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Theorizing Family Change: A Review and Reconceptualization

We review how recent family scholarship theorizes recent family change as either a process of deinstitutionalization, in which family can no longer be understood in institutional terms, or a process of diversification, in which family life is expanding but not losing its institutional character. We argue that both approaches emerge out of and depend on a social institutional framework for understanding family that was developed in 20th-century sociology. Despite producing a wealth of research, both approaches have difficulty adequately conceptualizing the institutional character of family and providing ways of theorizing family change. We introduce an alternative to a social institutional framework, a Weberian institutional logics approach, which provides a different way to understand the institutional character of family life and thereby affords new interpretations and avenues for theory and research on family change in the 21st century.

The most recent *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Families* opens its overview of current scholarship on families by proclaiming, “We live in extraordinary times” (Treas, Scott, & Richards, 2017, p. xvi). Indeed. A prominent family historian asserted that “the relations between men and women have changed more in the past 30 years than they did in the previous three thousand,” proceeding to argue that “a

similar transformation [has occurred] in the role of marriage” (Coontz, 2005, p. 4). We live in fascinating times for family scholars as the scope and depth of social change have produced dramatic and profound questions related to the study of family life. Surely, the extraordinary times we live in oblige the very best theoretical work we can produce.

How are family scholars theorizing recent family change, and what is the best way to do so? The topic is so expansive and challenging that it would tax the limits of the most capable of scholars to fully address it. Undoubtedly, both the range of possible research to include and the theoretical approaches one could incorporate are beyond the scope of any single article. Nevertheless, our review contends that the primary theoretical background for understanding family change remains the social institutional framework grounded in the work of Émile Durkheim and developed by Talcott Parsons in American sociology in the 20th century. In the late 20th century, the debate around family change centered on whether the family as a social institution was experiencing family decline or moving through a period of family adaptation. Today, however, the debate has moved away from how well family is performing its important functions as a social institution to whether family can be regarded as having institutional dimensions at all. Is family life today experiencing deinstitutionalization, such that family is becoming so individualized that it is no longer best understood in institutional terms? Or is family life experiencing diversification that expands but maintains a capacity for speaking of family in some sort of institutional terms? Despite the fact

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Key Words: Deinstitutionalization, diversity, family change, individualization, institutional logics.

Table 1. *Typology of Family and Theorization of Family Change*

	Vertical Relationality	Horizontal Relationality
Singular dimensionality	I: Social institutional (adaptation or decline)	II: Noninstitutional (deinstitutionalization)
Plural dimensionality	IV: Institutional logics (differentiation)	III: Postinstitutional (diversification)

that the deinstitutionalization and diversification approaches are both critical of the 20th-century social institutional approach to family, they are also both highly dependent on it for the theorizations of family change they produce. We show that both approaches offer compelling interpretations of family change that have invigorated family scholarship, and will continue to do so, and provide important contexts for interpreting issues related to family change. However, we also submit that both approaches encounter problems in maintaining a theorization of family change as specifically *family* change.

We conclude our review by raising the prospect of a fundamentally different starting point for theorizing the institutional character of family, a starting point derived from a framework provided in the work of another founder of sociology, Max Weber, and developed more fully in the contemporary literature on institutional logics. A Weberian approach has had vast influence within sociology more generally but has not found a presence in the family field. Although we lack the space and do not attempt to fully develop and argue for a Weberian institutional logics framework, we suggest that this alternative approach to theorizing the institutional character of family could enable a family scholar to explore and assess contemporary changes in family life in new ways.

FAMILY AS A SOCIAL INSTITUTION AND THEORIZING FAMILY CHANGE

Building on the work of Émile Durkheim (1982), sociologists have often understood themselves as engaged in “a science of institutions” focused on delineating “their genesis and functioning” (p. 45). Within this Durkheimian approach, developed more fully in the work of Talcott Parsons (1951; Parsons & Bales, 1955), sociology came to theorize modern societies as composed of a set of core social institutions: the economy, polity, religion, law, education, and the family. Family was understood in terms of its place in society and its important functions such as reproduction, socialization, and care for

