ABSTRACT

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Tino SCHLINZIG, Dresden University of Technology, Germany

IDENTITY POLICIES OF MULTI-LOCAL POST-SEPARATION FAMILIES-
TERRITORIALISATIONS BETWEEN DISTINCTION AND BELONGING

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Following sociological debates on family, the traditional nuclear family referring to a social group consisting of a heterosexual couple and their children all dwelling in one household is in decline and has lost its predominance even though it still preserves its normative power in public discourse and as an orientation foil. At the same time to date unconventional family models experience both an increase in numbers and social acceptance. The extensive corpus of family research literature on the pluralisation and de-standardisation of the family has neglected a key moment in the understanding of those forms of familial life for a long time – namely the social realities of the actors within, their self-concepts, their perspectives on what they call family and consequently do and present in their everyday conduct of life. A number of studies made effort to answer this desideratum in the years past (Morgan 2011, James/Curtis 2010, Schier 2009, Smart 2007). However it is not only the perspective on daily routines, rhythms and rituals of family everyday life that was still pending. Despite the fact that a structural differentiation and an increase in the distribution of multi-local living arrangements as a characteristic feature and biographical implication of postmodern sociation (Vergesellschaftung) can be observed (Beck 2000), too often family research scholars still refer to family as a household unit neglecting the spatial dimension of changing family patterns and belonging.
Taking the example of an empirical research project on multi-local post-separation families, this paper draws attention to a space-sensitive but de-territorialised notion of family in general and focuses in detail on practices of establishing and stabilising collective identities and belonging within shared residence arrangements where children regularly shuttle between the households of their parents. The project to be presented recognizes the importance of the negotiated social constructions of ‘we-ness’ at single places and across places against the background of the practical everyday challenges of blended familial arrangements and the cultural hegemony of the nuclear family in public discourse. The confrontation of those families with their structural deviance necessitates them to have innovative patterns of interpretation available to balance the cultural lack of concepts and terms and to recognize their complex social networks as family.

Central research questions focus on whether and by which means multi-local families after separation and divorce form a certain collective awareness, a ‘we-ness’ and how this form of identity is created, stabilised and reactualised in daily interactions and narrative actions. Or is there a need for other extraordinary occasions that symbolize family connections and a sense of common sense? What practices are applied to territorialisate a collective self at a place and across space?

In line with praxeological approaches, family is understood as something that is done (Morgan 2011, Schier 2009, Nelson 2006), instead of assuming family as a static institution predefined through marriage, a set of family roles or co-residence like structural-functionalist concepts do. Multi-local family practices cross individual residential household boundaries and bring places where family members live into a relationship to each other. Thus a comparative dimension of the everyday, here as well as there, is centrally anchored. For research into multi-local family arrangements an integrating, rather than a bipolar, approach to everyday family practices of adults and children in, between and beyond various places is applied.

To address the questions raised a multiple methods comprising qualitative research design is employed that aims for different analytical levels – single actors, nucleuses and the family system as a whole. Open guideline-based interviews, group discussions and visual methods are applied (Bohnsack 2010, Jorgenson/Sullivan 2010, Witzel 2000, Levin 1993). Data are interpreted by means of the documentary method for text and picture analysis within a qualitative reconstructive approach (Bohnsack 2010).

Results will be presented and current theoretical assumptions on construction processes of family identity will be discussed on a theoretical and empirical basis. Data suggest that passive multi-locally living parents and their new partners in post-separation families move between the poles of referring to the other household on behalf of the active multi-locally living children to create a cross-spatial sense of commonness and belonging and at the same time applying territorialisation practices to promote a space-bound collective identity. These practices include spatial, material, habitual and informational closure processes. Children however face the challenge to merge both residential places and family nucleuses into a coherent whole and simultaneously need to distinguish between different sociotopes and their social orders. Both adults and children are highly encouraged to reflect upon their (collective) practices and thus transfer them into discursive consciousness. On a more general level, the presented results try to find answers on the question about the relationship between tacit and theoretical resp. discursive knowledge within (post-)modern family life.

This paper is part of the author’s dissertation project. The respective doctoral thesis will be finished at the end of 2014.
References


