



## Family and space – an interpretive perspective on two central concepts in population geography

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Received: 15 January 2021 – Revised: 25 March 2022 – Accepted: 30 March 2022 – Published: 1 June 2022

**Abstract.** Introductory texts in population geography are often organized using a sociological approach to demography (Barcus and Halfacree 2018:2; Newbold 2014:6). This is particularly evident in discussions on the concept of family. Both sociology and geography center concepts like marriage, divorces, births, the number of children in a household, and the composition of households. However, many of these concepts are outdated, with limited value for understanding contemporary social change. As the editorial to this special issue suggests, population geography must look to other fields for concepts that describe subjects' meaning-making. Interpretive family studies' conceptual and methodological approaches can help reconfigure established assumptions about the term “population” (Gubrium and Holstein 1993; LaRossa and Reitzes 1993; Bösel, 1980; Burgess, 1926). While classic population geography research does engage with new mobility and flexibility regimes and pluralization tendencies, it often fails to identify their consequences for lived experiences and intergenerational relationships. This limits scholars' understandings of new living conditions and practices, as well as their consequences for central concepts of mobility, for example, co-presence, absence, relocation, and residential location. This also occurs with the concept of “family”, which is generally applied to mono-local nuclear families in a household unit. In this contribution, we draw on classic and contemporary interpretive research to (re-)evaluate the multi-locality of families and theories of co-presence to extend the concepts of family and space within population geography (see also Halatcheva-Trapp et al., 2019a). By transcending standard quantitative categories (e.g., the household, fertility, simplified models of mobility), we offer interpretive insights to better conceptualize an important topic in population geography – the family.

### 1 Introduction: the limits of demographic research and a proposal for interpretive approaches

The editors of this special issue criticized population geography for promoting a very limited understanding of “population” that does not capture the dramatic social changes that have occurred since the field was established. Much research from other fields understands and explains population dynamics, including “family” dynamics, in a more nuanced way than population geography often does. In population geography, “population” is usually conceptualized quantitatively as a mobile mass that is multiplying, decreasing, and moving within and across territorial containers. These move-

ments across physical space and temporal dynamics are typically depicted using thematic maps and other information graphics like population pyramids. According to its introductory literature, population geography aims to observe and explain the spatial dispersion of the population by its numbers, density, composition, and its movements (see, e.g., Barcus and Halfacree, 2018:64 pp.; De Lange et al., 2014; Newbold, 2014:3). It also pursues solutions for social problems at different spatial scales (e.g., neighborhoods, cities and municipalities, federal states, national states, and international and transnational). The field mainly uses quantitative, measurable evidence such as family (marital) status, households,

number of children, age structure, and residential locations to determine the causes of population movements.

In contrast to these demographically oriented population studies, migration studies considers broader methodological and conceptual perspectives, including interpretive and qualitative approaches. This kind of research notes the limits of popular models like the push–pull model of migration or the demographic transition (see De Lange et al., 2014) and showcases interpretive research’s ability to explain often-overlooked social dynamics. This article seeks to answer the editors’ call to diversify population geography and to describe population in its multidimensionality. Drawing on interpretive studies from geography and sociology, we evaluate the relationship between family and space using two concepts that have gained recent empirical and theoretical traction: multi-local living arrangements and co-presence in families.

## 2 The family in geography and sociology

Family has been a central topic in sociology from the beginning of the discipline, while family research in geography has been more marginal. However, population geography has centered family in the context of residential and everyday-life mobility. In this section, we provide a brief overview and critique of geography’s (limited) understanding of families, within and beyond population geography, before tracing sociology’s growing interest in space and its intersections with the family.

### 2.1 Family as a research field within and beyond population geography

Population geography is interested in the spatial distribution of population phenomena (such as persons themselves or fertility and mortality rates). Also Newbold (2014:5) considers the primary interests in population geography to be “space, regional variations, diffusion, and place, and their role in human and natural processes”. In a more abstract manner, for Barcus and Halfacree, population geography “represent[s] lives across space” (Barcus and Halfacree, 2018:40). Population geography is, therefore, interested in locating people, their characteristics, and their movement within Cartesian, measurable space.

