies that are oriented on network and translation theory (Gallón 1986). In a way that escapes notice, infrastructure only works due to local organizational translation practices (Star/Ruhleder 1994), and they are in turn only enabled by infrastructural forms of organization. Star und Ruhleder (ibid.: 253) originally developed this concept for early IT infrastructures (the Worm Community System – WCS) that were to enable genetic researchers to bring together knowledge from different locations to decode the human genome. In this, they argued against the widespread idea that (technical) infrastructure can be understood as a “passive substrate” that follows a simple relationship between ends and means. Instead, they emphasized the relational nature of technology: Not just the development but also the enactment of (technical) infrastructure occurs in complex relationships that give rise to its meaning.

Following Star (1999), we adapt this line of thinking by understanding the care of children as the result of an infrastructure of ‘supervised childhood’. In line with Star’s critical feminist theory generation and by way of analogy to female care work, “infrastructure” refers to work that necessarily occurs in the background to connect various social worlds. It nearly always remains invisible. Only when it fails, creates organizational problems, or collapses does it become visible and tangible. This be-

came quite evident as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic regulations. As soon as possibilities for using the ‘supervised childhood’ infrastructure failed or closed – that is, as soon as problems arose –, the infrastructure itself became a political topic that was publicly debated. It was no longer simply a background element of everyday life. Star (1999) also pointed out that infrastructure is characterized by generally operating in the background until it fails and thereby becomes visible. From her pragmatic perspective, infrastructure represents a dimension of organizing society: “Infrastuctures can be understood, in sense, as frozen discourses that form avenues between social worlds and into arenas and larger structures” (Clarke/Star 2008: 115).

In at least two different ways, the concept of infrastructure is thus fundamentally important for analyzing families. The first is in a functional regard that focuses on how family care work in the specific context is connected to other arrangements (e.g., daycares, schools, and youth welfare services) and concretely, how this care work is constructed across organizations (Eßler/Schröer 2019). Secondly, it refers to the social embeddedness of families, who, as they contribute to creating a care infrastructure for children, make use of external resources, actors and discourses. That is, families can only be appropriately understood within their ecology and in their interactions outside of it.

3 On the path to a socio-ecological research program...

Clarifying the socio-ecological conceptual perspective on families links the aspects of practical constituting with the interdependencies between families and their social environments, shifting the question of the definition of ‘family’ farther into the empirical realm. In their respective social constructivist models, both Morgan (2011) and Jurczyk (2020, 2023) assume that there are many ways of life whose concrete shape is constituted in practices of family lifestyles. They also both make out a certain core that serves as the basis for how they think of ‘family.’ For Morgan, this core is formed by the familial relationships and an insistence on being called a ‘family,’ while for Jurczyk the focus is on intergenerational care relationships in the private sphere.

From a political and systematic perspective, there is a great deal of evidence to support these positions. At the same time, to ensure our argument captures the necessary nuances, we find it important to note that not just those issues related to the specific structure of families or the practices that give rise to these structures can only be answered empirically. Depending on the social contexts that are examined empirically when looking in to their social ecology, families can appear empirically different because they receive their form in the relations arising from these social contexts (Dépelteau 2013).

The term 'family' of course does not need to be disregarded from a socio-ecological perspective, either, but much speaks in favor of using it more in the form of a question: Which constructions of family become visible in which social contexts? On this point, it is important to note that the perspectives outlined above do not organize the processes of negotiating meaning among social worlds around a center. Instead, they emphasize the relationships among these worlds (Clarke/Star 2008). In contrast to the orientation on a more classical socio-ecological approach, such as in Bronfenbrenner (1989), which is typical in family research and discussed above, a more modern and decentralized social ecology can contribute to avoiding skewed perceptions. Differentiating the micro-, meso-, and macro-dimensions from the outset can lead to a one-sided focus on adaptive processes of individuals and smaller constellations of actors – such as the family – because 'higher' aggregate levels in society are assumed to be static. This heuristic adjustment brings a new challenge with it, however. The more openly 'family' is conceived in theoretical terms and the fewer structural preconceptions are used, the more 'family' becomes a construction specific to each individual situation. This applies both to the level of the involved actors and to the level of an academic description of family.

Regarding lifeworlds, here we must once again emphasize that the negotiations among social worlds, which form the framework for the relational emergence of families, are not always started anew. That is, a clean slate is not assumed. All participants, both private actors and actors from the pedagogical organizations, act on the background of preconceived ideas and norms of 'family.' A socio-ecological perspective is therefore not focused on the dynamic formation of family in each particular situation. As a structure of "frozen discourses" (Clarke/Star 2008: 115), infrastructure is also influenced by more or less fixed relations of social recognition, thus projecting standards (legal, administrative, socio-cultural, etc.) on the actors – standards that are always in effect before the interaction. The room for maneuver within these standards and how this is realized in the relations between the families and organizations requires empirical analyses that look at the specific power relations and resource distribution.

