# The disorganized family: institutions, practices and normativity

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**Abstract**

This paper considers the value of a normative account of the relationship between agents and institutions for contemporary efforts to explain ever more complex and disorganized forms of social life. The character of social institutions, as they relate to practices, agents and norms, is explored through an engagement with the common claim that family life has been deinstitutionalized. The paper argues that a normative rather than empirical definition of institutions avoids a false distinction between institutions and practices. Drawing on ideas of social freedom and creative action from critical theory, the changes in family life are explained not as an effect of deinstitutionalization, but as a shift from an organized to a disorganized institutional type. This is understood as a response to changes in the wider normative structure, as a norm of individual freedom has undermined the legitimacy of the organized patriarchal nuclear family, with gender ascribed roles and associated duties. Contemporary motherhood is drawn on to illustrate the value of analysing the dynamic interactions between institutions, roles and practices for capturing both the complexity and the patterned quality of social experience.

**Keywords:** Institutions, Practices, Social Norms, Agency, Family, Disorganized.

**Introduction**

What does a focus on social institutions, and their relationship to practices, agents and norms, offer contemporary sociological efforts to analyse ever more complex and disorganized forms of social life? This question will be considered through an engagement with the debate on the contemporary character of family relations, which poses larger questions about the way in which contemporary sociology should approach the analysis of institutional change. The problem of what a social institution might be, and how institutions might relate to action, will be explored. Drawing on some ideas from critical theory, motherhood will be used to illustrate the value of an analysis of institutions, roles and practices for capturing both the complexity and the patterned quality of social experience.

**Conceptualizing Family Lives: The Current Debate**

Contemporary family life appears to have undergone a radical change, raising questions about the extent to which gender, sexuality and age continue to operate as legitimate organizing principles. The disconnection of sexual relationships from marriage and parenthood has been a significant alteration in the form of family lives (Roseneil 2006; Weeks 2007; Weston 1991). The status and prevalence of the nuclear family of married biological parents and their children has declined, with important consequences for other family forms (Williams 2004). If family roles and social positions have been transformed, no longer ascribed and duty-laden, but instead becoming reflexively negotiable (Crossley 2011:162; Jamieson 1998:23), it may be that for any specific relationship to be designated familial or intimate, those involved need to deliberately 'display' it as such (Dermott and Seymour 2011; Finch 2007).

These recent debates have been characterized by the assumption that the family has been deinstitutionalized, and much attention has focused on the extent to which actors enjoy freedom in this arena to create families on the basis of personal choices rather than social prescription. We

seem to be witnessing the emergence of 'families of choice', where heterosexual partnership is no longer assumed and boundaries between friendship and kinship are blurred. This transformation also seems to involve the replacement of strongly gendered mother/father roles with gender-neutral parenting and care-giving. Similarly, the decline in the legitimacy of authoritarian parenting appears to have undermined hierarchies of age, as relationships between parents and their children are newly democratized, and negotiation, persuasion and reasoned argument replace command and obedience (Chambers 2012).

Much effort has gone into considering whether, to what extent, and why the character of family and associated relationships may have changed in these sorts of ways (Amos and Parmar 1984; Chambers 2012; Gillies 2005; Jamieson 1998, 1999; Roseneil and Budgeon 2004; Smart and Shipman 2004; Weeks 2007; Williams 2004). Debates circulate around whether we can now freely choose, negotiate and 'make up' our family lives and intimate relationships in ways which are entirely free from expectations, particularly concerning their gendered composition. In seeking to explain the continued prominence of family relations in a context where marriage, sex and reproduction have been disconnected, the claim is often made that family life is best analysed as the practical achievement of specific agents. The achievement of familial status, it is argued, depends on practices of 'display', rather than on conformity with a typical organisational form (Dermott and Seymour 2011; Finch 2007).

Attention has tended to focus on whether a norm of 'individualization' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 2002; Giddens 1992) has come to define these relationships, although concerns about the value of this 'grand theory' for explaining the complexity and unevenness of family lives and practices, have been extensively aired (e.g. Brannen and Nilsen 2005; Dawson 2012; Jagger and Wright 1999; Jamieson 1998, 1999; Smart and Shipman 2004). While some argue that individualism and complex configurations of roles and relationships have long characterized family relations (e.g.

