

Family as Institution: subjectivity, and agency, of first time parents

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Introduction

Significant evidence has been drawn from psychologists that a large proportion of individuals encounter some difficulty in traversing issues related to changes to subjectivity when becoming a parent for the first time. The phenomenon has been labelled the 'transition to parenthood'. Often individuals encounter these issues as a couple, mother or father, but there is an increasing diversity of family forms including: sole parents, or gay or lesbian families. The definition of what it means to be a family has been contested over recent decades in Australia whereby the family form includes a wide variety of circumstances. The definition of family that I am using for my project includes one or more adults, and a dependent child, or children. It may be that two individuals, a couple, make up a family but by definition these couples don't go through a transition to parenthood. It also may be that a caring community will be responsible for the care and maintenance of a child, or children, but again the circumstances in which they operate does not, by its structure, necessarily prompt issues related to transition to parenthood as has been described in the literature.

In my paper I propose that the concepts in the work of Cornelius Castoriadis could help provide a framework so as to re-imagine the workings of the family in society and identify trends by which individuals, or couples, are determining new ways. Castoriadis argued that society is made up of institutions that are initially framed within the imaginary and then reified through society. He used the concept of a social magma to describe the web of institutions, and social imaginary significations, which, he said, provide symbolic meanings. He proposed that it is possible to identify a radical imaginary within the social magma that constitutes the new; new constructions of the possible. This is one way that change is promoted, an interaction of the individual with the social, new conceptions take form and are reified through the institutions, and the cycle continues.

Castoriadis is counted amongst the post-Lacanian theorists. In my paper I have highlighted a central difference between Castoriadis and Lacan, and outlined key concepts from his work. I then

go on to layout some examples of how the workings of the family in society might be understood within this framework. I argue that issues related to changes to subjectivity, of new parents, are indicative of a mismatch between expectations and the social structures and conventions. These issues need to be viewed within the context of the family in society because the day to day responsibilities that accompany the care of a child take place within a social and political structure that is reliant on the workings of some kind of family form. Therefore whilst considering the workings of family in society I will endeavour to outline how the structures, in turn, mould behaviours within the unit itself.

I concur with Nancy Fraser in *Justice Interruptus* that gender norms and family forms are highly contested in this new post-industrial phase of capitalism. The family was built into the social and economic system throughout the twentieth century through the 'family wage' and a reliance on them for welfare or as a caring unit. This juncture was alleviated by the extension of the welfare state in post-war Australia. The development of a politics of identity has meant that movements for change are fractured within specific interest groups. This process is exemplified by the generally separate field of activism around issues related to motherhood or fatherhood. The family form is a core institution within society, and I argue that because modern day conceptions of the family are highly contested, individuals need to negotiate conflicting tensions both between, pre and post baby, conceptions of self, as well as an order of events structured by gender, race and class. I furthermore suggest that there needs to be dialogue between the streams of thought on motherhood and fatherhood that would, in turn, contribute to the wider agenda on the family in society, particularly on issues related to care and equity.

The direction I have taken has been influenced by the feminist theorist Lois McNay. She highlights the work of three theorists: Cornelius Castoriadis, Pierre Bourdieu and Paul Ricoeur because, she argues that each of their works provide for a generative approach to theory; that is, in theory, there is an explanation for the workings of agency. Their theories include an avenue to explain how change can take place from subjectivity to the social.

Castoriadis a Post-Lacanian

After a decade of work in the field as a psychoanalyst Castoriadis published his first text *The Imaginary Institution of Society* in 1984 which was followed in 1997 by *The World in Fragments* in which he set out a framework for interpreting the psychic influences over the social and political constructions of society. He brought psychoanalysis together with history arguing that “society is self creation deployed as history” (Castoriadis 1997:13). A central difference between Castoriadis and Lacan is in his explanation of the psychological processes at work at the pre-symbolic stage of development. Castoriadis argued that the human capacity for language draws from an imaginary realm whereby in order to put together the image with the symbols, words, the imagination comes into play. McNay proposed that feminist theoretical understandings on the workings and construction of subjectivity have opened up a space for debate and projections. In particular, the work of Drucilla Cornell and Theresa Brennan has placed explanations of psychic processes within a historical realm.