the emotional needs of members of society. As a social institution, the family was conceptualized as a particular social structure with established roles, norms, and values for regulating individual behavior in such a way that it enabled the performance of its vital functions (Eisenstadt, 1968; Turner, 1997). By the late 20th century, the debate over family change was framed in terms of family decline or family adaptation and resilience. For some, family change signified a problematic case of disintegration and loss of institutional viability (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1993), with social science research establishing the detrimental effects of such change (Lerman, 2002; Putnam, 2001; Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Wells & Rankin, 1991). For others, family change indicated a form of “adaptive upgrading” (Abrutyn & Turner, 2011, p. 295) whereby the family as a social institution was changing in ways to facilitate its new place in a shifting system of social institutions.

Despite the prominence of conceptualizing the family as a social institution in the 20th century and the intensity of the debates surrounding family resilience and decline, recent family scholarship has shifted in important ways, yet it has done so without leaving the framework for theorizing family and family change provided by the social institutional approach. To adequately review these shifts and to facilitate insight into the limitations of remaining within the purview of a social institutional framework, we create a typology of different approaches to understanding family and subsequently theorizing family change (see Table 1). In our typology we focus on two aspects: the relationality, whether vertical or horizontal, and the dimensionality, whether singular or plural, of the theorization of family and family change. The conceptualization of relationality centers on theorizing how a phenomenon relates to that which is other than itself as either higher or lower than itself (vertical) or equivalent (horizontal). The conceptualization of dimensionality refers to the way a phenomenon relates to itself, that is, whether it centers on itself as composed

of primarily a singular feature or aspect, or whether it is capable of incorporating multiple aspects and features. Perhaps the easiest way to see the difference we are pointing to here is in the debate over whether to refer to family as “the family” or whether it is necessary to avoid any such reference and acknowledge family always in the plural: “families.” We postulate four frameworks for conceptualizing family (social institutional, noninstitutional, postinstitutional, and institutional logics), along with each framework’s accompanying way of theorizing recent family change: adaptation or decline, deinstitutionalization, diversification, and differentiation.

A Durkheimian social institutional approach insists on theorizing family in terms of vertical relationality such that the form, shape, maintenance, and endurance of the family are produced by forces, mechanisms, and functions external to the family itself. The family is understood in terms of an ordering by and to something external to itself, something to which it relates in vertical terms. To illustrate, there are two important formations of this vertical relationality in a social institutional approach to family. First, family phenomena are conceptualized as produced by factors and forces that determine the structure and function of what individuals then carry out and perform. Individuals in families are not theorized as interpretive actors who are creating and constructing their own family life from within; rather, they are occupants of positions and roles that are designed for them and that provide the normative rules that govern their behavior. Second, the family itself is theorized as a unit or entity placed in vertical relation to something outside of itself. The institutional character of “the family” is not merely some sort of habituated or normatively patterned character (a much narrower conceptualization that comes later) but is itself an institution ordered by and to its place in a broader society or system of institutions. Family is structured and formed in terms of its functional contributions to the well-being of the society and its members. The capacity of the social institutional approach to incorporate a vertical relationality in which not all family forms were considered equivalent and distinctions between family and other relationship forms (“alternatives”) could be placed in an evaluative relation to one another is an important contrast to the majority of contemporary horizontal conceptualizations that render, ipso

facto, the relationality between different forms in strictly parallel terms (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998).

For the social institutional approach, theorizing family often involved positing a singular family entity with a particular structure and form that functioned within a broader institutional arena. A focus on form or structure often devolved into conceptualizing family in terms of a singular form: namely, married biological mother and father and their children. Despite the fact that critics often overstated this emphasis on structure and form and a presumed commitment to “the family,” even if social institutional scholars succeeded in examining family more broadly as a complex of positions, roles, or norms, the focus remained on theorizing family in terms of its singular place in a system of social institutions. Framing family in terms of a singular dimensionality in combination with a vertical relationality enabled a whole host of social science research (and in many ways still does) to examine how well “the family” was meeting or fulfilling important functions, but it also limited the debate over characterizing family change to interpretations of family decline or family adaptation.