The concept of family permeates population geography, and it is often the primary research subject (in the introductory text of Barcus and Halfacree, 2018, the word “family” occurs 380 times; in the introduction of Newbold, 2014, it occurs 157 times). Alongside spatial analysis of classic demographic categories like fertility and mortality (Barcus and Halfacree, 2018:64 pp.; Newbold, 2014:79 pp./99 pp.), population geography also includes migration studies, which examines how “family matters” in everyday and residential mobility (Barcus and Halfacree, 2018:137). Concepts like the family life cycle and the life course perspective recognize

that family is not a fixed category and account for the temporally changing nature of household compositions (Barcus and Halfacree, 2018:18; Newbold, 2014:137). However, in population geography, family generally remains an inflexible, measurable, and mappable category – households with young children (only one period in the family life cycle). The use of simplified categories in empirical population geography studies has been criticized (see, e.g., Barcus and Halfacree 2018:13). Indeed, the increasing conceptual work on the family within geography led Tarrant Hall (2019) to proclaim a “family turn” in the discipline. Yet, much of this research does not appear within “population geography”; the field remains “unduly intellectually constricted, conservative and constrained” (Barcus and Halfacree, 2018:14).

While the link between family and space is not exclusive to geography (see Halatcheva-Trapp et al., 2019b), geographic research offers rich literature on the family and space nexus using a variety of methods in sub-disciplines like urban and mobility studies or cultural and political geography. For example, Hallman’s (2010) *Family Geographies* integrates research on the family and space. Other discussions consider the specific qualities of urban and/or rural family life (Valentine, 1997); “familial” spaces such as zoos/leisure parks, domestic space, and the separation of work and family in home offices (Hallman, 2010); micro-territorialization practices (Andrey and Johnson, 2010; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2011; Lewis, 2011; Schlinzig, 2019; Nimmo, 2019; Hall, 2019; Walton-Roberts, 2010); childcare and elderly care within families (Crooks and Williams, 2010; Power, 2019) and in institutional contexts (Gallagher, 2017); families and identity building (Gibas, 2019; Pimlott-Wilson, 2011); and family homes as fragile (Hall, 2019) and potentially problematic/dangerous places (Smith, 2017).

Geographical work on family as a social category has questioned the very concept of family (e.g., Turner and Almack, 2019). Alternative categories like community (Greenfields and Smith, 2011), kin, multi-local households, and roots and rhizomes (Gibas, 2019) better recognize the lived nature of personal relationships. Scholars have called for additional research on intergenerational relationships (e.g., Holt, 2011) and criticized “mainstream adultist geography” (Valentine, 2018:1) which ignores generational inequalities and homogenizes lived experiences (Valentine, 2018:2). In addition to this “generational turn”, scholars also call for in-depth, qualitative studies into the everyday mechanics of family life.

### 2.2 Sociological accounts on family and space – a brief overview

Family sociology and the sociology of space are generally disconnected fields. While the family has garnered continuous research since the beginning of the discipline, discussions of spatial issues only recently experienced a renaissance in German-speaking discourse. After sociological clas-

sics at the beginning of the 20th century at times tackled the aspect of space (like Durkheim, 1995/1912, and Simmel, 1992), sociology experienced a “spatial oblivion” (Schroer, 2006) or “spatial blindness” (Weichhart, 2008; Löw and Sturm, 2005; Läßle, 1991), which was only remedied in the 1970s by scholars like Henry Lefebvre (1974). From the end of the 1990s, together with time and body, space received increased attention within the social sciences and is now considered one of three decisive dimensions of everyday life (Rönkä and Korvela, 2009; Felski, 1999/2000). While the spatial turn foregrounded the relationship between society and space, little work has considered the many relations between family and space. This is partly because family is a deeply contested social category within sociology. However, there is broad consensus that the parent–child dyad, and one or more subsequent generations with close personal relationships, is a constitutive feature of the family (Lenz, 2003, 2013; Settles and Steinmetz, 1999; Trost, 1999). There are also assumptions about the spatial constitution of family. Family is often narrowly understood as a household unit, especially (but not exclusively) in official statistics and demographics. Family sociologist Karl Lenz (2003, 2013) worries that the relationship between family and household in sociology is too often tied to a normative concept of family as a mono-local and sedentary nuclear family, consisting of a heterosexual couple with biological children. Most contributions still neglect the multifaceted phenomenon of spatially dispersed family arrangements, including the practical implications of family life in multiple households and children’s and parents’ constructions of personal and group identities. However, as the diverse contributions in Halatcheva-Trapp et al. (2019a) show, space and family can be combined to explain family transformations caused by, for example, migration due to war and displacement, economic constraints, multi-local family arrangements after separation and divorce, higher mobility demands in the context of employment, and the growing labor force participation of women (Halatcheva-Trapp et al., 2019a:2 pp.).

