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# Family Transitions and Families in Transition

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*Kurt Luescher*

## AMBIVALENCE AND PRACTICE AS EMERGING TOPICS OF CONTEMPORARY FAMILY STUDIES

### 1. *Families today – families this day*<sup>1</sup>

In order to recall the concrete challenges involved, I will start with some snapshots on what may be taking place in families in Europe on an ordinary day.

– Approximately some 1,500 children will be born in the European countries, half of whom are the first-born, and we may say that 750 new families thereby start a new life and have to (re-)organize their daily routines. But in those families where the newborn is not the first child, everyday life is also changing, especially in the transition from a two- to three-child family.

– The care and education of millions of children will be provided by the mothers, the fathers, also by grandparents, often combined with care arrangements in crèches or similar institutions. Consequently, schedules have to be kept, alternatives have to be found in case of illness, and children and parents are clearly confronted with differences in the patterns of getting along with each other routinely and in case of unforeseen events.

– Some women will again have to decide if they will undergo physically and psychologically strenuous treatment for artificial insemination, knowing that the rate of success will be between 50 and 80 per cent. Their lives are influenced by the ups and downs of their hopes, by visits to the clinic and by hearing of the experiences of others in a similar situation.

– Parents will meet with other parents and exchange their experiences and concerns, or they may seek the advice of family counsellors, thus

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<sup>1</sup> This text is based on my keynote lecture presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> Congress of the European Society on Family Relations ESFR 2010, in Milan on the 30<sup>th</sup> of September. I have changed some parts but have retained the ductus of a lecture. In preparing this manuscript, I have profited from stimulating discussions with Andreas Lange and Eric Widmer. My thanks also go to David Brenner for substantial editorial support, to Caroline Johnen and Stefanie Trautwein as student assistants. My work has been supported by the Centre of Excellence EXC16, Cultural Foundations of Integration, at the University of Konstanz. My electronic address is [kurt.luescher@uni-konstanz.de](mailto:kurt.luescher@uni-konstanz.de). For additional publications and downloads, see: [www.kurtluescher.de](http://www.kurtluescher.de).

demonstrating how important they consider both their children and themselves. But in courts where they already exist, family judges will have to define the best interest of the child in cases of divorce. Such cases have become even more complicated when the father and mother live in different countries, where different judicial regimes exist, or where different customs shape the understanding of divorce and parenthood.

– Many adults, already in their fifties or sixties, will lose their last parent and thus be confronted with his or her final will and testament. At the same time, these adults may also be faced with judging their relationships or having to quarrel with their siblings. Moreover, their inheritance may change their living arrangements and their financial situation.

– Mothers (more likely than fathers) will open a letter in which their son or daughter will inform them that they live with a partner of the same sex and intend to legalize this partnership where it is possible to do so. Parents and children will have to reconsider their mutual relationships and how they deal with an unusual ‘in-law’ configuration.

– In perhaps more than half of the families, parents and children will eat their evening meal while watching a soap opera on television. But there are also a considerable number of children (and parents) who will leave the table still hungry, and mothers and fathers who do not know how they will earn money the following day.

## 2. *Defining the situation: “dynamically contradictory diversity”*

I have selected these concrete examples in order to recall the demanding tasks of family studies: specifically, of how to engage in a theoretically-based analysis while remaining sensitive to the idiomatic qualities of family life – and still not get lost in the details. Do the dominant concepts and variables account for these colourful facets of family life? How can we formulate an appropriate – to borrow a popular metaphor in sociology – “definition of the situation”? Many speak of family ‘*plurality*’ while others prefer ‘*diversity*’. I lean toward the latter, because the concept of diversity seems closer to that openness and indefinite process which sensitizes us to differences as well as to struggles over inclusion and exclusion. The concept of diversity also provides a link to the discourse of gender while ultimately connoting that sense of openness which triggers the search for additional facets. Indeed, we have to account for a “*diversity of diversities*”.