As we develop in the forthcoming sections, our typology enables configuring two additional contemporary approaches to family change, deinstitutionalization and diversification, as well as an undeveloped approach based in Weberian institutional logics. In the next section, we show how in much recent family scholarship, family, familylike, and other personal relationships are characterized in terms of a singular dimension of central importance: how the relationship functions by and for the individuals involved. Instead of a social institutional framing of family and family change, contemporary family relationships are increasingly theorized as being formed almost exclusively from within and are therefore best conceptualized in noninstitutional terms. Family change is consequently conceived of as a process of deinstitutionalization in which family is best theorized in terms of a horizontal relationality in which all relationships are understood as formally equivalent insofar as they are formed in highly individualized ways.

As we will show, a third approach in contemporary family scholarship situates itself against both social institutional and noninstitutional frameworks. Emphasizing the diversity of contemporary family life, scholars in this

group argue that attempts at liberation from the deficiencies of the social institutional approach have too easily slipped into a simplistic theorization of recent family change in highly singular terms such as deinstitutionalization or individualization. Instead, these family scholars contend that individuals are not forming relationships solely from within, solely by and for the individual, but that contemporary personal life is best characterized as individuals in relationships, to which negotiation and contingency are fundamental. We characterize this third approach as postinstitutional in the sense that it accepts some of the features of an institutional framing of family but is nevertheless “post” or critical of them even as it accepts them (the term *post* does not mean “after” but rather that the position accepts a particular stance even as it is also critical of it). For a postinstitutional approach, then, the kinds of relationships and contexts in which personal life is lived are characterized by a fundamental diversity. There is no singular “family” dimensionality, and the resultant diversity of relationships exemplified in contemporary social life must also be understood in terms of a fundamental horizontal relationality. This third approach theorizes family change as a process of diversification rather than deinstitutionalization.

Finally, with our typology, we are able to frame a fourth approach that is currently not found in the family literature, and we offer a brief, suggestive introduction to its possible development. The approach we have in mind, a Weberian approach, has a long history and has recently been developed and applied as an institutional logics approach to a variety of fields. Drawing on Weber’s concept of modernity as a set of competing value spheres, this approach focuses on how distinct institutional logics, values, goods, or “gods,” as Weber might put it, are both invoked and evoked in different institutional spheres. Rather than viewing the domain of the family as a social institution with a coherent set of norms that structure its form, function, and meaning, or as a domain to no longer to be understood within an institutional frame, or as a domain understood as capable of being in some way indefinitely expansive of itself in diverse ways, the institutional logics approach takes up the question of family by delineating its own “inner logic” and differentiating the “familial” from other competing institutional logics. In this way,

an institutional logics approach allows scholars the possibility of differentiating family from other forms of social life in a vertical relationality even as it also allows for theoretical attention to the plurality of possible dimensions and features that are expressive of an institutional logic. Instead of theorizing family change in terms of diversification that often leaves its institutional character unclear, the institutional logics framework theorizes family change in terms of its differentiation from and relation to other competing institutional logics at work in modern societies. In the context of our review, this fourth framework for theorizing the institutional dimension of family life may provide a basis for producing more adequate depictions of the character and significance of family change today.

DEINSTITUTIONALIZATION: THEORIZING FAMILY WITHOUT INSTITUTIONAL ELEMENTS

Most scholarship on recent family change describes the family as in a state of deinstitutionalization (Cherlin, 2004), disintegration (Purcell, 2002), detraditionalization (Gross, 2005), and demarriage (Théry, 1996). Family change is theorized as moving from a previously institutionalized state to an increasingly deinstitutionalized form, such that family itself is conceptualized in noninstitutional terms. In many ways deinstitutionalization has long been a way of conceptualizing 20th-century family change as family scholars viewed the family as moving “from institution to companionship” (Burgess & Locke, 1945). Yet it is important to recognize that when contemporary scholars reference family change in terms of deinstitutionalization, they have moved away from the first framework in our typology, a social institutional approach that would examine the changing character of family and its place as a social institution in society. Instead, adopting a second, new framework for understanding family and family change, they examine whether “family” can provide an institutional context for the self (Cancian, 1987), thereby changing the focus from “the family in society” to a focus on the weakening of cultural and social structures that regulate and constrain individuals in their construction of personal life.

