

# On the Family as a Realized Category

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THE DOMINANT, legitimate definition of the normal family (which may be explicit, as it is in law, or implicit, in for example the family questionnaires used by the state statistical agencies) is based on a constellation of words – house, home, household, *maison*, *maisonnée* – which, while seeming to describe social reality, in fact construct it. On this definition, the family is a set of related individuals linked either by alliance (marriage) or filiation, or, less commonly, by adoption (legal relationship), and living under the same roof (cohabitation). Some ethnomethodologists even go so far as to say that what we regard as a reality is a fiction, constructed to a large extent by the vocabulary that the social world provides us with in order to describe it. Appealing to the ‘real world’ (which, from their own standpoint, is not unproblematic), they point out that a number of the groups that are called ‘families’ in the present-day USA have absolutely no resemblance to this dominant definition, and that in most modern societies the nuclear family is a minority experience compared to the number of unmarried couples living together, single-parent families, married couples living apart, etc.<sup>1</sup> The new forms of family bonds that are being invented<sup>2</sup> before our eyes remind us that this family, which we are led to regard as *natural* because it presents itself with the self-evidence of what ‘has always been that way’, is a recent invention (as is shown in particular by the work of Ariès and Anderson on the genesis of private life or Shorter on the invention of family feeling), and is perhaps fast disappearing.

But if it is accepted that the family is only a word, a mere verbal construct, one then has to analyse the representations that people form of what they refer to as the family, of this ‘word family’ or ‘paper family’. Some ethnomethodologists, who see discourse about the family as a kind of political ideology designating a valorized configuration of social relationships, have

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identified a number of presuppositions common to this discourse in both its ordinary and scientific forms.

First set of properties: through a kind of anthropomorphism in which the properties of an individual are attributed to a group, the family is seen as a reality transcending its members, a transpersonal person endowed with a common life and spirit and a particular vision of the world.

Second set of properties: definitions of the family are seen as having in common the fact that they assume the family exists as a separate social universe, engaged in an effort to perpetuate its frontiers and oriented towards idealization of the interior as sacred, *sanctum* (as opposed to the exterior). This sacred, secret universe, with its doors closed to protect its intimacy, separated from the external world by the symbolic barrier of the threshold, perpetuates itself and perpetuates its own separateness, its *privacy*, as an obstacle to knowledge, a private secret, 'backstage'. One might add to this theme of privacy a third theme, that of the *residence*, the house as a stable, enduring locus and the household as a permanent unit, durably associated with a house that is endlessly transmissible.

Thus, in *family discourse*, the language that the family uses about the family, the domestic unit is conceived as an active agent, endowed with a will, capable of thought, feeling and action, and founded on a set of cognitive presuppositions and normative prescriptions about the proper way to conduct domestic relationships. It is a world in which the ordinary laws of the economy are suspended, a place of trusting and giving – as opposed to the market and its exchanges of equivalent values – or, to use Aristotle's term, *philia*, a word that is often translated as 'friendship' but which in fact designates the refusal to calculate; a place where interest, in the narrow sense of the pursuit of equivalence in exchanges, is suspended. Ordinary discourse ordinarily, and no doubt universally, draws from the family ideal models of human relations (with, for example, concepts like brotherhood), and family relations in their official definition tend to function as principles for the construction and evaluation of every social relationship.

### **A Well-Founded Fiction**

At the same time, if it is true that the family is only a word, it is also true that it is an active 'watchword', or rather, a category, a collective principle of construction of collective reality. It can be said without contradiction both that social realities are social fictions with no other basis than social construction, and that they really exist, inasmuch as they are collectively recognized. Every time we use a classificatory concept like 'family', we are making both a description and a prescription, which is not perceived as such because it is (more or less) universally accepted and goes without saying. We tacitly admit that the reality to which we give the name 'family', and which we place in the category of 'real' families, is a family in reality.

