1 Family Rhetoric in Family Politics

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Over the last decades, we have been witnessing a rising interest in family politics and family policies, and consequently in public debates on the family. Family reports may be seen as an important institutionalized form of this discourse, and consequently merit special attention within the sociology of the family. The analysis of these reports, especially in the perspective of a sociology of knowledge, may be advanced by comparisons between different forms of reports, their institutional settings, their contents and their impacts. The analysis may also profit from attempts to look at other forms and modes of public discourse on the family and on family politics. A tool for these kinds of comparative analysis – in the two ways just mentioned – may be seen in the conceptualization of family rhetoric. This is the perspective I will take in the following presentation. Its focus is on the general features of family rhetoric, thus it aims to sketch out a theoretical frame of reference. I will start with a definition of family rhetoric and then develop my argumentation in a set of four propositions.

Definition

The concept of family rhetoric refers to texts, images and statements which aim to publicly appraise 'the' family in general, certain forms of families, family behaviours or family patterns in particular in order to judge them, to promote or to reject them, and to impose specific models on individual actors.

Not all types of statements and texts on the family should be interpreted as rhetorical. My definition deliberately excludes:

- private conversations on the family, although these may be influenced by family rhetoric and may merit sociological studies;

- scholarly texts, insofar as they are not intended to make normative statements. However, scholarly text may be used (and misused) for rhetorical purposes, and rhetoric may be one of their concerns.

Family rhetoric, as a social phenomenon, has a long history, because public discourses on marriage, family, and household have always had a moralistic component. This is also true for the writings of the founding fathers of family sociology such as Riehl and Le Play.

A new interest in family rhetoric correlates with debates over family developments since the mid-1960s. These changes concern behaviours as well as ideas regarding the family. They go together with new notions concerning family policies and family politics, e.g., the relations among individual, family, state and society. The new interest also correlates with recent developments of the organization and the patterns of all forms of human communication as a consequence of the introduction of new media. Thus we should not be surprised to observe a renaissance of interest in rhetoric in the social sciences, as well as in law, economics, political science and the humanities proper.

The term 'family rhetoric', to my knowledge, first appeared in the 1980s. Thus, Gubrium and Lyott (1985), under the heading 'Family rhetoric and social order', proposed viewing 'family discourse as a form of social action through which aspects of social life are not only assigned meaning, but also are organized and manipulated – that is controlled' (Gubrium and Holstein, 1990, p. 132). Bernardes (1987, p. 691) expressed an interest in '... exploring the predominance of the representation of "family rhetoric" (or the power of "family ideology", in my terms)' implicit in the official statistics.

In our work, we first employed the term in connection with the analysis of different attempts to formulate a definition of the family (Lüscher, Wehrspaun and Lange, 1989). We then used the concept in connection with an analysis of family reports (Walter, 1993). Kaufmann (1993) took up this lead and used the concept of family rhetoric to characterize the different types of arguments employed in substantiating the legitimization of family policy. More recently, we have used the approach to compare publications in the field of family sociology and on the so called 'war between generations' (Bräuninger et al., 1997).

However, in this presentation, I do not wish to elaborate this line of analysis. Instead, I would like to offer a set of propositions based on a general thesis concerning the basic function of rhetoric.

This thesis relies on the leading idea behind Blumenberg's (1981) 'anthropological approach to the actuality of rhetoric'. The latter states that the essence of (philosophical) anthropology can be expressed in the

juxtaposition of man as a 'rich or a poor creature'. Man's creativity emerges from the precariousness of his needs or from a playful use of the abundance of his talents. Thus rhetoric reflects either man's possession of wisdom or truth or his inability to achieve them.

If we apply this idea to our proposition on family rhetoric, we may say that the latter serves to express convictions about what the family has been in the past and will be in the future; or it raises fundamental doubts about the reasonableness of such convictions and indicates a genuine openness what the family is or should be. Thus, we may formulate:

Proposition 1

Rhetoric serves to affirm either the possession of truth or to veil basic doubts. Accordingly, family rhetoric either proclaims a particular ideal of the family, or denies the feasibility of defining mandatory models of the family.

The juxtaposition of these two rhetorical positions is meant to be an ideal-type reference for the analyses of public discourse on the family along different themes and topics. I would like to briefly describe three such themes.