Strathern 1992), others reject the idea that individualism has come to define contemporary expectations and experiences of family life, emphasizing instead the strong solidarities, as well as tensions, dissatisfactions and inequalities, which persist. Dissenting voices argue that there is more involved in family lives and relationships than the efforts of specific agents to designate practices and relationships as familial, pointing, for example, to the strong interest states have in continuing to shape family relations and distribute responsibilities in a concerted way (Edwards, et al. 2012; Gilding 2010; Gillies 2011).

At the same time, the argument that there is no longer a clear distinction between families, friends and kin is frequently made, apparently reflecting changed practices of solidarity or connectedness (e.g. Jamieson 1998; Smart 2007). It is for these reasons, amongst others, that Smart has argued for a re-designation of this field as that of 'personal life' rather than 'family' sociology. This recommendation takes up Goldthorpe's efforts to avoid reification by focusing on the dynamic, interactive character of 'family life' rather than 'the family' (1987:2-3). Smart argues that a re-classification of the field in this way offers a non-atomistic, dynamic and normatively plural conceptualisation which can capture experiences and expectations more accurately than that offered either by family sociology, with its focus on the nuclear family form as typical, or by the individualization thesis, with its falsely universalist claims (Jamieson 1999; Smart 2007:28-30).

This reframing explains the changes in family relations not as an effect of the rise of individualization, but instead as a consequence of de-institutionalization. Arguments have tended to emphasise the disconnection of sex and intimacy from marriage, and marriage from parenthood, in response to pressure for gender and sexual equality and freedom exerted by the women's and gay liberation movements (Umansky 1996; Weeks 2007), as well as women's increased participation in the labour market; the possibility of planned human reproduction (Bradley 2007; Petchesky 1986); and the shift away from a religious towards a psychological frame for child-rearing. The consequent

emphasis on the quality of the relationship between infant and primary care-giver, generally envisaged as the mother, has resulted both in the sacralisation of motherhood and its eventual detachment from marriage (Hardyment 2007; Ramaekers and Suissa 2012; Silva 1996).

While family forms have become more open, inequalities in families remain and, some argue, have intensified (e.g. Gerson 2011; Jamieson 1998:175; Macdonald 2011). Furthermore, the connections between family position and wider inequalities also persist, as ongoing links between gender, parental status and unequal treatment demonstrate (Blair-Loy 2003; Williams, et al. 2013). Benard and Correll (2010), for example, found that mothers in professional employment are subject to routine 'normative discrimination', in sharp contrast to fathers. Their research showed that mothers who are professionally successful tend to be regarded as lacking warmth and nurturing qualities, instead being perceived as assertive, aggressive and competitive, those attitudes which are rewarded in professional environments. Such women, they argue, suffer a 'motherhood penalty', in terms of both pay and social esteem: '… [mothers] in high-status jobs experience a "double-bind": they can either be seen as competent and not likable, or they can be viewed as likable but not competent' (2010:620). Successful professional fathers, by contrast, were more highly valued and rewarded than both successful men without children and successful professional mothers, since '… having children marks them in the eyes of others as kinder, more expressive—yet still masculine …' (2010:621).

This study demonstrates the strong normative expectations attached to roles such as motherhood, playing out here in the continued perception of an irreconcilable conflict shaping the attempt to combine it with professional employment. Can expectations like these be explained through a theory of deinstitutionalized practices of display and choice? Does this type of explanation risk obscuring inequalities and the social expectations attached to occupying specific family positions? If the underlying assumptions about agency and social institutions informing this approach make it

more difficult to track inequalities, or to more fundamentally make sense of social experience, they need to be re-evaluated.

## Conceptualizing Social Institutions

The deinstitutionalized family argument relies on a limited conception of social institutions, defined in terms of the empirical prevalence of a specific form, and particularly the decline in the incidence of the gendered nuclear family, as noted above. Cherlin (2004), for instance, argues that although marriage remains an important source of social status, the advent of same-sex marriage and the rise in cohabitation are symptoms of deinstitutionalization. Morgan similarly argues that sociologists should focus on family practices rather than on the family as an institution, because, as he puts it, ''family' is not a thing' (1996:11).

