

What does a family do?

Or some scattered notes from the WSCF study session in Strasbourg

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During the WSCF study session on family in Strasbourg this past March the question of what a family is was central and was debated again and again during the conference. But maybe the question to be asked should be not what a family is but rather what does a family do? Meaning what does a family do to or with those who see themselves as members of a social unit called family.

In the beginning...

For me, being a gender studies major firmly rooted in a social constructivist understanding of society and individual, identity and sense of self is an always relational and unstable, continuous creation. My subjectivity, my sense of self and belonging is always continually created in relation to something or someone other than myself—be it a parent, a friend, a partner, a teacher, an intuition, an ideal, or a power structure.

Irrespective of whether this unit called family is a consequence of birth, kinship, marriage, coincidence or conscious choice, the family is one of the primary sites of socialization and identity formation. The first primary relationship we form is with our parent(s) or caregiver(s). When we are born into this world we are vulnerable, dependent and helpless.

Those that care for us as newborns, and consider themselves responsible for the satisfaction of our most basic needs such as food, warmth, love, protection etc. irrespective of whether a biological bond exists by birth or kinship, are also those with whom we are in our very first relationship with. It is in the early interactions with parents or caregivers that we are socialized into a basic pattern of relationships, of relating to ourselves, to others and to the outside world as a whole.



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For some of us, the monogamous nuclear family will be very satisfying and fulfilling. It will be the structure that allows us to realize our fullest potential as partners, family members and as humans. For others, striving for or living in this constellation will bring nothing but misery and a sense of unfulfilment and their desires and dreams will be for other ways of being and living as a family.

The family constellations and the lives lived by the individuals who are part of them are many and diverse, just as the dreams, thoughts, wants and desires about what it means to be a family and to live as and in one are diverse and manifold. And just as multiplicity and diversity characterises the actually existing family units in our world and the lives lived as part of them, so should we allow our thinking about what a family is, what it does and what it means to be part of one to be characterized by a multitude of diverse and manifold thoughts and perspectives.

So, in the end, one of the many functions of the family, one of the many things that it does—is that it creates and produces identity and subjectivity, both positive and negative.

[Endnotes]

1 [http://www2.amnesty.se/svaw.nsf/19april2004/\\$File/svenskrapport.pdf](http://www2.amnesty.se/svaw.nsf/19april2004/$File/svenskrapport.pdf)

The nuclear family is still dominant and very powerful as an ideal and a norm, and it is still something that all of us must position our dreams, desires and thoughts about the families of our own against.