According to one of the most widely referenced articulations of this view, deinstitutionalization primarily refers to “the weakening of the social norms that define people’s behavior”

(Cherlin, 2004, p. 848). Understanding family change in normative and cultural terms was central to conceptualizing family in the social institutional approach. Yet recent conceptualizations of deinstitutionalization narrow the institutional dimension to focus on the extent to which personal life is ordered by a normative set of cultural features, features that offer actors a coherent set of conventions or rules, whether formal or informal, and that structure the form, function, and meaning of human action. In this narrower framing, the question of the deinstitutionalization of family focuses on whether individual actors are faced with a social context that lacks normative ordering, a context filled with ambivalence that requires individuals to actively construct meaning and practice without established cultural rules. The central question is no longer a social institutional question of family adaptation or decline in family's ability to operate as a social institution. Rather, the question has narrowed to whether family life has shifted from being ordered from without to being ordered from within, and therefore to whether it can be framed in institutional terms at all.

Cherlin's (1978) early work on remarriage illustrates how in this approach the theoretical focus centers on the internal constitution of the marital relation. Cherlin demonstrated how a lack of consensus among members of stepfamilies about the roles and normative expectations in remarriages contrasted to the normative ordering common to first marriage. Although Cherlin in the late 1970s would interpret this lack as a sign that remarriage was as yet an "incomplete institution," the intervening 25 years did not help solidify a new set of cultural norms adapted to and enabling remarriage as an institutional form. In fact, he later argued that "just the opposite has happened. Remarriage has not become more like first marriage; rather, first marriage has become more like remarriage" (Cherlin, 2004, p. 848). Marriage itself has lost its institutional form such that even the most basic issues involved in what it means to be "married" and what the associated practices are that establish one as married "would have to be resolved family by family" (Cherlin, 2004, p. 851). In a deinstitutionalization approach, what is distinctive about recent family change is that contemporary marital and familial worlds must be "actively construct[ed]... with almost no institutional support" (Cherlin, 2004, p. 851), and that this produces "family patterns unlike anything that previous generations

of Americans have ever seen" (Cherlin 2009, p. 7; see also Cherlin, 2010).

Deinstitutionalization scholars often depict the history of marital change as moving from a social institutional ordering to a companionate marriage in which normative controls are still operative but grounded internally to the marital partnership, and then finally developing into an individualized marriage with a lack of normativity and openness to individual life formation (Amato, 2012; Cherlin, 2005, 2014; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007). Central to this depiction of family change is the expansion of a cultural model of expressive individualism that developed and became widespread during the 20th century (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 2007; Coontz, 2005). This cultural model "is about personal growth, getting in touch with your feelings, and expressing your needs. It emphasizes the continuing development of your sense of self throughout your life" (Cherlin, 2004, p. 851). This individualization of family relations gives relationships a market quality (Friedland, 2011; Gregory, 2012) that both favors and presupposes individual self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2010).

Theorizing family relationships as internally constituted involves conceptualizing the individual subject as internally free and active, or at least as acting in the absence of the controlling force of the institutional elements. Family life is framed in terms of individual choice (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001) rather than elements taken as given or ascribed (Smyth, 2016). In Anthony Giddens's (1991) well-known depiction, these new, fully deinstitutionalized relations are "pure relationships," relationships "in which external criteria have become dissolved: the relationship exists solely for whatever rewards that relationship can deliver" (p. 6). We see here a framing of the individual versus the institutional, such that family change is theorized in almost zero-sum terms: the more institutionalized the family is, the less individualized it can be; and the more individualized it is, the less institutional it can be (Amato, 2004). Most family scholars would likely interpret deinstitutionalization in terms of some kind of emancipatory lens (i.e., individuals are now free to choose their own lifestyles instead of having social institutional roles and statuses imposed on them). Yet the key theoretical point we are making is that in the shift from a social institutional to a noninstitutional framework,

the relation between the institutional and the individual has changed. Instead of individuals being embedded in an institutional context that grounds the individual in a vertical relationality, relationships are now theorized as lifestyle choices; as Regan (1993) puts it, "A lifestyle is not constitutive of identity. Rather, it is an object of choice—something one has, rather than something one is" (p. 62).

