

From fieldwork to the theory and back again

The biographical (re)construction of an unconventional family by way of multi-variant data

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My paper is research-oriented. In other words, I will concentrate on an object of research and introduce you to a certain methodological process. This object of research is an unconventional family. The unconventional factor in the following case embodies the special variant of a homosexual family. The method I have applied to study this particular form of family is known as “family research based on case reconstruction”. This means that interpretations and generalizations are not based on the frequency at which certain social phenomena occur but working on the individual case, theses or grounded theories are generated by way of case comparison. As to the structure of this paper, let me explain as follows:

The first part reflects a current topical debate in sociological family research. The second part introduces you to the object of research, the homosexual family. The unconventional factor in the following case is the absence of the biological parental couple. In its place is a lesbian couple who has satisfied its desire to have children by means of a sperm donation. I call this form of family the same-sex insemination family. The third part of this paper introduces you to the case in question. I hope I will be able to demonstrate two points. Firstly, that the scientist in the field of family research based on case reconstruction works with a variety of different data types that are retrieved by ethnographic approaches. And also I hope to show you that case-reconstructing family research means taking account of determinants that are “beyond direct interaction” (Charmaz 2006, p. 118, quoted from Hildenbrand 2013, p. 207). I will be closing my talk with an answer to the question: how do we proceed from fieldwork to the theory and back again?

Now to the first point:

I A debate in sociological family research

For many years now statements about familial change have been rather inconsistent. Discussion often swings between “dramatization and placation” (translated from Burkart 2008, p. 13); opinions range between claiming the family form is in crisis or is a form of life that is on the way out. The counter-argument maintains that on the whole the family is an “indestructible form of life” (translated from Allert 1998). These differing diagnoses result in controversial sociological debate about the term “family”.

The opinions vary from large-scale consent that the nuclear family is the focus of analysis in family sociology through to the total rejection of this position. New family forms, such as same-sex insemination families, can now be addressed to investigate whether or not the nuclear family really is losing its significance.

Now I come to my second point:

II Object of research: a form of the homosexual family – the same-sex insemination family

The object of research is a special variant of the same-sex family, namely lesbian couples who fulfil their desire for children by way of a sperm donation. To the family research sociologist it is of interest because the comparison of the variant unconventional forms of family shows the following: the more the family form differs from the “nuclear family”, the clearer do certain modes of organisation become apparent that are as follows; despite the fact that people live within the new unconventional family framework, these modes of organisation are just as defining and guiding as they are in the nuclear family.

To study the same-sex insemination family, I have conducted interviews on the family history. In addition to the interview, other procedures are used to retrieve data” (translated from Hildenbrand 1998, p. 209). For example, the data embodied in family reconstructions also include the information retrieved from observation, such as the structure of interactions during

the course of greeting and welcoming scenarios, seating arrangements or indicative documents and lettering, such as family photos or the doorbell panel.

Just another word about the data collection: the interviews on the family history I conducted were roughly aligned to the chronology of the respective process of family-building. Above all, I was interested in the process of setting up and structuring the family. In a second step I gathered data about the family of origin and the curriculum vitae. This information is entered on a genogram for analysis. Just imagine a graphic representation of a family tree that shows at a glance the various generations and how they all link up. The analysis of a genogram enables us to identify the conditional factors that also make an impact on the process of forming an identity. I will be showing you afterwards such a genogram.

I come to the third part of this paper.

III A case analysis – a path through a multi-variant range of data

One of the project's crucial findings – and I say crucial because it is a cross-case observation – is the fact that in all the families I have studied up to now, compensational strategies are at work. They aim to correct any irregularity in the family caused by only one of the women being biologically related to the child. In point of fact, it is often the case that the genetic parent positions herself on the periphery so that the parent not genetically related to the child can develop a bond with the child.

Now to my case:

The family community comprises five people. Namely the biological mother and her partner, the sperm donor – in other words the genetic father – and his partner. Life evolves mainly around the two women. The son, who I have called Felix, lives with them. He was conceived by insemination carried out at home. The male couple lives about 400 km away and regularly visits the female family. The central figure in this community of five is the biological mother. There are contrasting cases in which the genetic mother does not feature as centrally as she does in this case. This particular feature of the case has evolved from the history of socialisation as can be seen from the analysis of the genogram. I will only show you one genogram – that of the lesbian couple.

One of the results of the analysis of the genogram is the following: Brigitte is the genetic mother. Her parents separated before she was one year old. She grew up with her grandmother and step-grandfather. When Brigitte was 16 years old, her grandmother died, leaving her an orphan. One of the consequences of this, as the biographic data shows, is that the process of becoming independent is furthered and that by exercising control, the expected eventualities of life are to be prevented. In the context of the family, the analysis of the genogram identifies a typical pattern, namely the structural absence of paternal role models. If new life is to be socialized at all, then this can only take place via the experience acquired and provided by women. Given this background, it comes as no surprise that Brigitte is the central figure, the person who shapes the structure in an unconventional family setting.

The following documents leave no doubt that as biological mother Brigitte asserts her social position very clearly indeed. However, this has no influence on a central principle of order that is common to all families of this type that have been studied up to now: reducing the distance between the non-genetic parent and the child via processes of integration and enclosure. I will now lead you through the data material as it was collected during the process of gathering the data.

