

Conceptual note No.6

The significance of family in the context of poverty

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It must be said at the outset that there is but a relatively small literature on this subject (Kempson et al 1994; Daly and Leonard 2002; Walker and Collins 2004). There are a number of conceptual challenges involved. It is helpful for the purposes of identifying and working through those challenges to identify what is the key question involved in the topic. In my view this centres on how poverty and/or low income are mediated and affected by family considerations, whether through practices, exigencies or condition, resources, processes and relations? A number of clarifications follow.

The first centres on how to conceptualise the family. Normally this is taken as a structural entity although there is a whole slew of new work which emphasises family as a set of processes and relations (Morgan 2010; Dermott and Seymour 2011). This work cautions against seeing family in a fixed way, either as a unique structure or set of relations. A second conceptual point of note is that the family (in all its many forms) has to be understood as both collective unit and a unit in which individual behaviours are located. This means that for the purposes of understanding how family mediates poverty one must work at two levels: the individual and the collective. The concept of norm and obligation helps to forge a link between these two levels. The moral dimensions are vital, in the sense especially of how people's identities as moral beings is bound up in the exchanges and support they offer or not within a family context and the processes through which these get negotiated (Brannen and Wilson 1987; Finch and Mason 1993). The extent to which people have available support and the extent to which they extend support is another crucial element here. A third conceptual clarification is that focus has to be on the interior life of the family

as well as the external life. In the former regard, the goal is to make visible some of the internal processes and decisions about the use and distribution of resources (material and immaterial – essentially goods, money, emotional support, advice/information and services) within families and the capacities that exist and are available on a family basis. In regard to both collective and individual levels, of special interest is the way that families might be said to have capacities and generate resources and the practices and relations they engage in for this purpose. In other words, agency has to be a central assumption and interest (see Lister 2004; Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin 2010).

Concepts/Theoretical Insights

Apart from the poverty/social exclusion literature, there are five main sets of ideas or concepts from the literature that set out the conceptual terrain of the topic and frame key aspects of the approach.

First, David Morgan's concept/approach of family practices is relevant. The family practices framework directs attention to the everyday, to the way that family members organise their lives and the way they 'do' (i.e., perform) their family relationships. The emphasis is on agency in this perspective. Morgan (2010) elaborates the term family practices in terms of six sets of references or senses:

- a sense of the active in that family life is elaborated as a set of activities,
- a sense of the everyday and the routines which are common and shared across different types of families,
- a sense of the regular,
- a sense of fluidity in terms of the fluid nature of boundaries between family and non-family and in terms of who counts as family members,
- a sense of history and biography especially in the sense of the legal and political processes that surround family life and shape how people approach it and live it;
- a sense of movement between the perspectives of observer and the actor.

This approach takes the researcher into the understanding of the family as both a subjective - a mental category - and objective category. The perspective also has a foundational interest in everyday strategies which leaves it to respondents themselves to define what family is and means for them

A second relevant concept or approach is that of 'capital'. The deployment of capital in a sociological sense (as either social or cultural capitals) is controversial, although widely used (especially in the US). It has multiple meanings, most widely associated with the notion of community and involvement in civic life. This term is meant to pick on not so much the resources (broadly defined) that people have available but the way in which these resources are utilised and with what consequences. As applied to the family it especially refers to the family's functions in providing the connections or networks, normative control and 'sponsorship' that is required to integrate people into society (Furstenberg and Kaplan 2004: 219). In some ways the term capital is linked to one of the original meanings of the term 'resources, in the sense of how one copes. Pearlin and Schooler (cited in Thorogood, 1987: 20) have stated that resources refer not to what people do but what is available to them in developing their coping resources.

A third concept that is of interest is culture. This is a very wide-ranging concept or, better put, it is a concept that is used in a diverse set of ways. Cultural sociology strives to provide accounts of perceived hierarchies, group boundaries, and moral systems (Newman and Peebles Massengill 2006: 434). While they do not define culture as such, Small et al (2010) outline 7 different perspectives or ways in which it can be conceived. These are: values (the ends towards which behaviour is directed as opposed to the means to achieve them); frames (the lens through which life and behaviours are perceived – frames define horizons, individual life projects or what is 'thinkable'); repertoires (the idea that people have types or strategies of action, modes of action and meaning); narratives (causally linked sequences of events which are central to social identities); symbolic boundaries (systems of rules that guide interaction by affecting who comes together to engage in what social act); cultural capital (knowledge or information acquired through social experience); institution.

A fourth concept is that of capacities in the sense of the resources and dispositions available to people to take action. It has affinities with Amartya Sen's (1984) theorisation of capabilities – the freedom that people have to do what they want to and be who they want to be. For Sen well-being is to be assessed in terms of people's capability to engage in valuable activities or acts and to reach valuable states of being, functionings. It is not resources or command over commodities *per*

se that matter in determining quality of life or even justice but rather opportunities which can be taken up. The critical element, though, is capabilities. It is these which proffer the freedom or opportunity to achieve certain preferred life styles. People (should) have capability sets - resources to achieve whatever it is they value. This is close to what is known as positive freedom or 'freedom for'. This is useful as a positive concept. As Walker and Collins (2004: 205) say "poverty ratchets up the personal and social skills required successfully to undertake the basic tasks of domestic financial management".

A fifth potentially relevant concept or approach is less utilised compared with the other four discussed to date. This is the concept of family solidarity. It is evoked to refer to practices of reciprocity and mutual assistance among family members over and above personal interest (Martin 2004). Underlying it is an interest in the strength and meaning of family ties and kinship relations as distinctive (something which is disputed, especially in British sociology – see Smart (2007)). Empirically, it refers to whether and how family acts as a system of support, the extent to which one can rely or fall back on family or the wider kin group if and when one needs to (Finch and Mason 1993). Care needs to be exercised with the concept, though, because it has some affinity with a Durkheimian social cohesion perspective (implying family cohesion and bonding). However it is interesting to pose it as a counterpoint to the many claims about the individualisation of social life.

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