### 3 Family and space from an interpretative perspective

Like sociology in general, family sociology uses diverse theories to ground its findings and deploys varying research topics and methods (Hill and Kopp, 2013; Burkart, 2006; Thomas and Wilcox, 1987). Major theoretical schools include rational choice theories, structural functionalism, system theory, symbolic interactionism, phenomenological sociology, and, increasingly, practice theories or the *interpretative paradigm*. Interpretive theories challenge the *normative paradigm* (personified by Talcott Parsons), which suggests that social norms and roles are a precondition of the social. For phenomenological sociology (Schutz, 1962), symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969), and eth-

nomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), social reality and social order are the result of an iterative process of interactions and participants’ interpretations. An interpretive *family sociology* – in the tradition of the Chicago School (Waller, 1938; Thomas and Thomas, 1928; Burgess, 1926) – investigates “how intersubjectivity is produced as a prerequisite for social action, how a shared system of symbols and values is constructed”; it focuses on everyday life and family members’ interactions (Bösel, 1980:56). Over the last 10 years, sociology has approached the family as an “ongoing accomplishment” (Garfinkel, 1967), the result of actors’ *social practices*. Concepts like *doing* and *displaying family* suggest a return to *practice theories* (Jurczyk, 2014; Morgan, 2011; Finch, 2007; Smart, 2007; Nelson, 2006). This *practice turn within family sociology* (Jurczyk, 2014; Luescher, 2012) follows wider trends in the social and cultural sciences (Reckwitz, 2004; Schatzki, 2001), often said to be catalyzed by Harvey Sacks’ essay *On doing “being ordinary”* (Sacks, 1984). Space is also increasingly considered the outcome of social processes in sociology (Fuller and Löw, 2017; Löw, 2006, 2016; Schroer, 2006) and human geography (Halatcheva-Trapp et al., 2019c; Werlen, 2008). Over two decades, scholars have centered the physical-material dimension, cognitions, and the social and culturally bound constructions of space (Weichhart, 2008; Löw, 2006, 2016; Schroer, 2006). Space is, therefore, socially constituted and constructed through social practices. The remainder of this paper reviews two concepts – multi-locality and co-presence – that illustrate how the interpretivist paradigmatic shift can bring *family* and *space* closer together (Halatcheva-Trapp et al., 2019c).

#### 3.1 Multi-local family life

The “mobility turn” (Sheller, 2017) and “spatial turn” pushed scholars to go beyond movement (residential/migration) and instead investigate the relationships between movement and sedentariness, between dwelling and being on the move, and between moving and staying (Sheller, 2017; Wood et al., 2015:367). This led to a new focus on residential multi-locality – the use of multiple residential homes by either an individual or a family. While some scholars have investigated multi-local living arrangements in the Global South (Schmidt-Kallert, 2016), others focused on phenomena such as job-induced secondary households in the Global North. The multi-locality of family life also considers how children are involved when family life is conducted in two or more dwellings (e.g., in post-separation families or when one parent regularly commutes) (Monz et al., 2019).

Interpretive approaches consider how different places are used and imagined, how everyday life is practically organized, and which rhythms are established and why (Schier et al., 2015). For example, Nicola Hilti’s interpretive study found that multi-locally living persons conceptualize different living sites as parallel, contrary, double, or in-between

worlds (Hilti, 2016:472 pp.). She revealed how emotional, economic, and social lifestyle motives interact to create complex backgrounds of meaning, which she considers the norm, not the exception (Hilti, 2016:472). This calls into question typologies of multi-local living arrangements (often used in quantitative studies) that are based on a singular ascription of motives (e.g., job-induced vs. lifestyle-based; see Hesse and Scheiner, 2007). While job-related multi-local living arrangements (for example) may be statistically similar, Monz (2019) shows how they are experienced differently. Therefore, quantitative studies of motive-based typologies should be interpreted cautiously – such typologies are useful starting points for research, not an end goal.

In another interpretive study, Monz et al. (2019) used video-supported mobile participant observations to gather insights into families' everyday practices and challenges. Non-verbal communication practices, emotions, and spontaneous practices were observed (Monz et al., 2019:96). Practices of social and emotional bonding across different physical situations (being apart, spending time together, or being on the move) were made visible, disrupting the binary of being separated/spending time together. Similarly, Madianou's (2016) ethnographic research reveals how transnational families enable intimacy through mediated presence. Such "ambient co-presence" goes beyond measurable interactions like remittances and reshapes scholarly thinking on community and emotional bonding while apart. Qualitative studies on multi-local living practices demonstrate how interpretive approaches can help us empirically capture the ruptures caused by social change and new mobility and migration regimes (also Weiske et al., 2015:405). Interpretive frameworks are more nuanced than established concepts like the household in explaining how families maintain strong and relevant social connections while physically (and quantitatively) appearing to be separated.

