Nuclear family

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Abstract: The concept of the nuclear family is used to designate a socially meaningful unit of family members. In this contribution the usage of the concept of the nuclear family is positioned in two perspectives. First, when defined by demographic criteria, the nuclear family refers to a residential unit. Second, when adopting a structural functionalist perspective, the nuclear family refers to a functional unit featuring specific interactions between genders and generations. Next, criticism on the concept of the nuclear family as well as conceptual changes and further developments are discussed.

Main text:

The concept of the nuclear family enabled research to identify, distinguish and group family members together in order to represent a socially meaningful unit of family members. This concept refers to both a residential unit defined by demographic criteria, and a functional unit featuring specific interactions between genders and generations. The concept is also extensively used by a critical approach of family research questioning the versatility of the two previous definitions for contemporary society. The mixture of these different meanings of the concept of the nuclear family makes its use and understanding in family research challenging. We will discuss the different usages of the concept "nuclear family" and further developments.

The nuclear family as a residential unit

The nuclear family as a residential unit became first salient in historical demography. Based on the information that was available in historical records, such as censuses, historical demographic research had to rely on available administrative information on co-residence, marriage, and descent in order to capture a socially meaningful family unit. The nuclear family was accordingly defined as the residential unit consisting of a couple sharing an official bond, usually marriage, and its biological children, usually without the presence of extended kin in the household. Historians have long dealt with the question when the nuclear family became the dominant household in continental Europe. Some saw the nuclear family as a novelty of modernity (Shorter, 1975), whereas others, based on census data, stressed its

dominance at the end of the Middle Ages in various parts of Europe already (Laslett, 1970). Furthermore, researchers debated on the universality of nuclear units, some stressing that nuclear family units form the basis of complex kinship systems (Murdock, 1949) and that the nuclear family would become the universal family unit because it was expected to be the best fit for industrialized societies (Goode, 1963), whereas others rather emphasized that the salience of nuclear family units differ among cultures and societies (Lévi-Strauss, 1969), with consequences for a variety of cultural and economic outcomes such as fertility behaviors, literacy or economic development (Todd, 1990). Overall, due to the limited availability of other data sources, studying the composition of households throughout time and space has often been a surrogate to studies on actual family interactions.

The nuclear family as a functional unit

A structural functionalist understanding of the nuclear family grants importance to specific functions. In addition to the demographic criteria (co-residence, marriage, and descent), these concerned heteronormativity, marriage, the male breadwinner model and gendered socialization of children (Parsons & Bales, 1955). In this perspective, it was generally argued that the nuclear family consists of a married father and mother, together forming a cohesive and stable unit, and their biological children, each fulfilling specific functions for each other and for society. Men were considered to be the instrumental leader of the family by providing directions through leadership and external resources through paid employment. Whereas women were considered to be the expressive leader, naturally fulfilling the functions of raising children and taking care of them. The nuclear family served the socialization of the children to their (gendered) role in society. In addition, the members of the nuclear family were supposed to offer each other emotional support in order to compensate the stress generated by modern life outside the family. The gender differentiation associated with this definition of the nuclear family was considered to be functional because it promotes specialized contributions of family members to society. As a consequence, seeing the families from a structural functionalist perspective brought some scholars to stress the disappearance of the family as a whole, equating the endangering of the gendered divide of the set of functions described above, with family decline (i.e., Popenoe, 1993).

Criticism, conceptual changes and further research developments

Starting in the nineteen seventies and gaining momentum, the concept of the nuclear family is used in an increasing number of studies addressing the complex relationships and practices involving family members who do not correspond to the administrative or functional definitions of the nuclear family. In that increasing trend, the nuclear family is challenged as a significant social unit for a variety of reasons that we now shortly summarize.

In the context of increased longevity, a growing workforce participation by women, increasing divorce rates and higher numbers of single parent households, the importance of multigenerational bonds beyond the household is increasing (Bengtson, 2001). Not only because people are living longer and the period of “shared lives” with family members is increasing, but also because these multigenerational bonds offer the opportunity for support exchange between family generations (Bengtson, 2001), such as grandparents providing care to their grandchildren (e.g., Hank & Buber, 2009) and grandparents offering emotional support to grandchildren in times of divorce (e.g., Lussier, Deater-Deckard, Dunn, & Davies, 2002). Despite these changes, women are still considered to be the kin keepers of the family, i.e., the family member who is seen as the main responsible person to keep the family ties active (Hagestad, 1986; Rosenthal, 1985).

Regarded as a residential or functional unit, the concept of the nuclear family falls short of capturing actual family interactions (see for example Burgess, 1926), which may vary greatly across households (Widmer, 2016). There has been a growing interest to study actual exchanges between family members, in order to explain the quality and strength of family relationships, as well as to study more diverse meaningful units of family members. The intergenerational solidarity framework as developed by Bengtson and colleagues (e.g., Bengtson & Roberts, 1991) theorized on the connections between family members, parents and children, by means of interactions, affection, the exchange of different types of support, but also sharing the same values, family norms and having the same opportunity, such as distance, to develop any of these connections. Research has shown that intergenerational transfers of resources may extend beyond the scope of the household (Albertini, Kohli, & Vogel, 2007) and may vary according to parents' social class (Albertini & Radl, 2012).

Increasing family complexity expanded the definition of the family to a more diverse definition in which exchanges between stepchildren, stepparents, stepsiblings and step-grandparents are also considered. The focus on the nuclear family as a residential and functional unit started to shift to a more open definition of an individual's "significant others." The individual is considered to be surrounded by so-called convoys of important others during the life course (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980) which exist beyond the boundaries of the household. The configurational approach (Widmer, 2016) regards families as a network of mutually oriented and dependent people (Elias, 1978) beyond residence, marriage or filiation. ‘The family’ is defined based on one’s inclusion of others in a set of significant family members. Approaching the family as a configuration enables capturing family units beyond residential units.

Overall, critics challenge the supremacy of the nuclear family either defined in demographic or in functional terms. Indeed, research on family diversity questions the statement that the household

constituted by married parents and their children is a demographically dominant form of family in contemporary society (Demo, Allen, & Fine, 2000). Furthermore, the small and closed character of the nuclear family requires responsibilities in order to maintain its functions and avoid its dysfunctions, such as family violence (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Researchers focusing on interactions within the nuclear unit and disregarding configurations of family ties beyond may be at risk of misunderstanding a series of crucial issues for sociology, such as the family network dynamics of social and gender inequalities, the multigenerational socialization of children or the complex interdependencies shaping family conflict.

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See also:

Demography: Historical; Divorce; Extended Family; Family Conflict; Family Demography; Family, Sociology of; Gender and Care-giving; Gender, Work, and Family; Interpersonal Relationships; Solidarity; Stepfamilies; Structural Functional Theory

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