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## ***Familial pragmatism: modern families navigating the private/public junction***

This double-volume *Special Issue* (SI) aims at mapping the tensions that shape families and family life at the junction of what is private and personal about families and for their members, on the one hand, and how families are rendered public and political through external actors and agendas, on the other hand. As per the SI's title – *The privacy and politicisation of parenting in Europe: family as a set of practices and as an object of external influence* – we specifically foreground the clashes and mutual interdependencies between the two – private and public – domains of family life in the European perspective.

As the main argument, we stipulate that lasting tensions and the need to either reconcile, or, at least, successfully navigate between what is private and public about the family, can be tracked not only to scholarly debates and theorisation of families (see: Bridges, 2011; Hao, 2003; Hartman, 1996), but is also inherent in the experiences that families and their members enjoy and endure across private and public domains. In this *Guest Editorial* to the double volume of *Social Policy Issues*, we recapitulate some of the main points in the debates within the private/public lenses for studying families, as well as propose a navigating concept of **familial pragmatism** as our contribution to the means of observing the private/political junction in family life.

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### *Private and public spheres in the context of family*

Acknowledging fast social changes and shifts in societal values (see: Inglehart, 1997), two seemingly opposing arguments have been presented concerning the relationship between private and public spheres in the context of family. In essence, the first approach assumes a postmodern condition of the private sphere being increasingly present in the public domain, whereas the second suggests that the public sphere is increasingly interfering in private life. Drawing on past work (see: Sikorska, 2016), we will now briefly discuss these approaches and their respective relevance in the context of SI.

When diagnosing societies of “liquid modernity”, Bauman emphasises that [...] *the concerns and preoccupations of individuals qua individuals fill the public space to the brim, claiming to be its only legitimate occupants, and elbow out from public discourse everything else. The “public” is colonised by the “private”; “public interest” is reduced to curiosity about the private lives of public figures, and the art of public life is narrowed to the public display of private affairs and public confessions of private sentiments (the more intimate the better). “Public issues” which resist such reduction become all but incomprehensible* (Bauman, 2000, p. 37). To give just one example of this claim for the realm of parenthood and family, the colonisation of the public sphere with private matters can be seen in the vast industry built around parenting expertise (Lee, 2014). Once contained in intergenerational transmission and family networks, today’s understanding of optimal ways for raising a child hinges on the hyped parenting decisions and practices of public figures. Famous mommy bloggers, parent-influencers, and self-proclaimed experts who issue public, “expert” recommendations do so on the basis of their personal experiences (see: Lee, 2014; Hardyment, 2007), which ultimately become included in the public sphere and guide public interest.

Sennett (1977) holds a similar view to Bauman (2000), showing how the public sphere is corroded by the “tyranny of intimacy” and the widespread narcissistic attitude, which leads to the fact that a mysterious, dangerous force, namely the *Self*, began to define social relationships and became a social ruler. An emanation of this is a societal, romanticised idyll of love mediated for the public sphere by popular culture (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). By including specific but unattainable prescriptions of love, the public sphere ill-prepares subsequent generations for the realities of marriages that intrinsically entail tensions when their love is pursued as a private endeavour (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2013, Gattrell, 2005). Recent spectacles of celebrity divorce court proceedings as well as prominent transitions of influencers from the love-centred TV formats like *The Bachelor* and *Bachelorette* emanate this “colonisation” of the public sphere by the private one from a postfeminist perspective in the media landscape (Psarras et al., 2023).

In sum, the public space “is not much more than a giant screen on which private worries are projected without ceasing to be private or acquiring new collective qualities in the course of magnification: public space is where public confession of private secrets and intimacies is made” (Bauman, 2010, pp. 39–40). Privacy “spreads out”, becoming increasingly visible and public, and “private matters” become the focus of public life (see: Sikorska, 2016).

Moving to the opposite argumentation, Schilling (2003) points out that the increased level of control that states and the medical community exercise over the bodies of their citizens is one of the many effects of modernity. Lasch sums it up as follows: *The history of modern society, from one point of view, is the assertion of social control over activities once left to individuals or their families. During the first stage of the industrial revolution, capitalists took production out of the household and collectivised it, under their own supervision, in the factory. Then they proceeded to appropriate the workers' skills and technical knowledge, by means of "scientific management", and to bring these skills together under managerial direction* (1977, pp. XVI, XV). Lash also points to the expansion of control over the private lives of individuals as a result of doctors, psychiatrists, teachers, child guidance experts, juvenile court officials, and other specialists overseeing the upbringing of children, which was previously a family issue.