### 3.2 Presence in absence – co-presence in families

In western societies, the concept of family is strongly associated with members living together in a household community (Lenz, 2003:491). Physical co-presence is generally considered a fundamental part of family – which is indeed a unique form of presence. Accordingly, a valuable corpus of classic sociology literature has theorized physical presence. For example, Schutz and Luckmann (1973:66) identify the temporal and spatial commonality of the *we*-relationship (the interactions between people present) as characterized by a "maximal abundance of symptoms". According to Simmel (1992:722–742), shared physical presence enables a multisensory impression. Finally, for Goffman (1983), the manifold information available in a physically co-present interaction allows participants to interpret the social situation.

Current research challenges the centrality of physical co-presence. With increasing work-related mobility, migration, refuge and displacement, and the proliferation of multi-local

family arrangements in which children alternate between households after separation or divorce, the concept of co-presence must supplement its purely physical component. In such situations, information and communication technologies can be used to establish and maintain personal relationships and care (Schier and Schlinzig, 2018:93–95; Parreñas, 2014; Greschke, 2012). Family sociology has recently debated the different facets of co-presence (see Döbler, 2019, for an overview).

Physical co-presence of family members must be positioned alongside virtual co-presence. Virtual co-presence or connected presence (Christensen, 2009; Licoppe, 2004) denotes the bonds and affiliation between family members who are physically separated but mediated by information and communication technologies. The widespread use of low-cost and free technologies promotes this form of co-presence. Baldassar (2008) goes further, proposing an extended typology that includes co-presence by proxy and imagined co-presence. Co-presence by proxy uses objects (or even odors) that are strongly associated with absent individuals to keep them present (Eberle, 2015; Largey and Watson, 1977). As Marcel Mauss recognized, gifts incorporate those who are not physically present and enable a bond between persons who are absent and present (Mauss, 1966 [1925]). Imagined co-presence includes actions like including loved ones in daily prayers or anticipating someone's preferences when making consumption decisions or cooking meals. Madianou's (2016) concept of ambient co-presence also describes the "peripheral" yet highly significant, knowledgeable, and influential presence of absent persons through the omnipresence of new media or their connection to poly-media environments.

These approaches attempt to adequately describe a highly dynamic and increasingly complex research subject while accounting for changing patterns of time and space. Though most parents and children still reside together in traditional household arrangements, a growing number of families choose – for a variety of reasons – alternative housing solutions that meet care demands and create stable emotional and social bonds. Understanding the more-than-physical practices of family connections can enrich population geography's often limited perspectives on intergenerational bonds and social ties.

## 4 Conclusion: conceptual promises and quantitative translations

Qualitative, interpretive investigations into widely used concepts like "family" or "the household" can determine whether such concepts still reflect lived experiences. They may also identify areas where new conceptual work is needed to better understand the needs of "the population". Turning to the "invisible work of everyday intimate relations" (Tarrant



and Hall, 2019:4) will help (population) geographers continue to develop more complex concepts (Hopkins, 2020:3).

Embracing the social complexities of family can also improve quantitative research. It allows for a more accurate interpretation of quantitative results and articulations of what was (and was not) measured. Interpretive studies may also inspire innovative quantitative studies that produce socially relevant and relatable research. Multi-locality offers a compelling example of how empirically grounded concepts can be translated into quantitative research. Existing quantitative surveys already consider multi-local family arrangements in their questionnaires (e.g., German Youth Institute's AID: "Growing up in Germany: Everyday Worlds", "Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics" – pairfam, and "The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey" – HILDA). This helps scholars to better collect evidence about children living in more than one household and understand how family is done across space.

We support the editors' call to refine the generic categories present in the introductory literature as these categories do not reflect the far-reaching social change in highly dynamic late-modern societies. New perspectives should avoid simple solutions and simplified phenomena; rather, they must sit with the diversity and messiness inherent in concepts like the family. Interpretive paradigms should be used to broaden empirical and theoretical understandings of population and extend commonly used concepts, namely the family.

**Data availability.** No data sets were used in this article.

**Author contributions.** Both authors contributed equally to the writing of this article, including the original draft preparation as well as the review and editing process.

**Competing interests.** The contact author has declared that neither they nor their co-author has any competing interests.

**Disclaimer.** Publisher's note: Copernicus Publications remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

**Acknowledgements.** We would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers and the handling editor Nadine Marquardt for their valuable comments. Furthermore, we thank Jacob Henry for the language polishing and making the text much more concise.

**Review statement.** This paper was edited by Nadine Marquardt and reviewed by three anonymous referees.

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