*First*, on the phenomenological level, diversity refers to behaviours, actions, relationships and forms. We must only recall the different

ways parents educate their children. Or we can consider the different ways older people are involved as grandparents, while also thinking of those men and women who are deprived (for different reasons) of the opportunity to become grandparents. *Second*, diversity is actualized on the cognitive level as different forms of information and practical knowledge. This point is confirmed by visiting the family-advice section of any bookstore, or by reading magazines, in addition to the many programs for parent education offered by churches, family organizations, and private initiatives. The same holds for the diverse images of family lives which are transported through television into homes. These representations confront children and parents with alternatives to their own lifestyle or with behaviour that may seem strange or even bizarre to them. *Third*, diversity also involves observers, researchers and theories, and therefore knowledge about behaviours as well as different forms of knowledge. There is a diversity of scholarly perspectives, and we all know that these perspectives also guide what is observed and how it is observed. *Fourth*: In each of these three dimensions – behaviours, knowledge, and theories – we may distinguish a diversity of primary, secondary, tertiary and higher orders, depending on what level of social organization and concreteness we have in mind. Indeed, we can locate diversity differently within the same state, region, or even neighborhood. *Fifth*, diversity can be observed within one family type such as the single-parent family while also acting as an important feature of families in different categories of the population. Here an outstanding example is the diversity of migrant populations. To bring this diversity to the attention of the public at large is highly relevant in political terms, as Barbara Thiessen (2009, pp. 7-9) argues convincingly in a publication of the “German Youth Institute”.

These different forms of diversity keep accumulating. Furthermore, there is a widespread consciousness of family diversity due to the wealth of information available in the (increasingly) globalized world and the omnipresence of the media. The “diversity of diversities” – in the next step of our examination – requires attention on the private as well as on the societal level if we are to account for juxtapositions and contradictions. These likewise are diverse in their dynamics and involve the experience of overt and covert conflicts. They are further linked to the living conditions often subsumed under the label of ‘postmodernity’.

As a small *interlude*, I would like to recall that diversity also has to be considered with regard to the understanding and usage of *the term ‘family’*. In this case, I agree with the British sociologist David H. Morgan that we should be sceptical toward representations and ways of speak-

ing of the family as a substance or as an actor (Morgan 1996, p. 187)<sup>2</sup>. Nowadays the focus is on process and activities, although we should not neglect the institutional aspects. Nor should we exclude understanding families as a system or asking if it is possible to identify a specific “*proprium*” of ‘family’, e.g. a distinct task. As to be discussed below, I see this task in the personal and collective organization of ‘generativity’ in a wide sense of the word.

– The term family is used to refer to a *social category* or a *social topos*. In such cases, we speak of family as a life-form based primarily on the organization of intergenerational relationships between parent and child – as well as between the parents – which is socially recognized. This definition attempts to capture the twofold character of family as ‘daily lived’ and as a social institution while at the same time spotlighting permanent processes of institutionalization which may include conflicts.

– The term family is also used in connection with the term ‘*family types*’ when we observe that one or several features may serve objectively or subjectively as major references for the organization of family life (examples are: single-parent family, patchwork family).

– Finally, we may speak of an *individual family* or *subjective family* which has its own designation, particular membership, and perhaps its own idiosyncratic ways of organizing family life<sup>3</sup>.

### 3. Family practice and the “practice turn” in family studies

If we comprehend this globally contradictory family diversity as the – phenomenological – expression of the way people ‘do family’ – i.e., how they organize in meaningful ways their family life under present social, economic, and cultural conditions (and the tensions governing these) – then we should focus our attention on ‘family practice’. This is a concept which has received increasing attention in social and cultural studies as shown in overviews by Reckwitz (2003) and Hillebrandt (2009a; 2009b), which refer (among others) to the writings of Bourdieu and Giddens. A major issue is whether practices should be seen (in a manner of speaking) as the crystallization of action that is without reference to subjects. How-

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<sup>2</sup> His argument is as follows: Since the word is widely used, “it would be counter-[productive] to embargo its use. One strategy [...] is to use the word as a topic rather than a resource, to explore the ways in which and the occasions on which social actors use the word” (idem).