Middle-class parents, particularly mothers (Douglas & Michaels, 2005), became the beacon of this corporatisation within family life, as they used their professional skills to navigate the process of expert child-raising management (Bieńko, 2020). Not much different from a professional setting, their organisation of the parenting environment follows the rules of externalised expertise from many publicly recognised sources. As mothers aspire to amass substantial expertise in parenting their children across all domains (see: Miller, 2005), they allow various influences from the public sphere to transform their individual lives, forcing them to become educational advisors, health consultants, sports trainers, talent managers, chauffeurs, dieticians, and teachers (Douglas & Michaels, 2005). In the same vein, Foucault (1998, 2000) asserted the dominance of what is public (power and knowledge) over the private sphere about disciplining sexuality or increased control over "socially unfit" individuals, such as prisoners or the mentally ill placed in isolation, objectified, and categorised as "others". Foucault demonstrated that, with the shift to modern societies, the reach of control over individuals expanded and the means of control changed.

Pertinently, Giza-Poleszczuk emphasises that family became an increasingly public institution (2009, p. 19) through both the increased state's generalised interest in control and greater government intervention in private life. Several interconnections between family and other realms of public life demonstrate this. First, there is the massification of education, through which virtually all members of contemporary young generations are "educated" by the state. In addition to increasing access to education for underprivileged children, compulsory state schooling also removed children from wealthier families from home-based education (i.e., instruction by carefully chosen and vetted governesses or private tutors; cf. Pustulka & Sarnowska, 2021).

Second, combined advances in medical, statistical, and technological fields are used by nation-states for demographic analysis and resultant population control (Giza-Poleszczuk, 2009), as seen in the politicisation of reproduction in many countries. Connected to this is an overall wider policing of the body. In a manner consistent with Foucault's claims (1998), as a corollary to the commendable efforts towards ending domestic violence, the state dictates relational boundaries in the law as well as supervises the health of family members through public health programs like mandatory vaccinations and similar (see: Attwell et al. 2017),

Third, families benefit from the greater economic security guaranteed by a liberal welfare state, yet the bureaucratisation and controlling nature of the policies mean that family members – usually parents – offer unprecedented access to their private matters – like finances, accommodation, and leisure – to the state emissaries (Giza-Poleszczuk, 2009). This is perhaps best illustrated by studies that show family welfare cultures (Dahl et al., 2014), which demonstrate that members from subsequent generations within one family “inherit” a high probability of participation in welfare state programmes, becoming their *de facto* anticipated clients.

### *Familial pragmatism*

In our view, less attention is needed to identify the “culprit” in the blurriness and tensions between private and public spheres of family life. Instead, it is necessary to take the discussions to the next step of questioning what people do with the realisation that mutual entanglements of private and public spheres exist and have a bearing on their family life. Exploring familial pragmatism (Chang, 1997), as demonstrated by the papers in this SI, may provide one solution to framing individual reactions to the public sphere encroaching on families.

In the paper published in the *International Review of Sociology* in 1997, Kyung-Sup Chang mentioned familial pragmatism in passing to pinpoint the distinctive choices that young parents in Korea were making at the crossroads of public and private. Specifically, the studied group was trying to escape the pressures stemming from the confusion that the external West-inspired state policies caused for the Confucian heritage of family-centred daily life. It parallels, in some ways, to viewing pragmatism (Smith, 1990) as an answer to how family members choose to act in the most expedient way when faced with difficulties between agency and structure (Pfeffer, 2012; Sarnowska et al., 2020). Taking these works as inspiration, we argue that the studies in this volume demonstrate, albeit non-explicit, familial pragmatism as a suitable conceptual link for navigating and eluding the one-sided private vs. political framings of family.

Pragmatism has a long-standing interest in sociological theorising, with seminal works within symbolic interactionism of Blumer and Goffman hinging on reconciling and managing tensions between the self and society. However, familial pragmatism can specifically be traced to the works of Dorothy Smith (1987, 1990), who looked at social institutions, including family, that are experienced by individuals in their everyday lives. Echoing Hanisch’s essay (1970) on personal being political, Smith’s feminist sociology (1987, 1990) directly investigates how institutions and systems – such as healthcare, education, workplace – affect individuals at the micro-level of their everyday gendered and familial experiences. Her institutional ethnography debunks the fixedness of the social worlds, instead underscoring people’s pragmatic judgement of public institutions’ directives through the filter of personal experiences and circumstances. Women in particular – according to Smith – need to adapt their practices dynamically, as their position in the public sphere is typically intertwined with their private lives, gender orders, and family obligations.