Castoriadis made psychoanalysis an object of historical inquiry and the effect of psychoanalysis is being considered amongst other factors, that influence society. Society is always historical, he continued. In an attempt to explain how we can conceive of society as a whole Castoriadis described it as an institution. This institution, he said, is expressed through norms, values, language, tools, procedures and methods of dealing with things and doing things. Institutions and mechanisms are embedded in society and prevail broadly through: adherence, support, consensus, legitimacy and belief, and the fabrication of the human raw material which informs the social individual (Castoriadis 1997:5-6).

The social magma, according to Castoriadis, is the mix of factors that contributes to the workings of families in society, including the gamut of possibilities and positions, the messy reality of everyday life. The social magma includes the subjective, in that, individuals interact with and interpret meanings from the social context, the social institutions (Castoriadis 1997:141).

Castoriadis concurred with others at a conference in the late 1990s that because of a general move away from religious beliefs and a breaking down of truths and grand theories, society is in crisis. He argued that however, it is essentially a crisis of social imaginary significations. And amongst

the establishments that are affected by this malaise is the institution of the family. Castoriadis argued for critical readings of history so as to identify and legitimate traditions that can serve a new future, and furthermore, he pinpointed the role of ‘the mother’ as significant in this project. In Castoriadis’s words “she is also the mother in *this* society – which entails a host of things.” (Castoriadis 1997:85-98 – Thesis Eleven).

Castoriadis made a distinction between the functionality of an institution and the symbolic elements. The social imaginary is interwoven with a ‘peripheral imaginary’ the symbolic (Castoriadis 1975:130-1).

How do people conceptualize the family, motherhood, fatherhood, what it means to be a child?

As you know discourses on all of these topics are highly charged and draw on formulations that are said to be historical, including traditions, or are morally or psychologically based, and said to be promoting the needs of the child.

Castoriadis continued, that there is a complex web of meanings that permeate, orient and direct the life of the society as well as the concrete individuals. This web of meanings he called the magma of social imaginary significations which, he said, is embodied in the institutions of a given society and animate it, for example: spirits, gods, God, polis, citizen, nation, state, party, amongst others, as well as: man, woman and child: what they are by virtue of the social imaginary significations. They are called imaginary because they cannot be fully quantified by rational or real elements and it is through a creation that they are formed. Subjects, individuals and their groups are products of a socialization process, their existence presupposes the existence of an instituted society (Castoriadis 1997:7-8).

Castoriadis proposed that there is a radical imaginary realm which is active within society, constituted at an individual level, but is identifiable through the social magma. It is through this radical imaginary that agency comes into play.

What comes to mind for you in relation to the family in society as representative of this radical imaginary?

In my initial readings of the literature I've come across an expanding body of research on issues related to care and equity which may provide a way forward and ways of imaginary new family forms.

In essential creation, continued Castoriadis, which constitutes the new there are complex relations between 'the constituted' and 'the real' which are exceedingly complex. In the emergence of new institutions, new ways of living is an active constituent (Castoriadis 1975:133).

I will now talk about the family in society, and transition to parenthood, keeping in mind these concepts of family as institution, the magma of social imaginary significations, and the radical imaginary. There has been classically a division in policy between the public and the private realms in Australia, public policy very much depended on the functioning of the core institution of the family. The Harvester Decision in the early 20th century enshrined the principle of a family wage for the male head of the house which influenced wage fixing for decades. The primary role for women enshrined in the case was the care and nurturing of their families. Governments generally only became involved with this welfare, or caring, function of families by way of supplements, child welfare, health care and family support programs. Important achievements made by the second wave feminists were to build on the welfare state in the promotion of an array of programs in: aged care, child care, family support, single mother's pensions and more while at the same time pressing for equal pay and thus replacing the family wage.

This link between the family form and social welfare is clearly exemplified by the change in title of the federal Department of Social Security during the 1990s to the Department of Family and Community Services; welfare and family services are closely related and enshrined through our institutions. This policy structure of government in Australia is further entrenched by a strong commitment by the institution of the church to what is represented as the traditional family form, the nuclear family. What is often presented today as the 'traditional family' made up of a male breadwinner, a homemaker wife and children has been shown to be an aberration in historical terms that was perpetuated throughout western society in the process of post-war reconstruction.