A Family as a Natural Unit

Quite often, orators and writers start from the notion of a profound crisis of the family. Thus radical critics may ask if the family is a dying species, or what will happen to a society whose basic unit, its 'cells', are seriously endangered. These critics draw on a metaphor characteristic of a dogmatic conception of the family. It treats the family as a natural unit, put simply, as natural.

This idea is deeply rooted, first, in Roman Catholic doctrine, where it is related to the conception of marriage as a sacrament. The validity of such religious convictions will not be debated here. We are instead interested in their functions. These functions lie in the fact that a given form may be regarded as normative, and prescriptions may be made concerning what should be considered as natural, therefore as good behaviour, e.g., in regard to contraception or to reproductive medicine. The reference to nature is a rhetorical device serving to devaluate alternative views. The same is true for references to the origins of family, and defining the family and marriage as having been instituted by God.

A related position is held by those ethnologists, social-biologists and others who attempt to draw inferences as to the structure of the family from the study of animal behaviour, especially in regard to mother-child relations. They overlook the fact that such a use of the term family is not free from anthropocentric implications, and they also neglect the great diversity of behaviour found among non-human species.

The rhetorical counterposition conceives the family as an exclusively social construction, intended to serve specific interests, e.g., those of a given social class, as does the so-called 'bourgeois family', or to express male supremacy.

B What is Meant by 'Normal'?

Rhetorical statements on the family very often contain 'prescription in the form of description' (Finch, 1989, p. 237). Thus politicians in their political speeches often claim that the 'family provides its members security, devotion and warmth'. This is certainly often true. But there are, unfortunately, also instances and cases of family violence, even of homicide. Such cases are used as arguments against the dominance of an ideal model of the family, and estimates of the percentage of undetected crimes within families are used to strengthen the rhetorical impetus.

Any reference to the diversity of family forms is a threat to the notion of normality. Comparisons between different family types seem necessary, and this raises questions of the proper criteria for such comparisons. The topic is much discussed in the USA nowadays, as is demonstrated by the Poponoe-Stacey debate reported by Wilson (1993). Although he himself admits that his conclusions may not be conclusive, he nevertheless claims that there is a best form of the family, because the family 'is not a human contrivance invented to accomplish some goal and capable being reinvented or reformulated to achieve different goals. Family – and kinship generally – are the fundamental organizing facts of all human societies, primitive or advanced, and have been such for tens of thousands of years' (Wilson, 1993, p. 28).

The rhetorical counterposition is again represented by those who propose new labels for different forms of families in order to plead for their recognition. The same purpose may be served by pointing to the diversity of family forms and the lifestyles of politicians, or by quoting exotic witnesses for the value of the family, such as, for example, the pop musician Peter Townsend.

C Family as 'Value'?

'The family is our future' – this is a dictum which points to the relevance of the family beyond the present. In connection with an idealizing view of the past, it allows us to transcend or to transform the family rhetorically into a value in itself. In turn, this notion also allows us to construct a closer relation between the decline of the family and a general loss of values, without the necessity to explain the reasons for this loss (or this decline). It seems plausible to hope for a remedy for grievances through a return to family-values. On the other hand, the temptation is great to blame parents for societal problems.

Here the rhetorical counterposition to such an idealized view of the family is nourished by radically subjective individualism. Thus a German newspaper states: 'Whoever feels like a family is a family.' According to this position, every kind of enduring relation among persons who care for one another may be called a family. Thus the term should be used only in the plural, and it would be impossible to provide a valid definition.

To summarize: surveying the different topics related to the family, we can identify two basic positions, namely that there is only one correct form of family, and that there is a basic openness or undetermination in the concept of family. The first position is somewhat dogmatic and authoritarian, whereas the second is tied to individualistic and emancipatory ideas. These positions are also reflected in the definitions of family, in the circumscription of family functions or in the ways the patterning of the basic components (subsystems) of family is conceived.[1]

Proposition 2

Family rhetoric is programmatic; family behaviour is pragmatic. Thus the latter necessarily modifies and devaluates the former.

This proposition refers, first of all, to the plausible supposition that 'life' is more complex than the ideologies which are meant to capture it. Indeed, in looking around us, we observe a diversity of forms of family life. As forms or types, they stand for enduring patterns of behaviour and of relations. What are the origins of this diversity? Is it only the consequence of social differentiation?

