Navigating Symbolic Pollution Through Symbolic Boundary Work – Shaping a Sense of Home and Family in Family Assemblages

Carol Kelleher, University College Cork, Ireland
Deirdre O'Loughlin, University of Limerick, Ireland

In this paper, we explore how illness requiring care displaces family assemblages. Specifically, we illustrate how illness as a form of symbolic pollution transforms family relations and capacities necessitating symbolic boundary work to hold family assemblages together, which in turn, shapes both a sense of home and of family.

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Carol Kelleher, University College Cork, Ireland
Deirdre M. O’Loughlin, University of Limerick, Ireland

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Families can be characterized as “an assemblage of heterogeneous components (e.g. bodies, practices, objects, stories and everyday interactions) that form contingent relations across time to produce an emergent whole with a collective identity” (Price and Epp 2016, 60). The relations and capacities of the human and non-human component parts are contingent on each other and continuously unfolding. Hence, rather than having fixed boundaries, family assemblages occupy blurred and dynamic territories, where displacement amongst the component parts or disruption of family practices precipitates change (Price and Epp 2016). While recent consumer research has begun to employ assemblage theory to examine family consumption (e.g. Price and Epp 2016, Dinnin Huff and Cotte 2016), there is a paucity of studies which investigate how a sense of home and family emerge in family assemblages. The purpose of this paper is to explore how caring for family members suffering from illness characterized by gradual cognitive impairment and physical deterioration, specifically dementia and alzheimers, shapes experiences of home and family within family assemblages.

Drawing on Douglas (1967), we conceive symbolic pollution as “whatever […] eludes or threatens order” throughout the caregiving life course. It emerges when things become ‘out of place’, temporarily violating prior systems of classification (Dion, Sabri and Guillard 2015, 565). As symbolic pollution implies a previous set of ordered relations juxtaposed with contraventions of the order (Douglas 1967, 48), illness requiring care within family assemblages, temporarily destabilizes boundaries, necessitating symbolic boundary work. That is, illness contemporaneously de-constituted and reconstituted family relations and capacities within family assemblages, temporarily displaced, rearranged and reconfigured through symbolic boundary work. We define symbolic boundaries as the “conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space” (Lamont and Molnar 2002, 168).

Our qualitative study comprised long interviews (McCacken 1988), averaging two hours, with fourteen family carers, comprising nine females and five males, who had either voluntarily or involuntarily found themselves caring for another family member, without formal compensation or payment. A grounded theory constant comparison approach to data collection and analysis was adopted (Charmaz 2006). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Emergent themes as to how illness requiring care within families framed experiences of home and family were induced (Spiggle 1994).

Our findings revealed how caring for family members within family assemblages temporarily resulted in symbolic pollution necessitating symbolic boundary work throughout the care giving trajectory. Contingent notions of home and family were constantly in the balance as family assemblages adapted to the consumption and provision of care precipitated by illness. As a result, family assemblages were in a constant state of becoming or morphogenesis (Price and Epp 2016). In this way, a reconfigured liminal sense of home and of family emerged, both during the caregiving trajectory and once it ended (e.g. when the family member in need of care moves to a residential home/hospital or dies) (Barnhart, Dinnin Huff and Cotte 2014).

Specifically, we induced two forms of symbolic pollution - Familial Strangers and Home Unfixtures - which dynamically modulated meanings of home and family. These were managed through two forms of ongoing symbolic boundary work: Labors of Homing and Familying On. Familial Strangers refers to previous family relations and identities being disrupted and sometimes unrecognizable. Family carers learnt to accommodate switched family identities. They performed symbolic boundary work to reacquaint their “estranged” family member using material representations, such as constantly changing and captioning photo albums. Home Unfixtures refers to the displacement, introduction and reappraisal of objects within the home. While experiences of domesticity or “homeyness” (McCacken 2005, 36) are typically created through physical, symbolic and pragmatic properties, relations and capacities within families, illness resulted of the colonization of the home by medical equipment and apparatus to make it safe and secure. For example, family carers installed baby monitors, stair gates and hoists. Both forms of symbolic pollution were accepted as “tolerated transgressions” (Dion, Sabri and Guillard 2014, 578) and reflected the deep and both temporary and irreversible disruption of prior relations and capacities within family assemblages.

Building on prior research which explored tensions and their resolution in family assemblages of care (Epp and Vegaletti 2014), family carers performed symbolic boundary work in response to both forms of symbolic pollution. Labors of Homing refers to the conjoining, disjoining and commingling of family relations and capacities (spatially, geographically, and symbolically) to maintain a sense of home. In line with Figueiredo (2016, 77), a sense of home emerged as “multiple, fragmented and distributed across different spaces”. Familying On refers to altered family practices or labors of holding family together (Price and Epp 2016). Family members stepped in and out (both voluntarily and involuntarily) of caregiving relations, while certain members seemed to be “sucked in” to a caring role, from which they could not extract themselves.

In summary, we make three main contributions relating family consumption and caregiving within family assemblages of care. First, we reveal how illness requiring care by family members for other family members emerged as a temporary form of symbolic pollution that modulated family assemblages and created a liminal altered sense of home and family. Building on prior research on symbolic pollution (Douglas 1997; Dion, Sabri and Guillard 2014), we reveal how family caregiving temporarily disrupts previous classifications of home and family, rendering both constantly in the making (Barnhart, Dinnin Huff and Cotte 2014). Second, we reveal how illness precipitated ongoing processes of deterrioralization within family assemblages. Illness transformed material capacities that typically provide a sense of home, denoting safely, comfort and welcome (homeyness) into sites of surveillance and fortification. We thus respond to Figueiredo’s (2016, 87) call to “understand which material and expressive capacities of resources facilitate movement and coupling with other territories, and which capacities hinder de-coupling and recoupling”. Third, we reveal that illness facilitated, stretched and altered relations and capacities with family assemblages, or a sense of family, which in turn necessitated symbolic boundary work. That is, illness contemporaneously de-constituted and reconstituted families throughout the caregiving trajectory. We conclude with limitations and an agenda for future research.

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