In simple terms, familial pragmatism showcases what people do – privately and personally – when they encounter tensions in their family life. More than that, it places their actions in the context of the political, state-engendered opportunity structures. As such, familial pragmatism is a family-centred orientation and choice of family practices that are pragmatic in nature. To a degree, it compliments what we have elsewhere explained through the concept of social solvation (Sarnowska et al., 2020), as the process during which even best-intended policies are filtered through people’s beliefs about instability and weakness of institutions (see also Sikorska – in this volume). In the previous study (Sarnowska et al., 2020), we have shown that parents’ strategies of operating within families, i.e., in the private sphere, were largely microrational in nature and reflected not what was written in the law, but rather what they saw as “feasible” and “optimal” despite the law, in the context of both state policy and the interviewees’ employers being perceived by them as unreliable. Developing on this notion, familial pragmatism is explicitly located as a practical response to the unreliability or incompatibility of norms, values, and institutions. The arguments for familial pragmatism, though made in a different context (Chang, 1997), yield themselves well to the revival and usage in broader debates on the tensions inscribed in the construction of the public/private contrariety.

To illustrate the fittingness of familial pragmatism, we can go back to the underpinnings of the private and public – including political – as the two sides of the same coin in the central debates on gender and family (see: Bridges, 2011; Hao, 2003; Hartman, 1996). In this vein, individual and practical realisations of “doing family” happen largely in the private and affective space, focused on relationships between the individuals who comprise families and are guided by their emotions, family rituals, and enactments of intimacy (see: Morgan, 1996, 2011; Jamieson, 1998; Gawrońska & Sikorska, 2022; Radzińska & Pustułka, 2023). As an opposite to this private realm, the family as a social institution is an “object” of external and public influences. These include, but are not limited to, political agendas (e.g., social policies; laws pertaining to family domain, family members as voters), social references (e.g., public discourses, social norms, values), and economic aspects (e.g., the situation on the labour market influencing family life, gendered division of duties) (see: Hantrais, 2004; Kotowska, 2019; Meardi & Guardiancich, 2022).

A prime example of this can be seen in relation to parenthood: becoming a mother/father and caring for children is a biographical turning point that warrants redefinitions of identity (see: Miller, 2005, Thomson et al., 2011; Pustułka, 2023). From a personal standpoint, it typically signals not only changes and renegotiations in a couple’s relationship, but it also contributes to altering bonds with other family members like the child’s grandparents (see: Pustułka & Buler, 2022). As for broader social relations, specifically in terms of state interests, the birth of a child ultimately transforms the couple into “a family” as an institution of socialisation for the new generation of citizens (see: Schnittker et al., 2003; Peltola et al., 2004). The family becomes composed of “policy subjects”, as mothers and fathers may be simultaneously guided towards and restricted in their access to benefits (see: Orloff, 1996; Meardi & Guardiancich, 2022; Suwada, 2017), repositioned in their roles on the labour market through motherhood penalties

and fatherhood premiums (see: Grimshaw & Rubery, 2015; Wojnicka & Kubisa, 2023) or regulated in their parenting by the legal system, for instance if it so happens that their couplehood dissolves (see: Zartler & Hierzer, 2015).

In sum, pragmatism generally emphasises practical consequences and the utility of ideas, policies or beliefs as the primary criteria for evaluating their validity, then causing a fitting action response. In that sense, familial pragmatism signifies negotiations between structure and agency (Pfeffer, 2012), aware of both (state) policy and one's own fallibilism (see: Sarnowska et al., 2020). On the one hand, members of the kinship unit would have specific goals they would like to achieve for their family across different realms of values, relationships, resources and capitals, status, leisure, and so on (see: Tach, 2015). On the other hand, in trying to achieve these aims, families face real-life problems, which often span both private and public components.

### *Structure of the first volume of the Special Issue*

While focusing on the papers in both parts of this double-volume SI, it is important to note that contributions to the SI are primarily concerned with individuals attempting to understand or resolve tensions between private family life and the exteriorised institutional views, or framings of family. The authors map out several areas of private family practices on which the public realm encroaches, doing so through rigorous qualitative analyses. The first part of the double issue contains four papers by Maria Reimann, Piotr Binder, Justyna Kajta, and Małgorzata Sikorska. We will now trace familial pragmatism as a response to tensions in these four contributions and discuss them more broadly.