The diverse range of family forms that are evident in contemporary society are operating within an increasingly globalized economic system. The cost of living which includes food, housing and everyday expenses has risen in a climate of a deregulated labour market with pressures on productivity and job security. This current post-industrial phase of economic development in Australia has brought attempts to claw back the social welfare system while concurrently preserving the family form. The current generation of parents, however, have grown up in a climate where equality of the sexes has been promoted both through education and the workplace. There is often an expectation, and an attempt, to organise the domestic and caring responsibilities that come with a child, equitably. This is something of the social magma in which issues related to first time parents have arisen.

Transition to parenthood is a phenomenon which describes a series of adjustments both men and women negotiate when they become a parent. Longitudinal research has shown that up to thirty percent of couples/individuals struggle with issues arising from: changes to one's identity; changes to work and career options; negotiation with one's partner; changes to relationships with partner, friends and family; increased workload at home; and identifying the boundaries between child and self. Essentially all of these effects are related to changes in one's subjectivity when becoming a parent for the first time.

According to Castoriadis the construction of subjectivity is informed from birth, through the family. He outlined mechanisms whereby agents negotiate the social magma, though they are necessarily imbued with the culture in which they are born through language, values, priorities, beliefs, practices and more. As argued by the proponents of the co-existence thesis on detraditionalization, traditions historically form the grounding and individualizing processes in society. There is a dynamic within society between the traditional and detraditionalizing trends and mediating factors include: routines, rules, procedures, regulations, laws, duties, customs and values (Heelas, Lash and Morris 1996:8-9). Heelas, Lash and Morris highlighted the fact that detraditionalizing processes have thrown traditional family conventions into question; sure! But, I would question their proposition that women have become more free to construct their own narratives of identity. This depends, very much, on individual circumstances and substantive changes in policy and practice regarding issues related to care.

In a climate where child care, education and health services are being eked away these kinds of issues fall more heavily on individual men and women to negotiate. Furthermore, messages derived from these political structures feed into the gendered cultural and historical influences over both men and women forming a context in which negotiations about equitable arrangements within families around child care take place.

In the year 2000 an edition of *Gender and Society* was dedicated to papers on the family. The range and diversity of papers reflected the current concern identified by Fraser with identity politics. The general editors were concerned with a falling back on rhetoric that conveyed messages and associations with a conventional understanding of the family form. They found a trend whereby authors were arguing that the family type they were outlining was the ‘normal family form’. The editors stated that “these articles provide important glimpses into an increasingly complex field of family configurations. But” they continued “we believe there is much more work to be undertaken.” (Lempert and DeVault 2000)

Feminists seeking change have identified issues related to ‘woman as mother’ have become intransigent in endeavours to achieve agency because the role of mothering is embedded in the culture through institutions, personal experience and our historical heritage. When one becomes a parent you are confronted with issues related to the wider social context, in that, the baby represents the new, a new beginning. In an increasingly secularised society values and beliefs in equality, justice and liberty are often drawn from humanist or post-socialist traditions. The privileged by way of a mix of education, class, race or sexuality, have greater flexibility, or an ability to pay for support services, so as to realize their ambitions. It is interesting to note that Fraser argued in her work that in order to address these kinds of issues there is a need to “connect the study of significations to institutions and social structures.” (Fraser 1997:6) Such as, I would suggest, promoting new imaginings, social imaginary significations, of family form or care issues, into the political processes and bureaucratic procedures.

Relevant social imaginary significations to the family in society must include the representations and meanings that are associated with motherhood, fatherhood and childhood. There is a plethora of materials and obvious public debate on the tensions between these roles and the meanings. In 1976 Adrienne Rich published her groundbreaking work *Of Woman Born* and over the last 30

years there has been a growing body of work on motherhood including the work of Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering*. Elizabeth Grosz and other Lacanian feminists such as Irigaray and Kristeva argued that this model as presented by Chodorow operates within a cultural and historical context whereby femininity is devalued and masculinity presented as the norm working at both a functional, and a social imaginary level, and carrying with it privileges and power (Cranny-Francis:61).

These topics are highly political primarily because the structure and functioning of society depends so heavily on a workable and predictable family form. It is critical that reconceptions of mothering, fathering and new family forms are debated within the wider social realm so as to influence these social imaginary significations and prompt a radical imaginary, or new conceptions of family forms. There is a growing body of work on the new family and care and equity issues. I would be happy to put together a bibliography and send on to any interested people if you send me an email.