This debate has tended to present institutions and agents as alternative sources of coordination and social meaning, with agents being identified when action appears to be peculiarly independent from social pressures. Such a conception returns to important questions about the genesis of and relationship between social institutions on one hand, and agents and practices on the other. How do social institutions emerge, change and collapse? Why do agents find themselves voluntarily participating in non-compulsory institutions? Is this an effect of incentive structures, 'false consciousness', or of 'disciplinary' power which produces the very categories 'agent' and 'freedom'? Should we abandon the focus on these categories if they are simply effects of power, in order to more fully analyse the situated, relational quality of our understandings of the social world? If we regard institutions as static and determining 'things', then the family has indeed been deinstitutionalized, as the gendered nuclear form has lost legitimacy. I will, however, outline a more multidimensional model of what a social institution might be in what follows.

*Institutions and Practices, Diversity and Conflict*

Institutions are often defined as persistent sets of uniform rules for action, usually supported by sanctions and generating strong degrees of conformity (e.g. Bruce and Yearley 2006; Henning 2007; Martin 2004). The study of institutions, as well as of norms and roles, has indeed tended to emphasise social conformity, at the cost of thinking about their interactional, complex and uneven quality (Crossley 2011; Joas 1996). For example, Gerth and Mills (1953:23) argued that institutions require a 'head', in whom power is vested and without whom an institution cannot be sustained.

A fuller conception treats institutions in what Parsons himself described as less empiricist or descriptive, more analytic terms. As he argued:

> … the empiricist view […] identifies institutions with those concrete forms of relationship themselves and forever shuts the door on any attempt to use institutions as an explanatory category. Thus, above all, such a view tends to obscure the normative character of institutions. (1990:327)

Identifying institutions with concrete forms of relationship overlooks their normative quality, the ways in which institutions constitute 'way-station[s] between the micro level of individual actors and the macro level of structures of relations or systems of action' (Coleman 1990:334). Conceiving of institutions as distinct from practices, for example, assumes that they require no effort on the part of actors to bring to life, sustain or modify them (Carsten 2004:18).

A more analytic approach defines institutions instead as sets of coordinated normative expectations which guide, rather than determine, how people act and interact (Tuomela 2003). As Elster put it, 'institutions are not monolithic entities that can be counted on to transmit and then carry out decisions from the top' (1989:158). Rather than understanding authority as a substance invested in a

'head', this perspective understands institutions as having authority by virtue of the norms they rely on (Cherlin 1978:635). From this perspective, deinstitutionalization is an effect of the decline in the authority of the norms involved (Cherlin 2004:848). This allows attention to focus on the dynamic life of institutions, as they respond to changes in the wider normative landscape, for example by relying on a reconfigured array of norms. From this perspective it would be possible for an institution such as the family to survive the declining legitimacy of gender and sexual inequality by incorporating a norm of individual choice or self-realization into revised expectations concerning family life and relationships.

Tuomela, insisting that '[a]ll institutions are normative in some sense' (2003:147), provides additional tools for analysing the dynamic life of social institutions in the typology he offers. He distinguishes institutions which have the character of an organization, with non-negotiable roles and associated duties, from those which lack such organizational structure, but which nevertheless generate expectations for those involved (2003:141). This latter, disorganized, type is composed of agents who are not simply inventing practices at will, and successfully displaying the preferred social meaning of these practices to an external audience, but instead act in relation to specific configurations of norms, however contradictory or contested. In this way, institutions can be sustained, transformed or collapse as agents creatively interact with their normative structure (Joas 1996).

The dynamic, practical quality allows an institution to change, and to potentially shift between types, becoming more or less organized in response to the wider context and the practices of agents (Tuomela 2003:142). A loosening of expectations concerning the roles and duties of a specfic institution can indicate a transformation in type, for example shifting from organized to disorganized, rather than necessarily producing a more fundamental deinstitutionalization.

Alternative norms can be incorporated into a reconfigured set of expectations, which sustain institutional survival and shape the experiences and practices of agents.

From this perspective, the persistence of an institution is best understood not as guaranteed, for example, by its apparently primordial and unchanging character, or by explicit support from the state or other major sources of social power, but instead as an effect of how it interacts with the wider normative structure, as they are embedded in relevant social practices. Practical action is crucial to the dynamic life of social institutions (Moen and Wethington 1992), which depend on agents for continuity and normative authority.