<sup>3</sup> For an extended discussion of this way to define family in a pragmatic perspective see Luescher (2003).

ever, I think that the example of family life is a good point that a theory of practice should include the idea of the subject. The following argumentation follows this line, although it goes beyond the scope of this chapter to examine this discourse in detail.

Here I prefer a genuinely pragmatic (in the theoretical sense of the word) view, focusing on practical tasks that are both general and specific. In the case of the family, that implies – as outlined in the definition above – care and concern for human offspring and for the organization of generativity across the life course. The task has to be interpreted as personally and socially meaningful. It is therefore embedded in relationships, communication, and the transfer of knowledge related to the past. The respective practices include routines and strategies to deal with the unforeseen, such as contingencies.

I agree again with Morgan (op. cit.: pp. 188 ff.) who underscores “that family practices do not have a ‘thing-like’ existence”. Rather, “family practices have a theoretical status, and part of this status includes the recognition that things could be viewed otherwise, through different sets of lenses” (op. cit.: p. 191). He adds that “family practices have [...] some sense of personal or moral significance. [...] The twin aspects of the word ‘meaning’ in English capture this very well; to say that family practices are meaningful is to say that such practices can be identified as such and that they can have some degree of significance for the parties involved” (idem). We will be reminded of these aspects when we look at “family rhetoric” as an aspect of the concern for practice. The connection to the search of meaning is an important element of an elaborated definition of ambivalence as proposed below.

Implying the notion of ambivalence without really using it, Morgan states that “the Janus-faced character of everyday life – looking at both self and society at the same time – is seen as constructed in its clearest form in the case of family practices. Autobiographical accounts, for example, may provide vivid portraits of the routines and the pleasures and the terrors of everyday domestic life while also describing for the argumentation that the wider society in which these domestic events took place” (idem: p. 193).

A given practice can be reflected on, that is, compared with the alternatives. Furthermore, how meanings are constituted is related how facets are constituted of the identities of those engaged individually and collectively in the pursuit of a task. In this way, an institution at any given moment is the result of ongoing processes involving (simultaneously) conflicts and agreements in the subjective and collective search for meaning. In the case of the family, such conflicts are the field for struggles over the definition of the family as well as the implementation of family policies – and politics.

This suggests we ought to place a strong emphasis in family studies on the *processes of institutionalization*. This would involve not only the observation of practical behaviours and an understanding of them by the actors themselves but also the reflection on behaviours and meanings from the perspective of the observer such as the scientist.

In this way, we are making reference to a *theory* of practice. Such a theory is reflective, that is, it is both empirically-oriented and includes thinking in terms of what *is* as well as what *could possibly be*. It appeals to and extends that horizon which the writer Robert Musil called ‘Möglichkeitssinn’ (translatable as ‘sense for possibilities’) contrasted by Musil with a ‘sense for realities’. This reference to alternatives will be important for an elaborated understanding of ambivalences in the wider horizon of family diversity.

Closely linked with this practice turn is the above-mentioned interest in “*family rhetoric*”. I propose this term for delineating the public discourses and media (re)presentations which deal with definitions and statements of what family is, can be, and should be<sup>4</sup>. In other words, family rhetoric addresses directly or indirectly issues of family practice in the normative sense. Here again we find a constituent part of ambivalences. Due to its normative dimension, family rhetoric displays a tendency toward *polarization*: the family as ‘heaven on earth’ or as ‘hell’, as a mode of life providing a future or as an outdated model. In regard to film as a medium of family rhetoric, our colleagues from Northern Europe will certainly think of the movie *Festen* (1998), a production of the ‘Dogma 95 Collective’. Chapter two of the recently published (and voluminous) *Austrian Family Report* (2010)<sup>5</sup> contains a detailed analysis of current family rhetoric. Among other topics, these authors analyze the famous TV show ‘Supernanny’. In their synopsis, the authors observe a change in the focus of family rhetoric over the last twenty years, away from the ‘form’ of the ‘family’ to family behaviours and achievement. This is an example of making the turn to family practice, for which I now will present some empirical evidence.