In her article, "At mum's place, at dad's place, at home. How children do family in joint physical custody arrangements", Maria Reimann has given voice to children who must navigate joint physical custody arrangements after parental separation or divorce. In this sense, the Polish legal system determines the spatio-temporal dimension of practices that are recognised via the arrangements established during the parents' legal proceedings. Contrarily, the interviewed children become self-driven creators of family practices in their everyday lives. Thus, they are pragmatically making sense of their family lives anew, in consideration of, but also through contesting, the more exteriorised family court agendas. In a novel way, the article can help us recognise that not only adults are grappling with the public/private divide in their family lives. Children, like their parents, are affected by the state's interest in and framing of "optimal" family living, but they can also pragmatically and creatively cross the pre-established boundaries to find new meanings of "home".

Directly looking at the mediating effect of remote work on family/work tensions, Piotr Binder addresses the choices of family models that Polish families with children have made in the face of remote work caused by the structural crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the state and employers' regulations of remote work, men and women had to reestablish boundaries between the competing family (private) and work (public) spheres as parents. Given the new interplay of private and public, Binder argues, gender equality can increase or decrease, as well as evolve over time. Reading

through the qualitative data presented in the article, it becomes clear that the interviewees were making pragmatic choices, regardless of their family models. On the one hand, in the more egalitarian models, the parents' stories underlined adaptation and the promotion of flexibility over rigidity as a way to resolve tensions. On the other hand, economic pragmatism that supported family welfare was similarly evident in families where double-shift prevailed. Here, men and women, to ease the challenges of family life, especially childcare, would discredit the practicality of women's engagement in the public sphere, for instance, when talking about the unavailability of ECEC, which is a political failure translating into private choices.

As for the article by Justyna Kajta, which explores family influences within the process of intergenerational upward mobility, more tacit undertones of pragmatic reactions to atypical educational and career choices can be traced in the narratives of first-generation academics, artists, and businesspeople. Among the four scenarios of parental involvement, the author indirectly evidences parental framing of "suitable" pathways, which are often a reflection of observations they made in regard to the existing, external social structures. In particular, the notion of capitals points to the possible incompatibility between what is private within family capitals, and the professionally recognised capitals amassed in respective fields of public activity. Ranging from general encouragement through ambition-driven guidance and multifaceted withdrawal to hesitant observations, parents can be perceived as social actors rattled by tensions. In addition, the paper pointedly illustrates Giza-Poleszczuk's points (2000) on the invasion of the state into private life, showing the possible consequences thereof, in this case via education, for intergenerational matrices and bonds.

Last but not least, Małgorzata Sikorska's article poignantly showcases how family members see institutions in Poland. In this country-case study on amoral familism and sociological vacuum, Sikorska argues that family social isolation is the key concept for understanding familial reasons behind the dominant perception of institutions and the public sphere as dangerous. Based on their beliefs and lack of trust in the stability of the state and its potentially untrustworthy efforts to regulate family, the author's interlocutors have chosen hermetic strategies in their familial pragmatism or, perhaps, pragmatic familism. Sikorska's study also suggests that no end to the public/private tensions is in sight, given the dichotomy – as evident in the narrative excerpts – between the family as the only safe space, standing in stark opposition to institutions as the "danger zone" from which family life should better be protected. In essence, social relations between families and their external surroundings are not likely to become less tense, at least in the studied context of Poland.

### *Teaser for the second volume of the Special Issue*

Foreshadowing the upcoming second part of this SI, the discussion started here will be continued, with the emphasis on private/public debate, disentangled through familial pragmatism as the navigating concept. The continuation will focus on the methodological reflections on approaches that can illuminate the tensions between the personal and political dynamics, among others, with two papers – by Budginaitė-Mačkinė and

Kaźmierczak-Kałużna – zooming in on the political framings of personal issues. While the first contribution clarifies the tropes and trends in the media discourses pertinent to transnational childhood and childhood abroad in the Lithuanian context, the second one focuses on fertility policy in Poland. Adding the life-course perspective to the changing notions about private roles and their exteriorised framings, Herz-berg-Kurasz proposes new insights into motherhood at the empty-nest stage of the family cycle. Finally, intergenerational transmission of parenting as a value is tracked through multi-perspective approaches in the paper by Pustulka. A more detailed introduction to the second part of this double SI will follow in the subsequent volume of the *Social Policy Issues* journal.

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