THE MATERIALITY OF THE IMAGINED FAMILY

Laura Stark

The volume *Imagined Families* draws welcome attention to recent developments in transnational families and their use of technologies. When Ulla Vuorela used the term "imagined families" in 2002, she was describing the different ways in which transnationally dispersed family networks with deep historical roots in the colonial period are perceived by kin group members themselves. In the present volume, the term "imagined" is intended more broadly to encompass how agencies, institutions and groups perceive the new possibilities offered to families by technology and mobility. The volume focuses on the discourses, images and political interests through which understandings of migration, mobility and family are socially constructed and reified. Its authors have drawn attention to important dimensions of these topics such as individual experience and motives, as well as ethical and emotional dilemmas. The point that all families and kinship relations are to some extent imagined is well taken, but as the authors point out, in many cases these most recent exercises in "imagining" the family do not necessarily result in innovation in new family forms and ideals. Although new technologies and new political alliances are sometimes utilized to disrupt older assumptions of the family as rooted or fixed in a geographic place, as in Timm's article, they are often used to shore up and protect conservative notions of the family: for instance the family as incomplete without biological children, as engaged in close daily interaction, or as characterized by a gendered division of labour in migration contexts, in which men are expected to migrate as wage labourers, but women are expected to adopt a passive role as the accompanying spouse.[1] Families may use new technologies and mobilities to expand their opportunities, but in some cases they do it simply to ensure the family's survival. It may be useful to see the family *itself* as a material "survival strategy" for individuals in societies where other social institutions and groupings offer little concrete support. Even in Europe, the current youth unemployment rate of over 20 percent highlights the continuing importance of the family as a survival net. It is to be hoped that this volume will generate new interest in how the family is currently understood and organized in the context of current challenges facing European societies.

As mentioned above, in each of the articles of this theme issue, the authors have chosen to critically examine the discursive dimensions of the transnational and/or technologically-assisted family and to bring attention to the nature and source of the rhetoric surrounding controversial family issues. In a volume of limited space, this is a worthy and justified aim. At the same time, however, it has meant that the material causes and consequences of these discourses remain under-problematized: we are given few insights into how individual agency is impacted by the nature of IVF technologies, or by the opportunities and limitations of mobile telephony and Skype, by economic conditions in Eastern Europe, or by the nature of prostitution in different contexts. We receive little sense of how familial ties, which have been of concern to the Catholic Church in Hüwelmeier's and Radkowska-Walkowicz's articles, historically have played a role in the Church's political

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aims, in other words in the expansion of its power through international networks of young migrating nuns, or as a bulwark against the intrusion into private lives of science and technology, which represent the main challenges to the Church's authority today. Moreover, if understood as a discursive creation alone, the mobile family becomes a difficult category for historical analysis. Without an account linking the discursive to the material, an adequate conceptualization of change is not possible.

For this reason, in my commentary I would like to take up the thematic thread of materiality which is only implicitly present in the articles in this theme issue. By materiality, I mean the physical and economic aspects of family organization and mobility, in other words livelihoods, resources and labour (other material aspects which I do not address are the body, disability, sexuality, health and illness). As an adherent of practice theory, I do not consider the material level of analysis to be logically prior to the level of social discourse, and it is important to refrain from essentializing such seemingly material facts as human reproduction or the global economy, which we experience primarily through rhetorical constructs. Particularly in the man-made environments in which most of us live today, material conditions do not reproduce themselves but are rooted in human practice.

I became interested in the issue of families and material resources when researching the first public discussion on Finnish rural women's rights, which took place in newspapers in the early 1860s (Stark 2011). This discussion in the press centered on so-called "home thievery", a common practice in which rural farm women covertly sold the products of the farm household (chiefly butter and grain) behind the farm master's back. With the proceeds of the sale, these farm wives and daughters then secretly bought consumer goods which were important in maintaining their social status as distinctive from lower-class servant women and laborers' wives. Although most who wrote to the press on this topic were educated social reformers and farm masters, several young farm women also discussed home thievery in their letters to the press. From the 64 letters published in Finnish-language newspapers on the topic between 1849 and 1901, it became clear to me that the issue of home thievery, while couched in moral terms as an evil, a vice and a "sickness", was recognized by many male and female writers to be rooted in the problems of unequal inheritance. Farm masters who wanted to save money needed their adult children to work on the farm without pay rather than work for other farms as paid servants (at which point the father would have had to hire servants from the outside to replace his children). The incentive intended to keep elder sons working on their birth farm was the promise of later inheriting the farm as a whole, but no such formal incentives were provided for daughters. Although farm daughters were legally entitled to receive half of the inheritance that their brothers received, in eastern Finland they often received nothing more than a few basic dowry goods when they married. Male writers from a wide range of backgrounds argued that without equal inheritance, women would never be motivated to work for the common good of the farm but would instead pilfer from the farm's storehouses to accumulate the goods they felt were rightfully theirs. Farm masters were reported as having traditionally turned a blind eye to the whole practice, yet in the early 1860s they began to speak out in condemnation of it. I concluded that home thievery had earlier been a tacit incentive to keep daughters laboring on the farm, one which did not undermine the public authority of the farm master as long as it remained hidden. However, when retail trade became legal in the countryside in 1859, consumer goods came within reach of even those family members who had little opportunity to travel to distant markets. Since farm women sold pilfered goods secretly to the new rural shops through intermediaries, the practice of home thievery after 1859 quickly became expensive for farm masters, as "gallons of grain and pounds of butter began to slip away to the shops".[2] Home thievery went from being a hidden incentive to a visible embarrassment for farm masters when farm women's wearing of the latest fabrics and high consumption of expensive coffee made it clear to others in the community that the family

patriarch was unable to control the actions of his household members.