The *practice turn* in family research is also mirrored in the Seventh German ‘Family Report’, published in 2008, introducing a notion which sounds as awkward in German as in translation<sup>6</sup>. The authors speak of the family as ‘*Herstellungsleistung*’ (roughly: ‘production achievement’) to

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<sup>4</sup> For my understanding of family rhetoric, see Luescher (2000).

<sup>5</sup> Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft, Familie und Jugend, BMWFJ (2010).

<sup>6</sup> Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, BMFSFJ (2008).

suggest understanding the family as an ongoing accomplishment. Under this heading, they pay attention to what is called ‘work-life balance’, which is certainly also a major concern in current international research. The authors of the report – a group of seven distinguished scholars from different disciplines – emphasize the importance of the temporal dimensions of family life. In particular, they highlight the tension between the demands on family members’ time by the world of work, as well as by educational institutions and even the leisure industry. They also point out that members of the family, especially children, need their own rhythms and their own time (or *Eigenzeit*). In this way, they not only highlight the experience of tensions and contradictions in daily life but also the importance of the dimension of time in the analysis of practice. The English version of this view can be found in the many contributions that speak variously of ‘*doing family*’, an expression which is influenced (and not just verbally) by the expression ‘doing gender’. That expression in turn has its theoretical roots in social constructivism, philosophical performativism, and elsewhere<sup>7</sup>. On the practical side, as we all know, ‘doing family’ implies paying attention to the many manifestations of gender-oriented division of labour in doing the household, in care work, and in education – both within and outside families.

#### 4. *Generativity as a key issue*

As important as differentiated descriptions may be, we are also required to look for deeper analyses. In a more theoretically-directed perspective, the key term “dynamically contradictory diversity” consists of three theoretical propositions or assumptions:

1. Societal development implies and occurs in processes of differentiation and diversification that simultaneously include tensions and contradictions. This assumption can be easily demonstrated by reference to the general acceptance of the idea of evolution, and – in terms of recent historical developments – to the many analyses of the paradoxes of modernization, including those using the terms postmodernism or second modernity<sup>8</sup>. There are clearly differences among the approaches, but given the limits

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<sup>7</sup> For the development of the notion “doing” in this context, see West-Zimmerman (1987, pp. 125-151; Butler, 1990; Nelson, 2006, pp. 781-795).

<sup>8</sup> For my own understanding of “postmodernity” in connection with the contemporary family, see Luescher (1998).

of space and the major focus of this chapter, I shall take this assumption for granted and direct my attention to the second and third assumptions.

2. The tasks which we subsume nowadays under the label of family contain an innate potential for diversity, tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions, including those tasks situated between the possible and the desirable. I shall demonstrate this hypothesis by taking up the conceptualizing of family as a field of the social intermediary, located in the meso-realms of the social world. In conventional terms, we may refer (as above) to the tensions between individual and society. In analytical terms, these tensions occur between subject and sociality or between personal and collective identities. I shall illustrate this assumption with respect to generativity and socialization as major familial tasks.

Finally, a logically necessary third hypothesis may be formulated as follows:

3. Humans are able to experience tensions and contradictions in and between themselves. In other words, they can be sensitive to tensions and contradictions while developing their ideas of personal identity and hence their agency and their sociality or sociability, such as the way they organize social life. By agency I mean the ability to act in reflective modes, including responsibility for oneself and others<sup>9</sup>. Agency also refers to the factual and normative conditions under which people can and must act.