I would like to offer an alternative line of argumentation. Most social scientists would agree that they arise from the task of caring and educating

human offspring over a period of several years. The way this task is to be fulfilled can and must be interpreted. It is not an instinctual given or self-evident truth. It must be creatively formed. From the very beginning, 'nature and nurture' are interwoven. I suggest that we locate here a basic underlying potential for the emergence of a plurality of family forms or types, and we may want to see in this a true anthropological source of family plurality. To state this more explicitly: It is proposed that we begin the sociological conceptualization of 'family' not with the idea of one basic form (Urform), but rather with the idea of an underlying potential for a plurality of forms.

There is an additional dimension to be considered, namely our ability to reflect an understanding of nature and nurture, its interplay and thus to organize the tasks of socialization and of families in general. In a first approximation, we may want to distinguish three modi of reflection, namely experimental, theoretical and dramaturgical. Empirical approaches start with the observation of factual behaviours and interpret them by trail and error, by comparison and generalizations. Theoretical approaches derive from general systems of thoughts. The dramaturgical approach is represented by literary texts and works of art. These approaches are rooted in the social conditions of each culture and subculture, as well as in the subjective abilities of those who act in a socially correct way. Thus the primary potential of plurality is reinforced by a secondary potential inherent in the modes of reflective interpretation. It also concerns the reflection of processes of institutionalization.

As a consequence, different models of the family and of the fulfilment of family tasks have to be compared and will be evaluated. The needs for selection and evaluation derive from the relevance of the family and of family forms for the development of the individual and of societies. Thus the potential plurality of family forms will be restricted. It is a 'relative plurality'.[2]

In sum, we may even want to consider speaking of a contradictory openness of the processes of socialization and of family behaviours. This fundamental ambivalence which characterizes the family as an institution is reflected in the two positions of family rhetoric. This insight is important for family research and for the sociology of the family.

Proposition 3

An important task and an opportunity for contemporary sociological research on the family consists in the analysis, on the one side, of individual family behaviours, knowledges and beliefs, and, on the other side, in the study of (public) family rhetoric. In this way, it becomes possible to reflect the perspective of sociological family research and to determine its place within the many different perspectives on the family.

This proposition assigns to family sociology a 'third' position between what may be called the programmatics of rhetoric and the pragmatics of acting. Of course, doing research is also a way of acting, albeit a special kind of acting, because research reconstructions are guided by theory and methodology, and by other ways of speaking and of acting. This approach applies reflection and, in turn, constitutes specific perspectives. The better this reflection is done, the more the qualities and the singularities of a given perspective become recognizable, and also the differences in comparison with other perspectives. This is the case in regard to different sociological theories, as well as in regard to differences between the two positions and family sociology.

From its historical origins, those working in sociology and particularly in family sociology, at least to the extent they had a concern for empirical data, had to define their position between (simplifying) ideologies and the plurality of behaviours. With the development of perspectives which include the analysis of systems of knowledge and beliefs, both theoretically and empirically, it became possible to reflect the interrelationships among ideologies or belief systems, behaviours and the role of sociology. Major advances became possible with the acceptance of constructivist paradigms, a process still going on. It generates new interests and new insights into the contribution of sociology to public discourses and to politics.[3]

A topic of increasing relevance concerns especially the relevance of sociological knowledge, the role of sociologists as political advisors and, as experts and as participants in public discourses. Social reporting is a case in point. The study of this role involves many aspects. With reference to the foregoing general propositions on programmatic of family rhetoric and the pragmatics of family behaviours, I would suggest the following general proposition:

Proposition 4

Social reporting on the family (family reports) may be interpreted as an attempt to overcome the polarization of family rhetoric and to master – pragmatically – the 'contradictory openness' of processes of socialization, as well as the accompanying fundamental ambivalences of the family as a social institution.

Family reports (see the presentation in this session) are specific contributions to the public discourse on the family on a national level which since the 1960s have been available in several countries. Furthermore, reports are available on small political units, and even on cities and communities. In most cases, they have an official character, insofar as they are commissioned by the government or parliament. The situation is different in the United States, due to a fundamentally different understanding and organization of family policy and family politics (cf. the contribution by Walter). In Germany, the boundaries to other forms of public discourse on the family are much more open. But this is also true in other countries. Also, certain interconnections exist between social reports on women and children (for the latter see: Lüscher and Lange 1992). Finally, family reports can be located within the general tradition of social reporting, 'white papers' and similar publications. These correspondences, as well as differences, may well be topics of further discussions and elaborations. Here I would like to suggest, as I did in regard to proposition 4, that we start with the basic functions of the reports.