Deinstitutionalization does not necessarily result in the disappearance of marriage, but it does change its character so that it is no longer institutional. Within this framework, scholars argue that even those who may adhere to a more "traditional" cultural model of family must now make the conscious decision to "have tradition" instead of simply "being traditional" (Collier, 1997). Therefore, even if one were to conclude with Cherlin (2009) that the proper characterization of marital life today is something akin to a "marriage-go-round"—a play on words to describe the increasingly common cycling back and forth by individuals between "normative" ideals of marriage and the cultural ideals of an expressive individualism—the marriage-go-round frames the individual's relation to marriage as "just one life-style among others" (Giddens, 1992, p. 154). Situating itself as part of a wider individualization process that comes with modernity (Bauman, 2002) and a detraditionalization of virtually everything in society (Heelas, Lash, & Morris, 1996), the deinstitutionalization approach contends that a "qualitative change in the character and meaning of commitment and relationships" has occurred (Edwards, McCarthy, & Gillies, 2012, p. 733).

Deinstitutionalization centers itself on the individual and in this way frames family and family change in terms of a singular dimensionality, a point, as we will see, that our postinstitutional approach wants to correct. In addition, the individualization of personal relationships is theorized in terms of horizontal relationality. One freely chosen relationship is just like any other freely chosen relationship and markers of distinction are difficult to theorize or maintain in lived personal life.¹ This horizontal leveling

of all personal relationships makes questions of substantive difference either disappear or become difficult to address. We conclude by noting that the deinstitutionalization approach both tells a particular story of family change and exemplifies the story it tells: what *institutional* means in this approach has itself been reframed to fit into a story that centers on the self rather than a social system, social world, or something else that is both beyond the self and capable of constituting the self. Deinstitutionalization succeeds in shifting away from the macroinstitutional focus of the social institution approach to an approach centered on the individualized self and its renewed capacity to form relationships designed by and for itself. In this way, the theoretical stance of deinstitutionalization is reflective of the very change it claims to represent.

DIVERSIFICATION: THEORIZING FAMILY IN POSTINSTITUTIONAL TERMS

Our third approach, what we conceptualize as a postinstitutional approach, interprets recent changes in family life as a diversification of family forms rather than a deinstitutionalization or individualization of it (Bernardes, 1986; Widmer, 2016; Widmer & Jallinoja, 2008). In creating this group, we find a much less clear or delineated conceptualization of family and an approach that is filled with some ambiguity and

both marriage and family a choice, marital and familial relationships become an achievement, which enables them to have greater symbolic importance for individuals who live out their lives in an age lacking strong institutions (Billari & Liefbroer, 2016; Gillis, 2004; Nisbet, [1953] 2000; Seltzer, 2004). Marriage "evolved from a marker of conformity to a marker of prestige. [Where it] used to be the foundation of adult personal life; now it is sometimes the capstone" (Cherlin, 2004, p. 855). In the past, people would marry for the social benefits that marriage could provide; today, they marry "for the *personal* achievement it represents" (p. 857, italics added). Marriage remains but becomes a marker of status and recognition for individuals, and as such is notably incapable of being evaluated in terms of its institutional significance. Thus, in many ways the valuation and practice of marriage may appear to remain somewhat constant, but its internal core and meaning has shifted in historically unprecedented ways (Coontz, 2005; Finkel, Hui, Carswell, & Larson, 2014; Lewin, 2004; Treas, Lui, & Gubernskaya, 2014). Deinstitutionalization scholars have also emphasized how similar changes, though perhaps not as fully developed, are transforming parent-child and other familial relations (Blankenhorn, 1995; Dizard & Gadlin, 1992; Edwards et al., 2012; Gillies, 2011; Rosenfeld, 2007).

