

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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Thus the fundamental pattern of relating to others and to ourselves, the understanding of relationships and proper behaviour that is created and produced in these first interactions affects us a great deal as we grow up, in the life we come to live and in the relationships that we form later in life.

This means that if your family is dysfunctional, abusive, oppressive, controlling, etc the risk that you will perpetuate these dysfunctional patterns in your own relationships is significant. And vice versa, if your family is characterized by love, care, openness, safety and equality, the possibility of living a life characterized by the above increases.

This is the great paradox of the family, that as a site of identity creation and socialisation it can be characterised by positive socialisation just as much as by negative and destructive socialisation. In addition, the identity that the family helps form in an individual also effects and possibly changes or threatens the structure and identity of the family as a whole. The family may approve and strengthen or reject and ridicule an individual family member's identity and identification with a certain group, subculture, denomination or sexuality.

A place of violence

An example of this is that in Sweden, as in many other countries, domestic violence is a very serious and widespread problem. According to Amnesty International, violence against women is one of the globally most widespread violations of human rights;¹ it affects women from all classes and ethnicities of society but is still a hidden and underreported issue. The private sphere of the family is still the most dangerous place for a woman to be. It is in the home where the absolute majority of violence and abuse against women takes place and is perpetrated.

In addition, the violence is perpetrated by partners or relatives, by men known to the women. This widespread violence is a serious violation of the basic human rights of women.

Men's violence against women is not perpetrated in a vacuum or outside of history. It cannot be reduced to being understood as only the expression of the personality or disposition of the individual perpetrator. The violence is created and nourished by the views, attitudes and structures that in our societies lead to the systematic discrimination of women and maintain the power and privileges of men as a group over women as a group. These structures run through history up to the present day and are economic, political, juridical and social.

Not one, but a multitude

Traditionally, one of the sites of male power and inequality between men and women has been the heterosexual nuclear family. Although this type of family constellation is less dominant than it once was, and according to Dr Sharon Jones, who held a lecture during the study session in Strasbourg, studies made during the 1980s showed that only 15% of American families conformed to Talcott Parsons definition of the nuclear family. 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.

The specific kind of family constellation and organisation, the certain way of living together as a family that the nuclear family constitutes has historically appeared as the most natural and desirable, but one must remember that the monogamous, nuclear family is but one of many possible ways of organising life as a family unit.





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)

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