It is with regard to this third hypothesis that I would like to bring in the concept of ambivalence. But before doing so, I would like to elaborate briefly on the second proposition, concerning the predisposition of family for diversity and contradictions. Indeed, “generativity” can fruitfully be seen as the core of the “familial”. I see in this attempt a similarity to the propositions by Cigoli and Scabini (2006) and Donati (see the present volume). My point of departure is viewing generativity as rooted in a biological given, namely the dependency (or reliability) of human offspring on their elders. Yet this biological given, in the case of human beings, requires a social-cultural response, and our human equipment – the facility for thought and reflection – allows not only one but several responses. We may thus say that, from the outset, the familial contains a potential for diversity while also indicating two fundamental tensions. *First*, there is the tension between the “biological” and the “cultural” and – importantly – the understanding or knowledge of this tension as it has changed over history. Just consider the development of knowledge on contraception. The *second*

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<sup>9</sup> For a detailed discussion of agency which in its basic pragmatic orientation is quite compatible with the perspective taken here, see Emirbayer - Mische (1998).

basic tension consists in an opposition between the factual and normative, as demonstrated by the understanding of gender.

Thus, generativity is highly important for both social and individual development and also has a potential for diversity as well as innovation. Consequently, it has also provoked comparisons, evaluation (to use a modern word), social control, and institutionalization. Therefore, the family – or “doing family” – is fundamentally interwoven with politics, with the construction of inequalities and with the claim for social justice.

To put it in a simple sentence (yet one which entails a paradox): *‘Doing family’ or ‘family practice’ refers to a sociocultural task required by human biology.* And I should add, the understanding and interpretation of the concrete actions which accompany this task require something else: Overtly or covertly, we must deal with the possibility of alternatives, differences, tensions, and contradictions between the private and the public, the factual and the normative, and realities and potentials (or contingencies). There may be times when these tensions are less visible and pressing. Yet for the present, we will suggest that these tensions are obvious both on the phenomenological level and within deeper structures and processes. They are experienced by individuals (or by a family as a collective actor) and shape their family practice.

Let me add an additional remark on generativity. In contemporary Western societies, the *common life span*<sup>10</sup> of generations expands over three or even more generations. We are reminded that the relationships between members of two generations, both in private and public, are elements in chains of generations. This suggests, in my view, a broadening of our traditional understanding of generativity. In a broader contemporary perspective, therefore, we may *define* generativity as “the human ability to be individually and collectively aware of the mutual dependency of generations and to consider this in actions. Therein lies the specific potential for the significance of individual as well as community-based social life” (Luescher et al., 2010, p. 103)<sup>11</sup>.

Such a view of generativity can lead to an analogously expanded understanding of *socialization*. Learning influences extend obviously

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<sup>10</sup> Note that the *common life span* is the precondition of common life *time*, e.g. the time really spent together. Often, this distinction is overseen, but it is relevant in practice.

<sup>11</sup> For this definition as well as the following definition on generative socialization, see the synchronized trilingual (German, French, English) compendium *Generation, Intergenerational Relations, Generational Policy* edited by the Swiss Academy of the Humanities and the Social Sciences (Luescher et al., 2010).

from the old to the young – but also from the young to the old. And what is more: young and old learn together when faced with their common heritage. They may engage with – or even be forced to deal with – their common social and cultural heritage, in making critical assessments and even in searching for new practices. Against this background, we may consider a parallel concept called ‘*generative socialization*’. We may allude to *generative socialization* “as the various processes of learning between members of different generations, which lead to acquisition of facets of social identities in negotiating their joint economic, social and cultural inheritance” (Luescher et al., 2010, p. 102)<sup>12</sup>. Such a view emphasizes the close associations between generativity and socialization both in theory and in practice and may stimulate new research, for instance, on the so-called “dialogue between generations”. It might also be of interest when analyzing the activity and the social significance of family associations.