Although to explain human motives solely in rational economic terms would be reductionist and counterproductive, I was intrigued in my research by how a micro-level examination of material organization and resource distribution opened up new insights into the linkages between economic motives and cultural discourses on gender and family. Applied to the late modern family, a materialist perspective could, for example, explain why family members separate in the first place, why some members migrate while others stay behind, why some persons invest time and energy maintaining transnational family ties while others do not, or which specific family forms attract the greatest investment from their members. This question may be more easily answered for past societies, in which inheritance and socio-symbolic capital (honor and social prestige) were channeled to individuals primarily through roles occupied within the family. But are the present-day functions of the family so different? Inheritance, for instance, continues to be a highly pertinent issue for many Europeans, even for those who have left their birth communities, as anthropologist Nancy Konvalinka (2009, in press) suggests in her study of *embodied inheritance*. Konvalinka argues that persons can be shaped, by themselves and others, to maximize the use of the capital they inherit, when, for example, diplomats' children become diplomats or farmers' children become farmers. In the area of Spain she examines, economic conditions are pushing rural men to embody both their own and their sisters' inheritances. Daughters inherit land and thus control some of the land farmed by their brothers. A new implicit contract between brothers and sisters has recently appeared, however, in which brothers work hard on the farm to pay for their sisters' education, enabling their sisters to be more mobile than rural women used to be. As sisters become successful, move out of the rural context and marry non-farmers, they abstain from both using and selling the land they own, and brothers continue to use this land as if it were theirs.

While attention should be paid to the material and economic *causes* of family mobility or the family's use of new technologies, the material *consequences* of these practices should also be examined, and here there can be no *a priori* assumption that families and their strategies are characterized by solidarity and cohesion. In the 1980s and 1990s, anthropologists and socio-economists[3] undertook a theoretical re-examination of the political and material factors underlying the family as an economic unit and began to peer into the "black box" of the household, in order to deconstruct the unitary socio-economic model of the family which had prevailed from the late 1950s to the late 1980s.[4] Previously, the question of what went on *inside* the family and household with regard to work and resource allocation had been overlooked, and if resource allocation had been considered at all, it was assumed that resources and family members' tasks were rationally allocated by a benevolent household head seeking to maximize household utility for the common good. Later critiques defined the family and farm household instead as a locus of political struggle involving competing interests, negotiations over resources, and even conflict. Peering "inside" the family and household to perceive the internal conflicts therein would be a first step to understanding whether we can speak of "family" as a unitary concept in, for example, the issue of IVF in Poland: do wives and husbands view the concepts of childlessness, family, and reproductive rights in the same light? A non-unitary, material view of the household is also important for understanding the issue of female migration. Do we know, for instance, all the intrahousehold factors that push women to migrate? How are other family members affected materially by the migration of wives and mothers? Which relatives can make claims on female emigrant labourers' remittances and resources?

Material perspectives on the family may be even more pertinent for so-called developing countries. Economic restructuring and the withdrawal of the state from social and economic intervention, the explosive growth of the informal economy, and the influx of cheaply-made goods to low-income countries are resulting in severe unemployment and deprivation of basic needs. They are also contributing to a

phenomenon which has been called "the feminization of obligation" within low-income countries, in which women must increasingly take on the primary burden for the survival of the family and dependent children, while men are becoming more likely to desert their families, withhold earnings from them or take the earnings of wives to fund self-oriented consumption (Chant 2006, 2008). Another consequence of relative income and labour structure differences among societies is the rise of global care chains (Hochschild 2000), in which, typically, a Filipina woman who migrates to work as a nanny in a high-income country uses her wages to employ someone to care for her children in Manila, who may in turn have her children cared for by another woman in the rural Philippines, who may depend on her older daughter to care for the younger siblings.

Families may in some sense be "imagined", but they have also always been mechanisms of resource distribution and the transmission of wealth. In many ways they also serve as structures which oversee the organization of labor. Families must always find ways to survive materially from day to day, which often means competing with other family groups. New forms of family arise when resources and livelihood opportunities themselves become redistributed in new ways in time and space (i.e. livelihood opportunities become seasonal or only available after lengthy training or education, or certain types of work become centered in particular geographical locations). These considerations give rise to questions such as: How do changes in the resources available to families lead to different re-imaginings of the family? How do new discourses surrounding the family affect the ways in which families manage their assets and strategize for continued survival?

Notes

1 See also Madianou and Miller's 2011 article in which they argue that for Filipina emigrant mothers, the immediacy of communication offered by mobile telephony has served to reinforce traditional notions of the mother as domestic caretaker who must continue to invest time and emotion in her children from a distance.

2 Oct. 19, 1888. *Karjalatar* no. 83, "Joensuusta. Maataloudellisetolotläänissämme".

3 E.g., Collier & Rosaldo (1981); Hartmann (1981); Sen (1983); Delphy (1984); Yanagisako & Collier (1987); Guyer & Peters (1987); Phillips (1989); Hart (1992, 1995); Moore (1992); Kabeer (1994); Agarwal (1997); Kandiyoti (1998).

4 E.g., Chayanov (1966). The unitary model of the household was made popular by the work of Gary Becker (1965, 1974, 1981).

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