SESSION I: THEORETICAL CONCEPTS IN STUDYING FAMILIES AND FAMILY RESEARCH METHODS

Lisa SMYTH, School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen’s University Belfast, United Kingdom

THE STRUGGLE FOR FAMILY LIFE: RETHINKING SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Keywords: institutions, roles, creative action, recognition, conflict

There has been much recent debate about the value of ‘the family’ as a sociological concept, and efforts have been made to generate alternative frames for analysing the dynamics of what has been described as ‘personal’, ‘intimate’ or ‘relational’ life (e.g. Smart 2007; Edwards, Ribbens McCarthy and Gillies 2012). The value of ‘orthodox’ approaches to defining the subject matter of this field of analysis in terms of ‘the family’ has been subject to critical debate and contestation (Gilding 2010). Against this background, the need to explain intense social conflicts over the character and practice of contemporary ‘family’ life remains. Central questions concerning the shifting relationships between familial roles, identities and practices, and wider institutional changes, for instance in employment and the state, remain. Sociologists point to a new emphasis on individual choice, the diversity of family forms and roles, and the prioritisation of personal connectedness and intimacy (Irwin 2005; Smart 2007; Weeks 2007; Dermott and Seymour 2011; May 2011; Chambers 2012). The ways in which these institutional processes play out in relation to shifting normative configurations of gender, sexuality and the individual, comprise important areas of ongoing and future research. Efforts to understand personal struggles for intimacy, care, respect and love are situated within these wider social processes.

The often heated debates about the degree to which individualism has become the primary norm shaping familial and personal life (Giddens 1992, Jamieson 1999, Lewis 2001, Roseneil and Budgeon 2004; Daly and Scheiwe 2010) have underlined the difficulties of developing explanations which can account for normative and institutional change as well as stability, while at the same time paying attention to individual and collective forms of action. Explanations which can connect these levels of social life are needed, to allow, for instance, for fuller accounts of the ways in which symbolic capital continues to attach to conventional family forms (Bennett et al 2009:217).
This paper explores some of the challenges for generating comprehensive explanations of the dynamics of continuity and change in family life. The many analyses inspired by sociology’s ‘cultural turn’, focusing on discursive regimes around gender, sexuality and human reproduction, have been valuable, not least in emphasising complexity and conflict in the field of familial and intimate relations (e.g. Stacey 1990; Lupton and Barclay 1991; Cosslett 1994). However, critics argue that the Foucauldian tendency to explain action as an effect of the operation of power through embodied forms of subjectivisation risks deflecting attention from the interactive, necessarily creative and consequently unpredictable character of such actions, as they are situated within, and in turn configure, social institutions and normative structures of meaning (King 2009:267; Lukes 2005:97).

The more recent development of a Bourdieusian-inspired sociology of culturally structured action has challenged Foucauldian accounts of the discursive construction of social life. Attention has shifted towards the relational and emotional character of situated forms of action, as they play out in fields characterised by struggles for distinction, through the accumulation of various forms of capital (e.g. Gillies 2007; Taylor 2009). However, critics take issue with Bourdieu’s assumption that social life is driven by the self-interested and ‘somewhat cynical’ effort to maximise one’s resources, and consequently one’s status (Joas 2009:384-5), again raising important questions about the drivers of continuity and change in this area of social life.

This paper instead seeks to consider the ways in which neo-pragmatism (Joas 1993, 1996; Bernstein 2010), and the sociology of recognition (Honneth 1995; Lovell 2007) allows for a comprehensive explanation of how contemporary ‘family life’ is taken up and remade, not least through the ‘feedback loops’ of social interaction (Demo 1992, Turner 1970). Honneth’s argument that social conflicts can generally be understood as effects of struggles for recognition, which he identifies as taking the form of efforts to secure respect, esteem or love from multiple sources, is a promising development in thinking about struggles within and about ‘family’ life. This turn towards explorations of emotional dynamics offers interesting ways of expanding available perspectives in ‘family’ or ‘personal life’ sociology. Similarly, neo-pragmatist thought, with its interest in the necessarily creative character of social action, as roles and identities are interpreted, designed and re-made by their incumbents, in situations which are often beyond their own making (Joas 1993), provides a potentially valuable approach for explaining how conflicts around family life shape, and in turn are shaped by, situated agents.

References