From an academic perspective, and especially an empirical one, working with an open concept of the family demands a high degree of reflection. While approaches that have a strong structural orientation affix the social location of the family, the participating actors, and their relationship structure in advance, the 'doing family' approaches that have thus far been developed mostly refrain from defining the actors and social patterns of familial life according to pre-defined formulas. However, they still hold to socially situating the family by characterizing living together and personal relationships as the core of a family. Without denying that this is an important sphere of the family, a socio-ecological perspective assumes the family is socially dispersed. Anywhere the actors within the social world 'family' enter into relational processes of constitution with actors from other social worlds, family is

created. This compounded context makes it necessary for research to clearly state the context it uses to recreate family construction processes.

3.1 Care of children as an object of social world analysis

In principle, the relationships of families as viewed from a socio-ecological perspective are thus just as open as they are diverse: They can be analyzed by the leisure industry and consumer products on questions related to everything from urban planning and housing to links with health policy. As part of a research program, however, they must be heuristically situated with a view to the specific epistemological interest. In the present article, this interest lies in the question of childcare, which is pursued using the approach of a social worlds analysis (Clarke/Star 2008). Empirically examining families in ecologies of care can mean different things in this process. If the focus is on the constitutive participation of families in socially complex functional interactions such as the childcare system, then, for example, the relationships between pedagogical organizations and the family can be understood such that each represents its own social world. Processes of cooperation and negotiation (bi-, tri-, and multilateral processes) then unfold between and among these worlds, which in turn lead to specific social structures of childcare functions or, to state it simply, to care infrastructure.

This is in contrast to research that is more interested in families' embeddedness in their social contexts and thus primarily asks how families' constitutions are shaped by this embeddedness. From this perspective, family is an arena in which the various actors cooperate for a specific purpose, negotiating their respective positions and associated requirements and demands in the course of that cooperation. In their network of organizations and institutional structures in the childcare system, families are figured both practically and in discourse as instances of supervision and care. This second perspective will now be examined in more depth.

It is considered standard knowledge in modern family science that contemporary families' lifestyles are framed in large part by the possibilities (and limitations) of childcare outside of the family. Simply stating this yet again would run the risk of implicitly establishing a new structural functionalism. Our article instead aims to find ways in which the relational processes that lead to these close connections can be made visible. The empirical work necessary for this could be oriented on a program presented by Clark and Star: the "social worlds framework" (Clarke/Star 2008).

3.2 Reconstructing social worlds through and with boundary objects

In our analysis, we would like to use the term "boundary objects" in particular because it enables us to focus on the interfaces among the various social worlds

(Hörster et al. 2013). In their foundational work on Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, Star and Griesemer (1989) analyzed the question of how social worlds that are initially different can work together on an object – such as the zoological museum – despite their different 'languages.' They identified "boundary objects" (ibid) as playing a decisive role in the translation processes that become necessary to communicate between the social worlds. These boundary objects can be – but do not have to be – material objects that convey meaning between the social worlds.

A socio-ecological research perspective on the family would thus also look for boundary objects that constitute the family while also conveying the family as a social world and/or arena to other social worlds. These boundary objects could be the children themselves, as they move between the social worlds of family, childcare center, school, etc. (Bollig et al. 2016). However, they could also be material objects such as lunch boxes that must be processed both in the context of the family as well as in the public institutions in order to fulfill the basic care function of supplying sufficient nutrition to children during their time in the institution. To remain with this example, the childcare institution's expectation that the family needs to prepare and provide food in a certain form – that is, such that it fits in a lunch box –, also implies a specific understanding of care and family that aids in constituting them (Eßer 2013). Each family must process this expectation in their own "translation work" (Krinninger 2020) and integrate it into their structures.

3.3 Families' contribution to care as infrastructure

When care is to be understood and reconstituted as infrastructure, then in a final step the knowledge gained must be pieced together with the social worlds and their connections with and through boundary objects of care. This includes considering how these connections establish an infrastructure that ensures children are supervised throughout the day (or fails to do so) and the various social worlds that participate. One method that could be used for this purpose is creating (situation) maps (Clarke 2012: 124). From a socio-ecological perspective, the 'problem' of childcare and resulting infrastructure that must be worked on jointly opens families to public childcare institutions and other private childcare arrangements while at the same time requiring that they differentiate themselves from these alternatives (see also Göbel/Bollig in this volume).

4 Summary

Our call for a socio-ecological perspective on the family expands existing approaches that focus on the daily production of family by situating these processes relationally in interaction with various social worlds without using structural-functionalist ar-

guments: Instead of a reaction to a changing environment, it is about the interaction among actors in the same and different social worlds.

When looking at the resulting social worlds, the boundary objects that play a key role are those that create translation processes among different social worlds that (by necessity) work together on the same object, that is, 'care.' In the modern labor society, caring for children is something that can no longer be done by an individual institution – or social world – and cannot be understood by looking at only one institution (Bollig et al. 2016). Instead, from a relational perspective, it represents a complex process on the part of various actors who first emerge in their roles and must communicate with each other as a part of this process. A socio-ecological understanding of family permits us to reconstruct this participation in and contribution to the care infrastructure.

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