All reports provide, so-to-speak 'by definition', as an important component, differentiated analytical descriptions of the situation of the family. For this purpose they rely heavily on demographic material, but they also make ample use of the social sciences. In this way, they stress the pragmatic aspect of the public discourse. This entails that these reports must also deal with the notion of plurality and of pluralization.

On the other hand, insofar as they aim to make recommendations for family policy and family politics, these reports must also contribute to a 'reduction of complexity', and in this way they necessarily take positions which ultimately restricts the potential for plurality or which provides reasons (or even legitimizations) for doing so.

Several strategies may be employed in order to deal with this dilemma (and to overcome its inherent ambivalences). I would like to mention three such strategies, namely:

- a strategy of (implicit and explicit) *advocacy*, taking recent developments of family behaviours as point of departure. This strategy was, in my view, followed in the first *Austrian report* (1970), and to some extent in the more recent second Austrian report, which significantly enough bears the title: 'Lebenswelt Familie' ('Life World of the Family') (1990) and pays great attention to the pluralization of family forms. This strategy is characterized by extended descriptive sections and a discussion of the (international) research literature. Policy recommendations are primarily based upon common sense reasoning;

- a strategy of *institutionalized differentiation*, starting from existing family policy. This strategy characterizes French social reporting on the family (see Lamm-Hess, 1993). The analysis and recommendations are developed within the highly elaborated system of family policy, of which the fundamental justifications and legitimization are taken for granted. It goes without saying that this includes references to the pluralization of family forms, yet within the already differentiated system this is not a point of reference of primary (rhetorical) reference;

- a strategy of *systematic reconceptualization*, both of recent developments in the family and of family policy. I find this strategy realized in the most recent German report. It is organized around the concept of *Humanvermögen* (human capital) which is meant to characterize, on a general level, the achievements of the family and serves as point of reference for a fundamental (re)orientation of family policy and its justification. It does account for pluralization on a higher level of conceptualization. This strategy may well be supported both by the fact that this report had the task of taking into account the situation in a reunited Germany; it can also find a basis in a series of recent decisions (judgments) by the Federal Constitutional Court of Germany (Bundesverfassungsgericht). However, the dialectic of reconceptualization may be seen as potentially built into the format of the German reports. With the exception of the first report, they all consist of a group of (independent) experts and the government official position paper (see also Walter, 1993).

What about strategies in the case of a weak institutionalization of family policy - as in the case of the USA? In my judgment, the pluralization of family forms is an important issue in at least two regards. First, it encourages moral arguments on the rightness of certain forms (regardless of their empirical reality), and second, it provokes the comparison of the functioning and of the achievements of the failures of different forms, in the concrete case of the single-parent family.

I am aware that my suggestion to distinguish different types of family and to study the way family reports deal with the inherent ambivalences of the plurality of family forms and patterns is tentative and in need of further elaboration. We may also want to consider the strategies of dealing with other

major issues of contemporary family life, especially those which refer to other forms of conflict and contradictions such as arises from the incompatibility of work and family or of gender and family obligations.

I am also prepared to be confronted with the argument that my characterization of family rhetoric and its relevance to family politics overstates the polarization of the two basic models. However, I would suggest that a formal view may provoke a series of arguments and of hypotheses, both theoretical and empirical, in regard to a topic which is only beginning to receive attention.

Notes

1 Those components may be described in reference to the model of the so-called 'traditional family' (*bürgerliche Familie*): partnership (marriage), parenthood, household, relation to kinship, and also: authoritarian vs. egalitarian division of tasks and competences among the members of the nuclear family. Model 1 refers to a strict temporal order and an institutionalized connection, especially between marriage and parenthood. Model 2 challenges this order on theoretical and empirical grounds. For the analysis of family discourses it is also noteworthy to recall the duality of meanings related to the concept of *bürgerliche Familie*, namely as a historical ideal-type, and as a term to be used with polemic intentions (see also Lüscher 1997a).

2 For a further elaboration of this conceptualization of family plurality see Lüscher 1997b.

3 These recent developments may be characterized as a move away from a sociology which took a firm stand against ideologies (thus attempted to be value-free) to a sociology which reflects differentially (and in connection with empirical observations) the relations of all parts involved, including sociology itself, toward elements of ideological thinking, as well as toward all other possible connections among texts, contexts and actors.

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