*Norms and Roles*

Defining institutions in this way raises the question of how to understand social norms. Brennan et al. point out that the concept of a norm tends to be used in three quite different ways: firstly to refer to what is empirically typical or 'normal', on the basis of statistical regularities; secondly to refer to moral principals concerning what counts as 'good' or 'bad' actions; and thirdly to refer to informal social expectations. It is this third meaning that is relied on for explaining social institutions. The authority of social norms, in this sense, is not derived from moral principles or, as in the case of legal norms, from the state. Instead, it is derived from their status as social facts: they have somehow come to be generally or collectively accepted (Brennan, et al. 2013; Tuomela 2003:146).

Brennan et al. argue that it is through our participation in the social world, as we respond to the variety of sometimes competing normative expectations, that we make ourselves accountable to each other, and consequently to ourselves (see also Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). This is what distinguishes social norms from simple habits, which may be regularly repeated but generate no expectations of accountability, and can be modified or abandoned without explanation. Once norms enter social relationships, 'we are in a position to hold one another to account and to demand and

expect things of one another' (Brennan, et al. 2013:36). It is this accountability effect which makes norms so central to social life, since the entitlement to make demands of each other has the reflexive effect of signalling what matters to us:

> [w]e are, in effect, expressing to one another, through our recognition of one another's right to demand this or that, what matters to us, who we take ourselves to be, and how we see ourselves and others. (pg.37)

While norms may facilitate cooperation and coordination by making us more predictable to each other (Turner 1990:87), this, Brennan et al. argue, is a secondary consequence of their primary function, namely that of generating social accountability. A more utilitarian understanding of norms as primarily supporting cooperation and coordination misses this crucial intersubjective effect. Instead, an account of norms as expectations or attitudes which principally generate accountability allows human action to be explained in terms of a situated 'logic of appropriateness', rather than a more narrowly conceived, non-intersubjective 'logic of consequence' (March and Olsen, in Brennan, et al. 2013:159). From the perspective of appropriateness, social action is the result not of the efficiency calculations of the detached agent, but instead of the evaluations of what might be expected from someone 'like me' in a specific situation. Thus, norms are embedded in social roles and institutions, as we struggle to act in what we gauge to be appropriate ways.

From this perspective, social roles, the constituent elements of institutions, can be understood as complex, dynamic collections of specific norms, which require interpretation by the actor and, consequently, modification. While the concept of a social role has fallen into disuse, largely in response to its take-up by behaviourism and its consequent disconnection from any wider theory of society, it's value needs to be reappraised, given that it offers a way of capturing the complexity and

contestability of social life, in ways which can avoid static, deterministic explanation (Joas 1993:220-1). Crossley, for instance, accepts that the current preference for a focus on 'position' does not fully capture important aspects of social life in the way that 'role' does, but nevertheless defends this alternative, trusting that the gaps it leaves might be filled in other ways (2011:162).

Turner describes the inevitably tentative and creative character of social roles as they are understood and performed, or 'taken and made'. In so doing, he relies on Mead's conception of social action as a 'conversation of gestures', involving mutual adjustment between actors as they respond to the attitude of others towards themselves:

> Roles "exist" in varying degrees of concreteness and consistency, while the individual confidently frames his behavior as if they had unequivocal existence and clarity. The result is that in attempting from time to time to make aspects of the roles explicit he is creating and modifying roles as well as merely bringing them to light; the process is not only role-taking but role-making. (Turner 1962:22)

This ongoing process of evaluating expectations and adjusting to responses means thatconceptions of appropriate action, or, in Bourdieu's terms, the practical mastery characterising the habitus (1977:4; 2000:11), emerge, and shape our evaluations of ourselves and each other (Sunstein 1996:9), so that 'we all act better than we know how' (Goffman 1971:80).

Joas describes this as 'the active definition of social relations through mutual consideration of the claims and expectations actors have toward each other' (1993:221). Social roles are not governed by strict rules, but they do make normative claims on us which we find that we must respond to, as we go about the business of making ourselves accountable to each other and ourselves. These

normative claims acquire the character of a social institution, as they become established as social facts informing conceptions of appropriate action.