*To reiterate*: The dynamic contradictory diversity of ‘doing family’, or ‘the familial’ (perhaps also ‘il familiare’), can be comprehended as the temporary result of processes, attempts, and struggles involved in practicing generativity and socialization; this includes the ways these “tasks” are understood as meaningful. Such meanings include the interplay between actions, knowledge, and beliefs. And in addition, the practice of generativity and socialization may involve dealing with both abstract and concrete tensions, such as the tensions between

- subjectivity and sociality,
- the private and public in dividing up tasks and actions,
- experienced-based knowledge and beliefs as guidelines for action,
- reality and ambition,
- similarity and difference,
- closeness and distance,
- dependency and autonomy, and
- the understanding of contingencies in individual and collective lives<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> The concept of “generative socialization” is presented in more details and in an interdisciplinary perspective in a contribution to the *German Handbook on Socialization Research* by Liegle - Luescher (2008).

<sup>13</sup> See also de Singly (2007), who refers to the following tensions: “Entre personnalisation et socialisation, privatisation et normalisation, fragilité et ancrage, reproduction sociale et processus d’individualisation, l’amour et la blessure d’amour”.

### 5. *Ambivalence in family practice*

Here I would like to bring in the concept of ambivalence – or more appropriately the ‘construct’ of ambivalence<sup>14</sup>. The term has its origins in psychiatry and psychotherapy but is now used in many disciplines and is well-known in everyday language. Just recall some of the examples mentioned in the introductory section above: the paths to parenthood, the decision to have a child or an additional child, the usage of reproductive medicine, the arrangements of childcare, dealing with an inheritance, defining the relationships with a child and his or her partner of the same sex.

What do these examples have in common? Some of them require dealing with differences in connection with sameness. Others involve our aspirations or ambitions, measured against an ideal of normality. In this way, social structures, ideas and ideologies become relevant. This is also the case when moral duties or standards compete with the desire for self-fulfillment. Some hint at a simultaneous contrast between love and hatred. At play in any given situation or given phase of common action are simultaneously contrasting feelings, thoughts, wishes, intentions or assessments of social structures and societal forces. In many instances, some or all of them enhance and influence the others.

Nonetheless, there is another element at play which, in my view, contributes significantly to an elaborated definition of ambivalence and its connection to practice. Speaking (as above) of an *experience*, we can – and I think we *should* – include in a fuller understanding of ambivalence *the processes of oscillation* between polarized juxtapositions. Hence, we ought to consider the oscillations between difference and similarity, between autonomy and dependence, and between moral obligations and self-interest – and the oscillations between their concrete manifestations in social situations. These oscillations may be of a longer or a shorter duration. That is, they last as long as the polarized contradictions are interpreted as irreconcilable. Hence, the dynamics of becoming parents, of leaving the parental home, or of entering a nursing home all provide concrete examples. In fact, through inheritance, the ambivalences may even be prolonged beyond death<sup>15</sup>.

When recalling the origin of the concept *ambivalence*, we are reminded that it entails a reference – in sociological and psychological terms – to

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<sup>14</sup> In the following passages I am partially relying on my recent presentation of ambivalence in Luescher (2011).

<sup>15</sup> See in this connection the presentations of Konstanzer-Erben-Survey (Constance Inheritance Survey) by Lettke (2004, 2005).

the self. In other words, it seems useful to comprehend ambivalences as referring to conflicting experiences which are relevant to personal identity or the personality. More precisely, these are relevant to *facets* of personal identity and its dynamics. Here we can also grasp why ambivalence has received increased attention in recent years, inasmuch as *individualization* has become a keyword for the analysis of contemporary social life. The accompanied challenges of contradictions and fragmentation in the precarious, socially-imposed search for identity is a specific theme in theories of postmodernity, as expressed in notions used by different authors such as the ‘fragmented self’, the ‘fragile self’ or the ‘precarious self’. In moving toward a more elaborated understanding of ambivalence, I would like to add one further element. The experience of polarized tensions is not only important behaviourally but is also *meaningful* for the subject (or the individual person) in the sense of being *significant*. Concurrently, this experience is connected to the ability to act consciously and responsibly as well as to consider *alternatives*.

