ABSTRACT

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

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FAMILY AS A NEXUS OF MATERIAL-DISCURSIVE PRACTICES: NEW ONTO-EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THE DEFINITION OF HUMANS AND HUMAN RELATIONS AND THE CONSEQUENCES FOR THE DEFINITION OF FAMILY

Keywords: Definitions of family, new materialism, new materialist ethnography

Within the last decades the concept of family was subject to constant redefinition. Who and what is family was steadily questioned. Despite many forms of close relationships exist, the continuance of the institution family has not declined or has even been reinforced. We experience what Rosi Braidotti calls a "schizoid double pull" (Rosi Braidotti borrows the concept of the schizoid form DeleuzeBara): the accepted definitions of family constantly broaden and traditional family forms become strengthened at the same time. With current instruments of defining, the term "family" becomes harder and harder to grasp. In this talk I want to introduce a new definition of family as a nexus of, what philosopher Karen Barad (2007) calls, material-discursive practices.

Research thesis

On an analytical level we currently experience two types of family definitions: Top down and bottom up concepts. Top down definitions of family appear in family research, statistics, legal texts and political definitions. While Family was defined by Parsons and Bales (1956) as a formation that includes a men, a women and their biological child, to date several more assemblages of humans are considered to be a family: e.g divorced parents with their new partners and their children, single mothers with their children, same sex couples with or without children or couples that live together apart. If we look at self definitions (bottom up definitions) of family in interviews a certain closeness within a relationship and certain activities are used to attach the meaning ‘family’ to a relationship (e.g. Jalinoja, 2008; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; Pahl and Spencer, 2010). These
definitions do often not fit structural or legal definitions of family. Informants also define a group of long-term roommates or a couple with their two cats as family. Research on bottom up definitions of family investigates the narratives of informants about their family ties (e.g. Pahl and Spencer, 2010) and the meaning of family, which is attached to certain family activities (e.g. Jalinoja, 2008; Morgan, 1996).

We are able to bring top down and bottom up definitions of family together by perceiving both of them as parts of material-discursive practices, which constitute families. If we do not define family by the members (humans or animals) but by practices, the boundaries of family and the shaping of family members become comprehensible. By adopting such a perspective we are able to describe how boundaries of families emerge and transform.

Theoretical Framework

A recent nexus of theories, the so called new materialisms, which include posthumanist practice theory (Hirschauer, 2004; Haraway, 2004), deleuzian materialism (Braidotti 2003, 2006) and agential realism (Barad, 2007), emphasizes material-discursive processes and how they form the boundaries of humans, things, discourses, structures, values, etc. Donna Haraway argued that humans, their relations and their connections as kin are made in practices (Haraway 2004). Practices are defined as processes, which include seemingly independent entities, which act together. These seemingly independent entities can be humans, animals or things but also legal structures, discursive definitions, norms or values. Relying on Garfinkel and Goffman, Stefan Hirschauer (2004) calls those entities participants, as they are entities that become perceivable by being part of doings. Participants are all parts which are figured in practices, e.g. humans, things, discourses, values or thoughts. Those figured participants do not precede the process nor does the process precede the participants; the participants are made within the practices (Hirschauer, 2004, 75). As a consequence of this perspective participants can only be perceived in transformation and their ontological state is the state of becoming (Braidotti 2003; 2006).

However, in our everyday world there seem to be clear cut boundaries between some participants, e.g between different humans or between concepts like family and friends. Further, those individuals seem to preexist their actions. Karen Barad (2007) sees participants separated and figured within practices through the enactment of boundaries. Agential cuts produce those seemingly independent and preexisting individuals by producing an exteriority, along with specific configurations of time and space within the practice. Those processes cut the participants out of an indeterminate material-discursive body which then becomes relationships and participants.

In theory practices introduce agential cuts that create boundaries of a e.g. human that becomes the seemingly pre-existing doer of a deed (Barad, 2007). This is the effect of a temporal cut that makes it seem like the entity had been there all along. For actual research this means to study seemingly established participants (e.g. a family member) and their co-participants within their everyday processes and to reconstruct the boundary making work during analysis.

Most important findings

From a new materialist perspective humans, their companions and their relationships with each others are figured in practices. Therefore family members are not perceived as individuals which inherent properties (genes, the ability to reason or love) that make them connect with each other and act with each other; rather, practices enact mutual activities, relationships and their participants. Hence practices enact activities like romantic love along with their family members. The family member does not preexist the activity; but the activity figures certain members, e.g. a female and male human participant. Those humans are not connected by properties or inherent abilities that create relationships, they are connected, because they are made within the very same practices. Within these practices nonhuman participants are also enacted and cannot, therefore, be separated from the production of human family members. Participants of the practices that figure human
families can be humans, but also animals, things, discourses, values, images and numerous other entities.

If we take the assumptions of various new materialisms seriously we also have to discuss how family is formed as vital material. As practices are ongoing processes, families are fluid formations in transformation, but they are also manifest materially and are corporeal. Family is not just a discourse, a meaning, a concept or a metaphor, but a material and corporeal entity which becomes real in activities between bodies, documents, artifacts, discourses, values etc. Family therefore is and has a body itself which is separated into family members, humans, animals or things by agential cuts. Single (human) bodies appear in the process of organic and inorganic material intra-action. The aim is not simply to expand a notion of the (human) body to an assemblage like family, but to explicate that humans are not pre-existing individual bodies, but are figured in practices. Humans come to embody certain parts of the assemblage, like being a family member.

**Conclusion**

These reconceptualizations have consequences for standard definitions of family and parenthood. For example the differentiation between biological and social parenthood becomes impossible to maintain and parenthood has to be radically redefined. Further, the centrality of the nuclear family diminishes as numerous additional participants in the practice of family appear. With this concept a difference between the nuclear family as a hegemonic configuration opposed to other family forms dissolves as every family is a unique assemblage of participants.

However, a substantial definition that is faithful to everyday family practices must be empirically grounded. The methodological consequence of investigating everyday practices is ethnographic research on micro-relations between participants and the embodiment of family (Schadler, 2014). A new materialist ethnography of family formations will follow this theoretical research (This research will be conducted with an Erwin-Schrödinger-Fellowship of the Austrian Science Fund (Cofunded by Marie Curie Actions)).

**References**