This conception of social roles, those aspects of institutions which are directly available for practical interpretation, focuses attention on the dynamic, interactive and normative quality of contemporary social life. This offers a much more fruitful focus for analysis than the more usual contemporary concern with social position. It allows us to analyse general expectations associated with specific roles, including those that might initially appear to have become entirely available for personal reinvention, as the institutions to which they are attached undergo significant change. An analysis of the normative expectations and commitments shaping role performance, for example in relation to families, can indicate the persistence of institutions in new, more or less organized, forms (e.g. Widmer 2010).

This offers a more fully intersubjective account of the institutional, practical and agentic qualities of social life, overcoming the limits, for example, of Foucauldian accounts which emphasize the disciplinary effects of discursive power, where agency is replaced by subject positions and the interactive and creative quality of social life is obscured (Atkinson 2014:226). Similarly, it strengthens the focus on interaction which Bourdieu offers, without the constraint of viewing agents and social relations as primarily oriented towards securing or increasing symbolic capital, albeit tempered by dispositional and field dynamics (Joas and Knöbl 2009:384-5). Instead, in this model action is normatively oriented, characterized by a concern with appropriateness, depending on how the agent recognises the range of norms informing the situation. While this effort is not disconnected from struggles over symbolic capital, appropriateness and accountability are understood as the basic motivators of action, which give shape and meaning to efforts to accumulate resources or enhance status.

Recent efforts to think about the dynamic way in which the social world takes shape and changes through situated interactions have taken a 'relational' turn. This approach prioritises interactive dynamics over more 'substantialist' perspectives, which assume that agents and structures are driven by their own 'vital inner forces' (Emirbayer 1997:284). This approach is attractive for its rejection of both voluntarist accounts of agency, and determinist, agentless accounts of structures (Crossley 2011:127; Dépelteau 2013:179). The emphasis is on the dynamic relationship between context and 'transaction' (Emirbayer 1997:287-90). A relational approach understands both structures and agents as transient effects of situated and dynamic social relations (Crossley 2011:124). However, this involves rejecting a focus on interactions between social entities, such as between agents, norms, roles, institutions and structures, which are at the heart of contemporary critical theory (Honneth 2014; Joas and Beckert 2001). Instead, analysis centres on relations between situationally constituted phenomena, which cannot be assumed to have a sustained existence or consistent effect beyond that specific situation (Dépelteau 2013:180; Roseneil and Ketokivi 2015).

The abandonment of social entities as the focus for analysis in relational sociology raises questions about what these transactional relations are taking place between, as well as how general patterns in social life might be identified, beyond the dynamics of specific situations. It also, importantly, obscures a focus on the experiences of agents as they persist from one situation to another, interacting with social institutions and responding to their normative demands (McBride 2013). As Emirbayer points out, relational sociology has tended to neglect the normative quality of interactions, other than in the rejection of a substantialist account of norms as simple determinants of action (Emirbayer 1997:284, 310). Instead, a fuller account of the significance of norms as dynamic social facts, or structures, would allow for a return to thinking about institutions, roles and situated social life.

*Institutions, Agents and Social Freedom*

Returning to the debate about the contemporary social dynamics of family relations and 'personal life', the claim that this arena has been deinstitutionalized appears to rely on a problematic distinction between institutions and freedom. Institutions tend to be conceived in terms of ascribed roles, which are governed by inflexible duties, without any possibility of what Joas describes as 'creative' action (1996), or the realization of 'social freedom' (Honneth 2014). By contrast, in defending a fully social account of the dynamics of free action in the context of an institutional understanding of family and personal life, Honneth develops his critical theory of 'social' freedom, which he distinguishes from both 'negative' and 'reflexive' versions. Negative, or libertarian, freedom is defined as non-interference with the realization of one's non-reflective, 'natural' intentions. By contrast, 'reflexive' freedom is understood as an achievement of the self, pursuing reflexively constituted intentions against the constraining force of the society within which they act (2014:29). Social freedom instead involves the realization of intentions which have developed through interaction with others in institutional contexts. From this perspective, the intentions of free agents are not naturally occurring or atomistically generated in opposition to the social, but instead are arrived at through the interactions of institutionally anchored, normatively oriented agents:

> On this account individual subjects can perform the reflexive acts required for self-determination only if they interact socially with others who do the same. *The given institutional setting […] constitutes an element of freedom itself.* Only if such institutions are given in social reality can individuals relate to their own wills within that framework in a way that ensures reflexive freedom. (2014:42, my emphasis)

Thus, social freedom depends on mutual recognition, which '… can […] be fulfilled only within - or with the aid of - institutions' (Honneth 2014:45). This is because the recognition claims we make,

and in turn respond to from others, are normative in character, and require a level of institutionalization so that they shape our expectations of what might be appropriate in specific situations (McBride 2013).