In other words, it is relevant for the connection between the *self and agency*. Coping with ambivalences emerges as a quality and capacity in processes of identity construction. The awareness of alternatives and their realization within a given context – including the restraints brought on by the circumstances or power of others – is what constitutes agency. And agency, connected to the notion of responsibility for oneself and others, is a crucial element of practice.

I have now arrived at the point in my essay where I see the possibility of integrating the two lines of my argumentation on ambivalence in family practice. *To recapitulate*: we have reached an elaborated definition of ambivalence which may be formulated as follows: The concept of ambivalence refers to specific experiences. These occur while people are searching for the significance of facts, events, others, social relationships, tasks and institutions which are relevant to the individual and his/her development as well as his/her agency. These experiences oscillate temporarily or permanently between polar contradictions in feeling, thinking, desiring, or social structures. These oscillations can be asymmetrical or imbalanced, reflecting the impact of powers.

This definition contains several analytical elements, as was outlined above. In research, not every element is given the same attention. This is a reason to speak of *potentials* of a concept which are still to be explored. Yet the fundamental familial tasks – generally speaking, generativity and socialization – are also a hotbed for ambivalent experiences with regard to differences under the condition of intimacy, such as autonomy *vs.* dependency or self-interest *vs.* solidarity. In practice – most obviously in

the different forms of caregiving – these two predispositions overlap and reinforce each other. Child-parent relationships over the entire life-course seem to be conditioned on the experience of ambivalences. These relationships are realized in a domain where the private and the public overlap. For the adult children still belong to the family but are also supposed to find their place out in the world. Similarity and difference in lifestyles and character become evident and may generate conflicts. Unforeseen events such as a divorce or chronic illness may accentuate the tensions between dependence and autonomy. Furthermore (and with reference to the first of my three general propositions), it seems plausible that the contradictory social forces characterizing postmodern societies have an immediate impact on family practice.

By now, there is a wide range of research proving the fruitfulness of the concept of ambivalence. It is beyond the scope of the present article to provide an extensive review<sup>16</sup> or to discuss methodological issues<sup>17</sup>. The major challenge has been to achieve a theoretical-based understanding of the different forms of experiences with ambivalences and the ways to deal with them<sup>18</sup>. As a result, different ways of dealing with ambivalences become practices themselves, tied to the lives of individual families as well as to family types. And in such a way, they are simultaneously connected to the societal conditions that shape contemporary family life.

To sum up, this wide range of topics demonstrates the fruitfulness of focusing on ambivalences. Such an approach is both plausible and relates to the daily experiences of mothers, fathers, children, and grandparents as well as those involved professionally in family work. In this way, ambivalences enhance the authenticity of family life. Yet they are also well-established in a theoretically-based understanding of fundamental family tasks. And finally, they can be related to an analysis of societal life under conditions of ‘postmodernity’.

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<sup>16</sup> See for an early source, the contribution in Pillemer - Luescher (2004) and the references provided there, for a recent overview Luescher-Hoff (2011) (under submission).

<sup>17</sup> For an overview which is still valid, see Lettke - Klein (2004). In a discussion of the methodological nature of ambivalence I suggest to see it as a “sensitizing construct” (Luescher, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> An example is given in the Konstanz module, of which a revised version is contained in Luescher (2005). Meanwhile, the module has been applied and discussed in different studies, for instance by Lorenz-Meyer (2004), Lowenstein (2007), Burkhardt et al. (2007), Letiecq et al. (2008), Principi et al. (2010), Widmer - Luescher (2011).

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