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NUCLEAR FISSION IN FAMILIES. HISTORIC REVIEW OF PERSPECTIVES IN EUROPEAN FAMILY SOCIOLOGY

Like many themes in sociology, family sociology has had a special interest in studying social change through the lens of families. In the process of modernization families have been portrayed as carrying changing features that have caused worries in debates about the effects of changes on keeping important “family functions” alive. In retrospect, families were analyzed as units to be held together through special duties carried out by women in particular, through the financial support by husbands. For example, looking back at my own history, I started to study families inspired by Nordic approaches to the interconnections of family, social class and community. However with the growing impact of women studies the focus shifted into analysis of what was going on in families with theoretical lenses of gender. Women studies asked new questions about family life and analyzed domestic labor and the exploitation of female unpaid reproductive work. The theoretical framework was macrostructures of patriarchy. Complementary to the gender approach, the features of individualization within the process of modernization developed as an overarching lens in studies of changing family patterns. Family change like sinking birth rates, increased cohabitation and falling marriage rates, children born out of wedlock, divorce and separation and formation of new families became the final blow to the view on families as units - “Nuclear fission of families”, to quote the title of a thesis by the Norwegian sociologist, Kari Moxnes. New conceptions like ‘family practices’ (David Morgan), ‘family configurations’ (Eric Widmer), ‘network families’ (Bäck-Wiklund), ‘family fragments’ (Smart& Neale), ‘transnational care in families’ (Baldassar and Merla), ’same sex families’ (Rosenheil) are examples of analyses of emerging family forms and of how family relations are maintained or reconstituted under changing social conditions. The role of social- and family policy and balancing work and family in analyzing institutional conditions for family life also provided a large amount of studies in family sociology. The position of the child in changing family formations has also become a strong focus in family sociology. Likewise the intergenerational perspective, especially on care under the new circumstances of increased female employment and ageing populations.