Honneth argues that individual freedom has become the principal value of contemporary social life: '… all modern ethical ideals have been placed under the spell of freedom; sometimes they infuse this idea with greater depth or add new accents, but they never manage to posit an independent, stand-alone alternative' (2014:15). The value attached to individual freedom has, he argues, taken priority in the 'moral grammar' of modern social institutions, in which 'the demand for justice can only be shown to be legitimate by making some kind of reference to the autonomy of the individual' (2014:17).

This defining feature of contemporary moral grammar inflects family life, Honneth argues, alongside other institutions, in distinct ways. One important consequence is that relations of dependency, for instance between sexual partners, or parents and children, have been politicized and to some extent delegitimized, as the norm of individual freedom gains authority.

While individual freedom has gained normative status, it has not, Honneth argues, had the effect of dissolving differences between distinct types of personal relationship. Families remain distinct from friendships and sexual partnerships, not by virtue of their forms or functions, but because of the distinct normative expectations they generate from members. For instance, while friendship entails an expectation 'that two individuals complete each other […] by bearing trustworthy witness to the existential decisions of the other and by providing advice' (2014:150), this is distinct from expectations that family relationships, understood primarily as intergenerational, constitute enduring forms of reciprocal care relationships, which are not expected to be broken. Sexual partners are more like friends than family members in this scheme, with the additional aspect that

'… each person is a condition for the freedom of the other by becoming a source of physical self-experience for the other' (2014:151). In line with Jamieson (1999), Honneth argues that the continued popularity of marriage, alongside rising rates of divorce and single-person households, suggest that intimate partnership has become a major, if often incomplete or unsuccessful, focus for self-realization and social freedom, while 'the increasing conflicts found in personal relationships can be viewed as an indicator of the everyday difficulties, especially for men, of implementing the principle of equality that has already been normatively accepted' (2014:153).

While both friendship and sexual partnership are understood as terminable, particularly when they can no longer sustain mutual self-realization, family relationships, Honneth argues, are not. Defined by the practice of child-rearing and intergenerational care, or, as Becker and Charles put it, 'bringing up children, staying in contact or giving support' (2006:101), family relations, especially between parents and children, have come to be regarded as permanent. Echoing Smart and Neal (1999), Honneth notes the 'astounding willingness' of parents to maintain long-term co-operative relations following the breakdown of their relationship:

> Parent-child relationships are not only legally and normatively interminable, in the last fifty years they have even undergone a process of 'structural solidification', making them the central focus of the life-long attentiveness and concern of the parents. Both the conscious restrictions of the number of children, which has led to strongly decreased birth rates, and the increased willingness to co-operate in taking care of the children even after divorce can be interpreted as a tendency to view responsible parenthood as the moral core of the family (2014:163).

This 'structural solidification' of family relationships can be understood as a consequence of expected moral responsibilities, however negotiated, which family roles, particularly parenthood, continue to carry, combined with the idea that taking on these responsibilities tends to be understood not as a duty or an inevitability, but as a form self-realization (Smyth 2012).

Nevertheless, this has not deadened the dynamic quality of family life, as the normative priority of individual freedom has opened up family roles and relationships for negotiation, placing a new emphasis on co-operation and deliberation. This is not to argue that these principles characterize how people always actually inhabit their families, but instead that this constitutes an important element of the 'moral grammar', or normative expectations, of contemporary family life, in ways which can generate conflict, as well as harmony. While McCarthy argues that families remain distinct from friendships and sexual partnership as a consequence of the cultural meanings associated with these relationships (2012:70), the emphasis placed on family relations in everyday life that she is concerned with explaining is, for Honneth, also a feature of the institutional dynamics that reproduce roles and relative status positions. Normative expectations shape social evaluations of the quality of one's role performance, however negotiated: 'our feelings for our 'father' or 'mother' are always already marked by the expectations linked to the actual performance of both these roles' (Honneth 2014:166). Thus,

> [w]e cannot artificially reach back beyond the institutionally fixed meaning of parenthood and the role of children, which are fundamentally determined by the taboo of incest, by physical closeness and interminability. Therefore, the moral obligations currently prevalent in the family are rooted in intersubjective attitudes that differ strongly from those between friends. (pg.166)

Consequently, the sort of social freedom available through family life is distinct from that available through friendship and sexual partnership. Self-realization in this institutional arena is made possible not only by dyadic relations of mutual recognition, but also through the social evaluations of family, and particularly parental, role performance. The content of these roles are both taken and made through this intersubjective process.

