

Discourses of ambivalence with reference to the Konstanz perspective

A brief overview

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We first used the concept of ambivalence in our analyses of data from our projects on intergenerational relationships in later life which in the 1980s were predominantly viewed from the perspective of solidarity. This was related to the criticism of the then prevailing idealized image of the nuclear family. At the same time, a social science-oriented gerontology emerged aiming to emphasize the positive aspects of aging. This view had a normative bias. The stressful aspects in the relationship between (adult) children and their parents were disregarded. The concept of ambivalence allowed for a new emphasis (Lüscher and Pillemer, *Intergenerational Ambivalence*, JMF 1998:413-425), namely the simultaneous view of positive and negative experiences.

This perspective received impetus from a "Review Symposium" in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (JMF, 2002: 557-601). It stimulated a broad, sustained international reception of the concept. This perspective had been used earlier in generational research, but without much resonance. In the Konstanz approach, several strands of further development can be distinguished.

First, generational ambivalence is seen simply as complementary to generational solidarity. In this context, ambivalence is often seen as undesirable, burdensome, and thus negative. What is overlooked is that the point of ambivalence lies precisely in taking an unbiased look at the simultaneity or, more precisely stated, the dynamic vacillation between closeness and distance, dependence and autonomy, liking and rejecting, and, in extreme cases, between loving and hating. That is, this disregards the fact that dealing with ambivalences can be stressful, but also socially creative.

Second, there are differentiating proposals. They consist of describing phenomena of – more or less frequent or intense – experiences of ambivalence in different contexts, situations, family configurations, roles and subject areas, that can be traced in the course of life. These include "caring", relationships in the context of immigration, and dealing with different sexual orientations. Research uses quantitative and qualitative techniques and methods, as exemplified by Lettke and Klein (in Pillemer and Lüscher, *Intergenerational Ambivalences*, 2004: 85-113). The understanding of ambivalences is sometimes simplified, sometimes

modified, and sometimes expanded as shown, for example, by Lüscher and Hoff (in Ferring et al. *Intergenerational Relations*, 2013:39-63) and Connidis (*JMF* 2015: 77-95). – Although the research perspective as such is now internationally and cross-culturally accepted, the extent to which the figure of thought of ambivalence is differentially embedded in each culture is hardly ever discussed.

Third, it should be noted that many studies remain within the limits of a colloquial, descriptive understanding of ambivalence. Likewise, an explicit reference to notions of identity is rarely made. The closest we can come to this thesis is to link ambivalence to the common variables of relationship quality and "well-being." Rarely are investigators asking for explanations of the emergence and formation of ambivalence experiences as well as strategies and consequences of dealing with it. However, contributions (referring to Konstanz work in this regard) can be found in the publication by Albert et al. (*Transgenerational Family Relations*, Charlotte NC. 2018), and in essays by Biggs, (*Thinking about Generations: Conceptual Positions and Policy Implications. Journal of Social Issues*, 63, 2007, pp. 695-711), Connidis (op. cit.), and Girardin et al. (*Ambivalence in Later Life Families, JMF* 2018: 768-784).

Parallel to this work, I turned to a sociological-transdisciplinary exploration of the scope of the concept of ambivalence. Starting from Bleuler and Freud, numerous theoretically oriented investigations emerged as well as representations in relevant handbooks (e.g.: Mertens and Waldvogel, *Handbuch psychoanalytischer Grundbegriffe*, Stuttgart 2008: 56-62). As a result, references to psychiatry, to different psychoanalytic approaches, to attachment theory, and to therapies and their fields become apparent.

Another important field is the discourse of ambivalence in art, literature, music, and dance. However, the concept is often only used in a colloquial sense. Sometimes it is used as synonym of ambiguity; other times, the differences between these concepts is a topic of discussion (see for example the volume "*Ambige Verhältnisse*" by B. Groß et al., Bielefeld 2021). There is widespread agreement on the general thesis that ways of thinking and experiencing ambivalence (and ambiguity) are characteristic of elaborate forms of aesthetic representation of all kinds. In this regard, there are also works that fruitfully combine social and cultural science approaches. An example is the study by U. Pietsch-Lindt (*Tod und Sterben alter Eltern: Die Verwaisung Erwachsener als ambivalente Erfahrung in narrativen literarischen Rekonstruktionen*. Opladen 2021). The concept of ambivalence also appears in theology. Furthermore, it is useful for the interdisciplinary analysis of disability and more or

less stigmatized social roles (example: Ch. Mürner, *Der hinkende Bote*. Zürich 2015, ders. *Narrheit*. Hamburg 2022).

In time-diagnostic analyses, the concept of ambivalence is often used in a general way. But there are also differentiated analyses. This can be found, for example, in the Konstanz perspective by M. Junge, *Ambivalente Gesellschaftlichkeit*, Opladen 2000. Finally, ambivalence is a topic of philosophical investigations with regard to the question of the anthropological and logical premises of experiencing and understanding "otherness" (see Fischer and Lüscher in *Familiendynamik* 2014:122-133).

Exploring the scope of ambivalence lends itself to discussion forums. In addition to the symposium in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, such projects document discussions in the Luxembourg volume of Albert et al., the thematic issues (with participation from Konstanz) of the "Forum for Psychoanalysis" (2011), "Familiendynamik" (2014), and the "Zeitschrift für Soziologie der Erziehung und Sozialisation" (2016). Regular meetings are held by the "Interdisciplinary Study Group on Ambivalence" (IAA).

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