An initial record indicative of the family is the doorbell panel. It looks like this: (PP). It was made by the women themselves. This means that in the process of production a decision had to be taken about its design. If we now view the doorbell panel along the lines of the most frequent written languages, for example, we need to explain why the first line gives the women's first names, and below this the surname "Meisner". This name, by the way is the name of the genetic mother. And then the question arises as to why the child's first name is shown at a distance, which is marked by the plus sign ("+")? If the women had wanted to express that their communal life evolves along a power axis by which the parents are superior and the children inferior, then it would have been enough to order the names underneath one another. This is not what they decided. So that it can be assumed that the "+" sign has yet another significance. I would suggest the following interpretation: the "+" sign between the women who are bound in their own alliance and their son indicates a distance in contact. The plus sign admittedly brings the elements together as one but it also denotes a separation between them. What does the doorbell panel tell Felix? It can be surmised that Felix is growing up in a triangular structure of

relationships. The generation of adults is defined by the two females who are bound to one another as kinsfolk. Their shared household provides the framework for their life together. However, unlike the nuclear family, there is no congruence between blood relationship (descendants) and social relationship. This is why Felix appears on the doorbell panel without a surname of his own. Issues of origin and parentage cannot be explained within the bounds of the household community. If Felix wants to trace his genealogical origin, he will have to proceed beyond the bounds of the persons named on the panel. In this sense the “+” sign indicates a bond as well as a separation.

To find out what happens after ringing the doorbell, the observation record is called for. I will now show you the diagram by which I visualized the process of welcoming or greeting me. The diagram shows the order in which the involved parties receive me. First of all, Brigitte, the genetic mother, welcomes me and after her, her partner. Then the partner of the sperm donor shakes my hand and after him, the sperm donor himself, i.e. the genetic father. The diagram gives emphasis to the biological parents of Felix. Or in other words: those directly involved in the process of reproduction, namely the sperm donor and the woman in whom insemination took place, the genetic mother, stand on the periphery. The partners of the biological parents are shown in italics. What strikes one here?

The non-genetic parents are integrated into the reproduction triad. In order to integrate the socially constructed parents, the genetic parents are separated. A relationship becomes visible in which those involved in reproduction are shown separately in chiastic structure (**a b b a**) but at the same time bond over the social parenthood of their partners.

After greeting one another, the persons involved now have to arrange themselves in the room. This is how the seating is arranged: the genetic mother Brigitte and her partner sit next to each other. In other words the “maternal parental unit” sits opposite me, the genetic father is sitting on the sofa to the side of the table. His partner is seated on the floor with the child. Compared to when greeting me, we now see that the non-genetic relations, i.e. Kordula and Klaus, have not been fully included in the reproduction triad. Yet the partner of the biological father, Klaus, who is generally the farthest removed from the child in terms of everyday life and genetic connection, is now closest to the child. To bond with the child, the person who has no genetic connection

with Felix is close to the child. What else is striking? There is a similarity to the greeting and reception scene. Here too in the seating arrangement, the female couple is of particular relevance. Upon my arrival I was first greeted by the “maternal parental unit”. Here in the seating order it [= the parental unit] is objectified by the two women sitting next to each other. In terms of everyday life, the reproduction triad is shown to be of no relevance. This is particularly obvious at the beginning of the interview. This is the initial sequence of the interview:

Interviewer: Do tell me (.) how you all (.) became a family

Brigitte: Mmm.

Kordula: Yes.

Brigitte: (grins) Suppose I’d better begin (!)(?)

Kordula: (laughs): @Yes@

Brigitte: Well I want, I mean wanted ...

It is significant that the men say nothing and the two women consider themselves to be of relevance to the start of the interview. Those who live the everyday routine place themselves in the centre by way of language. Through the order of interaction, the scene is set and the two women form the hub of the social family. Now to the seating arrangement again: you see that spatially speaking, the genetic father is the most exposed of them all. He is seated to the side of the table on the sofa, so that he is slightly higher than the female couple kneeling on the floor. Compared to her partner, the biological mother has a more central position. She is facing the interviewer. The following becomes clear: even if everyday family life is structured by the two women, the social relations that are based on parentage are retained. “Reproductive parenthood” and social parenthood join forces in this family in the form of the “maternal parental unit”.

Now to the family photo: The photo shows: the reproduction triad, in other words the biological parents and the child, look beyond the picture. Since they are looking directly at the photographer and hence at the potential viewer of the photo, it is they who establish external contact. This enables the non-genetic parents to address the son within an interior. Yet again we see that the genetic parentage provides a frame for the socially constructed family. However, if we imagine that the non-genetic parents did not exist, and if we bunch the people looking into the camera all together, we recognise the paternalistic family, such as featured in works of art from the 19th century (*cf.* Lorenz 1985). Setting up a family in an alternative context does not

only mean generating structures of a family of origin within the female couple family but also acknowledging that the family is a fact that is rooted in the biology of reproduction.

Now let me draw to a close.

IV How do we proceed from fieldwork to the theory and back again?

How does one proceed from the individual case to the theory? Most of all it has to be a basis operation: the selective selection of cases subject to the criterion of the greatest possible contrast. A contrast case to this would be a same-sex insemination family with an anonymous sperm donor. Up to now, I have compared three cases. One characteristic common to all three cases is that they all tend to reflect efforts to enable the non-genetic parent to become close to the child; frequently at the price of the biological mother occupying a peripheral position. In this particular case, admittedly, this feature is not quite so obvious. The mother-child dyad is not split up to integrate the partner and enable her to build up a relationship with the child as if she were the natural mother. The fact that this characteristic found in all three cases is not quite as apparent in this one particular case is because of the mother's history of socialisation. It would be of interest for further case analyses to focus on this question: what characteristics distinctive for the individual case and differing from other cases do not, however, result in general structural characteristics consistently emerging despite the differences? Yet theories on general structural characteristics can be supported if it is possible to claim the following: if these structures can be reconstructed in different cases of same-sex insemination families, then it is possible to argue that they also prevail in other cases. Certainly, as Max Weber said, theories are allowed an "eternal youthfulness". For "the perpetually progressive flow of culture always leads to new problems" and to constructions of the actors. For this reason, a "return to the field" would seem likely.