Institutions furnish the bundles of potentially dissonant normative expectations which agents respond to and draw on as they act. These expectations are remade and reconceived through a complex view of agency, rather than the 'flat and impoverished conception [of agency] that, when it escapes the abstract voluntarism of rational choice theory, tends to remain so tightly bound to structure that one loses sight of the different ways in which agency actually shapes social action' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998:963).

Instead, agency is better understood as an intelligent response to the normative demands of specific situations, through various combinations of habit, projective planning and evaluation (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). This approach can be understood as similar to Bourdieu's (1977) notion of habitus as guiding action, with additional emphasis on the intersubjective creativity involved in responding to problems encountered in the social world (Joas 1996). It explains the interactions between agents and institutions as a dynamic process through which social norms emerge, gain authority, change and decline, as agents struggle to be recognized as acting appropriately. As the actor adopts the perspective of Mead's 'generalized other', she reflects back on the normative quality of her own actions: '[t]he actor assumes the role of another in order to 'turn back' upon their self and constitute their self as an object' (Crossley 2011:93).

Bearing in mind that normativity is itself complex and potentially conflictual, this is not simply a process of conformity, but instead demands creative action, as one or other norm must be affirmed

in order to act in a socially meaningful way, and thereby make one's self accountable. This is distinct from thinking, in functionalist terms, about social norms as internalized early in life and then either followed or resisted (Bicchieri and Muldoon 2011). Instead, '... the actor is not forced to agree with or concede to the view of generalized others. The relationship is dialogical' (Crossley 2011:86).

**Disorganized Social Roles: The Case of Motherhood**

The major way in which institutions are experienced is through the normative pressure they exert on agents, and the response this demands. Rival perspectives, such as Foucault offers, risk obscuring the indeterminable quality of this interaction by reducing it to a question of 'discipline' (e.g. Lawler 2000). An analysis of complex and competing normative expectations as they are experienced through motherhood can shed light on the disorganized institutional character of contemporary family life, as the role is taken and creatively remade by agents.

For example, Smyth (2012) explains the emotional intensity of and variation in contemporary mothering not as a fluid, deinstitutionalized practice but as an example of a particularly strained form of institutionally framed action. Rather than understanding motherhood as determined, whether by the power of state-sanctioned professional expertise (Furedi 2008), or by the cultural contradictions of late capitalism (Hays 1996), this study instead argues that motherhood is practiced in a variety of patterned ways, in response to the disorganized institutional normative context and situated needs and interests involved (Joas 1996). Mothers in this study are understood as adopting various combinations of romantic, instrumental and pragmatist norms of selfhood to guide their child-rearing and wider family activities, and seek recognition for the appropriateness of their role performance, across a range of sites and relationships.

The 'disorganized' quality of this social role means that it continues to be experienced as carrying significant expectations, particularly in relation to optimizing child health and psychological

wellbeing (Hardyment 2007). However, the ways in which these expectations might be interpreted and met are more open than in organized institutional contexts. The possibility of combining motherhood with other significant roles, particularly paid work, and the diversity of contemporary family forms, leaves it more available for formulation by the agent. Women incorporated the general expectation of individual freedom into their interpretations of motherhood in a variety of ways, although not exclusively.

In this study, some women interpreted motherhood through a norm of romantic individualism, perceiving the role as giving expression to female 'authenticity', allowing for the full realization of one's 'inner spirit'. This expressive version of the role reflects nineteenth century Romanticism's ideas about individual 'nature' as the source of truth, a form of individualism which, Taylor argues, has established 'originality as a vocation' in contemporary culture (1989:376). Expressivist mothers prioritised spontaneity as the central mechanism of self-realization, and consequently as the main guide for appropriate and accountable role performance. They regarded strict routines and tight scheduling as damaging the free expression of spontaneous impulses and responses. Expressive mothers were strongly committed to norms of individual freedom and self-realization, both through choosing this role and by performing it with an emphasis on naturalism, instinct and devoted attention.