So, while we may accept, with the ethnomethodologists, that the family is a principle of construction of social reality, it also has to be pointed out, in opposition to ethnomethodology, that this principle of construction is itself

socially constructed and that it is common to all agents socialized in a particular way. In other words, it is a common principle of vision and division, a *nomos*, that we all have in our heads because it has been inculcated in us through a process of socialization performed in a world that was itself organized according to the division into families. This principle of construction is one of the constituent elements of our *habitus*, a mental structure which, having been inculcated into all brains socialized in a particular way, is both individual and collective. It is a tacit law (*nomos*) of perception and practice that is at the basis of the consensus on the sense of the social world (and of the word ‘family’ in particular), the basis of *common sense*. Thus the pre-notions of common sense and the folk categories of spontaneous sociology which, methodologically speaking, have to be called into question, may, as here, be well-founded, because they help to *make* the reality that they describe. In the social world, words make things, because they make the consensus on the existence and the meaning of things, the common sense, the *doxa* accepted by all as self-evident.<sup>3</sup>

The family is a principle of construction that is both immanent in individuals (as an internalized collective) and transcendent to them, since they encounter it in the form of objectivity in all other individuals; it is a transcendental in Kant’s sense, but one which, being immanent in all *habitus*, imposes itself as transcendent. This is the basis of the specific ontology of social categories: being rooted both in the objectivity of social structures and in the subjectivity of objectively orchestrated mental structures, they present themselves to experience with the opacity and resistance of things, although they are the product of acts of construction which, as a certain ethno-methodological critique suggests, apparently relegate them to the non-existence of pure figments of thought.

Thus the family as an objective social category (a structuring structure) is the basis of the family as a subjective social category (a structured structure), a mental category which is the matrix of countless representations and actions (e.g. marriages) which help to reproduce the objective social category. The circle is that of reproduction of the social order. The near-perfect match that is then set up between the subjective and objective categories provides the foundation for an experience of the world as self-evident, taken for granted. And nothing seems more natural than the family; this arbitrary social construct seems to belong on the side of nature, the natural and the universal.

### **The Labour of Institution**

If the family appears as the most natural of social categories and is therefore destined to provide the model for all *social bodies*, this is because it functions, in *habitus*, as a classificatory scheme and a principle of the construction of the social world and of that particular social body, the family, a principle which is acquired within a family existing as a realized social fiction.<sup>4</sup> The family is the product of a labour of *institutionalization*, both ritual and technical, aimed at durably instituting in each member of the

instituted unit feelings that will tend to ensure the *integration* that is the condition of the existence and persistence of the unit. Rites of institution (from *stare*, to stand, be stable) aim to constitute the family by constituting it as a united, integrated entity which is therefore stable, constant, indifferent to the fluctuations of individual feelings. And these inaugural acts of creation (imposition of the family name, marriage, etc.) have their logical extension in the countless acts of reaffirmation and reinforcement that aim to produce, in a kind of continuous creation, the *obliged affections* and *affective obligations* of family feeling (conjugal love, paternal and maternal love, filial love, brotherly and sisterly love, etc.). This constant maintenance work on the feelings complements the performative effect of the simple *naming* which constructs an affective object and socializes the libido (for example, the proposition 'She's your sister' contains the imposition of brotherly love as desexualized social libido – the incest taboo).

To understand how the family turns from a nominal fiction into a real group whose members are united by intense affective bonds, one has to take account of all the practical and symbolic work that transforms the obligation to love into a loving disposition and tends to endow each member of the family with a 'family feeling' that generates devotion, generosity and solidarity. This means both the countless ordinary and continuous exchanges of daily existence – exchange of gifts, service, assistance, visits, attention, kindnesses – and the extra-ordinary and solemn exchanges of family occasions, often sanctioned and memorialized by photographs consecrating the integration of the assembled family. This work falls more particularly to the women, who are responsible for maintaining relationships (not only with their own family but very often also with the spouse's) through visits, correspondence (especially the ritual exchange of good wishes) and, as an American study has shown, telephone calls. The structures of kinship and family as *bodies* can only be perpetuated through a continuous creation of family feeling, a cognitive principle of vision and division that is at the same time an affective principle of *cohesion*, i.e. the adhesion that is vital to the existence of a family group and its interests.

This work of integration is all the more necessary since, in order to exist and persist, and to function as a *body*, the family always tends to function as a *field*, with its physical, economic and, above all, symbolic power relations (linked, for example, to the volume and structure of the capital possessed by each member), its struggles for conservation and transformation of these power relations (with specific strategies of sociodicy, including the dominant representation of the family), and so on. The forces of *fusion* (especially the affective one) must endlessly counteract the forces of *fission*.

### **The Site of Social Reproduction**

But the naturalization of social arbitrariness causes it to be forgotten that, in order for this reality called 'family' to be possible, certain social conditions that are in no way universal have to be fulfilled. They are, in any case, by no means uniformly distributed. In short, the family in its legitimate definition

is a privilege instituted into a universal norm: a *de facto* privilege that implies a symbolic privilege – the privilege of being *comme il faut*, conforming to the norm, and therefore enjoying a symbolic profit of normality. Those who have the privilege of having a normal family are able to demand the same of everyone without having to raise the question of the conditions (e.g. a certain income, living space, etc.) of universal access to what they demand universally.