By contrast, rationalist mothers tended to be guided by a norm of instrumental planning, oriented towards the maximization of choices and the achievement of goals (Schwartz, et al. 2002). Efficiency calculations and strict control of impulses are crucial to rational mothering. Brenda, for example, described her transition into motherhood as 'very smooth', because she had planned and pursued it for years: ' [H]aving everything […] handled, being debt-free and, freeing up my time [made the transition easy] […].I just kind of set it up so that it wouldn't be stressful'. Goal orientation allowed for a potentially strong sense of individual achievement, but at the cost of intense everyday anxiety

about the possibility of failure. It also tended to generate resentment when carefully worked-out plans were blocked or frustrated, especially when gender norms took priority over efficiency calculations in family life.

Thirdly, a pragmatist interpretation of motherhood viewed it less as an opportunity for self-expression or the carefully calculated achievement of individual goals, but instead as a somewhat unpredictable, frustrating and problem-driven activity. This is primarily a practical, satisficing approach (Schwartz, et al. 2002), which treats goals and their realization as matters of trial and error, rather than certainty and planned efficiency (Joas 1993). While pragmatists did set goals and adopt strategies calculated to reach them, these were treated as contingent and revisable, in response to situational dynamics. As Stephanie commented, 'I'm sure I'm doing half of it wrong, but that's how I'm doing it, I don't have to be perfect.' Pragmatic motherhood was typified not by pride in success, anxiety over the possibility of failure, or realising one's original 'inner spirit', but instead by flexibility and adaptability, in the effort to do a 'good enough' job. This was the least intense version of the role, and the least inflected by the expectation that individual freedom should guide maternal practice.

Understanding the family as a deinstitutionalized arena of choice, lacking any coherent normative structure, would lose sight of the various ways in which motherhood is practiced in relation to this cluster of norms of selfhood, and their varied relation to expectations of individual freedom. The differential significance of gender in the alternative interpretations of this role would also have been obscured. This approach sheds light on the diverse, yet patterned ways of practicing motherhood, both within the family and as it connects with other institutions, including the labour market, education and health.

**Conclusion**

Treating institutions and the practices of agents as mutually interacting sites where norms gain and lose authority allows for an explanation of contemporary family life as disorganized but nevertheless institutional. Family relations continue to be constituted by a complex array of normative expectations, which have the status of social facts, and which distinguish familial from other types of relationships, including friendship and non-familial sexual partnership. The liberalisation and democratisation of family forms has not resulted in the disappearance of expectations concerning family belonging and attachment, or what Smart describes as 'connectedness' (2007:189). Rather than becoming a deinstitutionalized arena of free choice, constrained only by the wider dynamics of social inequalities, family relations have survived the disconnection between marriage, sexuality and parenthood through a normative reconfiguration, which places new emphasis on freedom over duty, however imperfectly realized. This has created the disorganized institutional form which has become so familiar to us today (e.g. Holmes 2006; Roseneil 2006).

This is different from thinking of social life as simply determined by structures, or subjectivity by discursive power. Norms are understood as making claims on us through our social roles, as we intersubjectively 'take and make' them, and in so doing, participate in the dynamic interaction between agent and institution. This approach further avoids the functionalism of behaviourist role theory, given that the normative expectations at work in specific institutions may be enduring, but are not necessarily harmonious. For example, motherhood can involve a central conflict between norms of selfless care-giving on the one hand and individual self-realization on the other.

Much of the current debate about how to explain the dynamics of contemporary family life relies on a false distinction between institutions and practices. Underlying this is a set of assumptions about the determining character of institutions and the potential for freedom apparently captured by the concept of practices. This paper has argued instead that a normative account of social institutions,

which assumes interdependence between institutions and the practices of agents, and includes a variety of institutional types, allows for a more fully social approach to the dynamics of contemporary family life. From this perspective, institutions are understood not as static structures with ascribed, determining roles and associated duties, but instead as complex and variable bundles of normative expectations, the persistence of which depends on the interactive practices of agents.

**Note**

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