This privilege is, in reality, one of the major conditions of the accumulation and transmission of economic, cultural and symbolic privileges. The family plays a decisive role in the maintenance of the social order, through social as well as biological reproduction, i.e. reproduction of the structure of the social space and social relations. It is one of the key sites of the accumulation of capital in its different forms and its transmission between the generations. It safeguards its unity for and through this transmission. It is the main ‘subject’ of reproduction strategies. That is seen clearly in the transmission of the *family name*, the basic element in the hereditary symbolic capital. The father is only the apparent subject of the naming of his son because he names him in accordance with a principle of which he is not the master, and in transmitting his own name (*the name of the father*) he transmits an *auctoritas* of which he is not the *auctor*, according to a rule of which he is not the creator. The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of the material heritage. A considerable number of economic acts have as their ‘subject’ not the individual *homo economicus* but collectives, one of the most important of these being the family; this is as true of the choice of a school as of the purchase of a house. For example, in property purchases the decision often involves a large part of the lineage (e.g. the parents of one or the other of the spouses, who lend money and in turn have the right to give advice and influence the economic decision). It is true that, in this case, the family acts as a kind of ‘collective subject’, as commonly defined, and not as a simple aggregate of individuals. But this is not the only case in which it is the site of a kind of transcendent will manifesting itself in collective decisions and in which its members feel required to act as parts of a united body.

At the same time, not all families, and, within a given family, not all members, have the same capacity and propensity to conform to the dominant definition. As is seen especially clearly in societies based on the ‘house’, where the perpetuation of the house as a set of material assets orients the whole existence of the household,<sup>5</sup> the tendency of the family to persevere in its being, to perpetuate its existence by ensuring its integration, is inseparable from the tendency to perpetuate the integrity of its heritage, which is always threatened by dilapidation and dispersion. The forces of fusion, especially the ethical dispositions that incline its members to identify the particular interests of individuals with the collective interests of the family, have to contain the forces of fission, i.e. the interests of the various members of the group, who may be more or less inclined to accept the common vision and more or less capable of imposing their ‘selfish’ point of view. The practices of which the family is the ‘subject’ (e.g. ‘choices’ as regards fertility,

child-rearing and education, marriage, consumption) cannot be accounted for without considering the structure of the power relations among the members of the family group (and therefore the history of which it is the outcome), a structure that is always at stake in the struggles within the domestic field. But the functioning of the domestic unit as a *field* encounters its limit in the effects of male domination, which orients the family towards the logic of the monolithic *body* (since integration can be an effect of domination).

One of the properties of dominant social fractions is that they have particularly extensive families ('great' families are big families) that are strongly integrated because they are united not only by the affinity between *habitus* but also by the solidarity of interests, i.e. both by capital and for capital, economic capital naturally, but also symbolic capital (the name) and perhaps above all social capital (which can be shown to be the condition and the effect of successful management of the capital collectively possessed by the members of the domestic unit). For example, among executives, the family plays a considerable role not only in the transmission but also in the management of the economic heritage, especially through business alliances which are often family alliances. Bourgeois dynasties function like select clubs; they are the sites of the accumulation and management of a capital equal to the sum of the capital held by each of their members, which the relationships between the various holders make it possible to mobilize, partially at least, in favour of each of them (the extremely diversified character of this capital no doubt explaining how it is that, as historians have shown, *grand bourgeois* and aristocratic families weather revolutions so well).

### **The State and the Statisticians**

Thus, having started out with a form of radical doubt, we are led to retain a number of the properties that figure in the ordinary definitions; but only after subjecting them to a twofold challenge that only apparently leads back to the starting point. No doubt one has to cease to regard the family as an immediate datum of social reality and see it rather as an instrument of construction of that reality; but one also has to move beyond the ethnomethodological challenge and ask who constructed the instruments of construction that are thereby brought to light, and to examine family categories as institutions existing both in the objectivity of the world, in the form of the elementary social bodies that we call families, and in people's minds, in the form of principles of classification that are implemented both by ordinary agents and by the licensed operators of official classifications, such as state statisticians (working for INED, INSEE,<sup>6</sup> etc.).

It is indeed clear that in modern societies the main agent of the construction of the official categories through which both populations and minds are structured is the state, which, through a whole labour of codification accompanied by economic and social effects (family allowances, for example), aims to favour a certain kind of family organization and to strengthen those who are in a position to conform to this form of organization.

If radical doubt remains indispensable, this is because simple positivistic recording (the family exists, we have met it under our statistical scalpel) is liable to contribute, through the effect of ratification, of registration, to the construction work on social reality that is implied in the word ‘family’ and in the family talk which, under the appearance of describing a social reality, the family, prescribes a mode of existence: family life.

By uncritically implementing state thinking, i.e. the thought categories of common sense, inculcated by the action of the state, the official statisticians help to reproduce the thinking that is part of the conditions of functioning of the family – a supposedly private reality that is of public origin. The same is true of the judges or social workers who, very spontaneously, when they want to predict the probable effects of a punishment or remission of sentence, or even to evaluate the weight of the punishment given to a young offender, take account of a number of indicators of conformity to the official idea of the family.<sup>7</sup> In a kind of circle, the native category, having become a scientific category for demographers, sociologists and especially social workers who, like official statisticians, are invested with the capacity to work on reality, to make reality, helps to give real existence to that category. The family discourse that ethnomethodologists refer to is a powerful, performative discourse, which has the means of creating the conditions of its own verification and therefore its own reinforcement, an institutional discourse which durably institutes itself in reality.

The state, through its official recording operations (inscribed in France in the *livret de famille*) performs countless constituting acts which constitute family identity as one of the most powerful principles of perception of the social world and one of the most real social units. A social history of the process of state institutionalization of the family – which would be much more radical than ethnomethodological critique – would show that the traditional opposition between the public and the private conceals the extent to which the public is present in the private, and in the very notion of *privacy*. Being the product of a sustained effort of juridical and political construction culminating in the modern family, the private is a public matter. The public vision (the *nomos*, this time in the sense of *law*) is deeply involved in our vision of domestic things, and our most private behaviours themselves depend on public actions, such as housing policy or, more directly, family policy.<sup>8</sup>

Thus the family is indeed a fiction, a social artefact, an illusion in the most ordinary sense of the word, but a ‘well-founded illusion’, because, being produced and reproduced with the guarantee of the state, it receives from the state at every moment the means to exist and persist.

#### Notes

1. I will cite just one work, exemplary in its audacious application of ethnomethodological doubt: Gubrium and Holstein (1990).
2. In the absence of empirical studies, I will cite here, for the case of France, the work of the cartoonist Claire Bretécher, an excellent ethnographer of a very particular social milieu. In one of her books, *Agrippine*, her heroine spells out a

whole new taxonomy corresponding to entirely unprecedented kin relationships – ‘pseudo-half’ (brother), ‘half’, ‘double-half’, ‘half-double’ – devised to designate all the forms of kinship made possible by remarriages or (pseudo-) divorces. In short, to understand some of the family combinations really existing today in the social world, one would have to follow Bretécher and construct an entirely new kinship terminology overriding all the structural oppositions that componential analyses of kinship normally bring out.

3. To convey the full force of this shared self-evidence one would need to relate here the testimony of the women we recently interviewed in the course of a survey on social suffering: being out of line with the tacit norm which demands, with increasing insistence as they grow older, that they should be married and have children, they speak of the pressures exerted on them to fall into line, to ‘settle down’ and start a family (e.g. the harassments and problems associated with the status of single woman, at receptions or dinner parties, or the difficulty of being taken completely seriously when one is seen as an incomplete and inadequate person).

4. Ethnomethodological critique leaves unanswered the question of the genesis of the social categories of construction of social reality, the acquisition of the durable dispositions that constitute the *habitus*. Similarly, it fails to address the question of the social conditions of possibility both of this process of acquisition and of the family as a realized social category.

5. On the ‘house’, see Bourdieu (1962, 1972); and also, inter alia, Klapisch-Zuber (1990).

6. French national institutes for demographic and socioeconomic statistics respectively (translator).

7. These indicators are often provided by sociologists, as has been shown by a US study of the criteria social workers use to make a rapid assessment of the cohesion of the family. This assessment then provides the basis for a forecast of the chances of success of a given course of action and, consequently, one of the mediations through which social destiny is accomplished.

8. For example, the major commissions that have decided the form that state housing aid should take have made a major contribution towards shaping the family and the representation of family life that demographic and sociological surveys record as a kind of natural datum.

### *References*

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