¹Ironically, although deinstitutionalization theorizes the leveling of all relationships, the theory does not predict that, empirically, in the lived reality of family life, all forms of personal relationships will come to be considered substantively equal. Indeed, Cherlin and others conclude that by making

contradictory elements in its theorizing of family change. In identifying “diversity” as central to this approach, we emphasize how its most essential defining feature is its commitment to negation: the denial of any singular conception of “the family” as normative (McClain & Cere, 2013). Diversification scholarship shares a framework that stands diametrically opposed to the social institutional approach, which theorizes family in terms of a singular dimensionality as well as a vertical relationality. Arguing that “to speak of ‘the family’ often obscures more than it reveals” (Mason, Skolnick, & Sugarman, 1998, p. 1), the proper theoretical move is to give up “the search for a uniform definition of family or household in favor of contingent characterizations in different cultural contexts” (Creed, 2000, p. 330). This negative theorization and oppositional stance to a social institutional approach, with its formal obligations and externally dictated roles, has facilitated much recent research on the diversification of family life (Demo, Allen, & Fine, 2000).

Nevertheless, individualization and deinstitutionalization scholarship also oppose a social institutional approach. Indeed, as Levin (1999) pointed out, “The individual’s social construction of family suggests that not only one, but numerous concepts of family exist” (p. 93). In addition, an emphasis on the diversity of family forms often entails the hope for a family life in which “individuals can relate to each other simply ‘as such,’ without the interference of ‘distorting’ social forms” (Gardner, 2006, p. 238). Why not, then, fold scholarship that emphasizes the diversification of contemporary family life into a deinstitutionalization framework? In many ways, this is one of the theoretical challenges a diversification framework faces. Indeed, the focus on the emancipatory possibilities of new family forms, common to virtually all diversification scholarship, could easily slip into theorizing family in noninstitutional terms, which ends up privileging individualization.

In general, we have found that the diversification scholars stand opposed to rendering the proliferation of personal relationships and family forms as a process of an individualized deinstitutionalization because it tends to overestimate the autonomy of the individual and the individualistic character of personal life (Finch & Mason, 2013; Jallinoja & Widmer, 2011; Jamieson, 1999; Kagitçibasi, 1996, 2005;

Roseneil, 2009; Roseneil & Ketokivi, 2015; Williams, 2004). Diversification scholars argue that the “evidence serves to refute those who claim that personal relationships are becoming more transitory and superficial, associated with the inevitable advance of a deterministic process of individualization” (Pahl & Spencer, 2010, p. 197). Therefore, in contrast to a deinstitutionalization account, diversification scholarship seeks to account for family change in ways that conceptualize the individual in more social, relational, and even “institutional” terms (Risman, 2015). Hence, we characterize this third approach as “postinstitutional” because even as it is critical of the social institutional approach it also opposes deinstitutionalization and sees the need to find some institutional elements in contemporary family life. Debates within a diversification approach often center on how to conceptualize the individual in relationships without resorting to either social institutional or highly individualistic, deinstitutionalized conceptions.

Can family scholarship recognize the growing plethora of diverse family relationships but without resorting to theorizing the individual as the centerpiece, the singular dimension around which all the relationships turn? Is it possible to theorize diversity and maintain some sort of institutional elements in doing so? Just how to theorize family change while emphasizing diversification is not an easy theoretical task. What will form the center around which the forms of diversity hold? In what follows, we illustrate the postinstitutional approach and its challenges with a review of a couple of attempts to theorize the diversity of family life while also avoiding a highly individualistic, deinstitutionalization framework.

For some diversification scholars, the best course is to form the theoretical center around personal life or personal relationships and in this way allow for the accommodation of a plural dimensionality. The work of Carol Smart and colleagues exemplifies this approach (Smart, 2007; Smart & Neale, 1999). Smart and Shipman (2004) challenged the depiction of modernity and individualization as “marching inexorably forward together,” insisting that “the individualization thesis can slide into becoming less a form of sociological analysis and more a moral rant” (p. 493). According to this view, the narrow framing of deinstitutionalization narratives is expedited by positivistic conceptions of social science that produce research

that facilitates the “monochrome” theorizations found in both social institutional and individualization accounts. What is needed today, Smart argued, are more concrete examinations of the complexities and diversities of ways that individuals live in contemporary relationships. The argument is that qualitative empirical work that examines how relationality, memory, biography, the imaginary, and embeddedness are involved in how family life is formed and lived will show “elements of individualization mixed with aspirations to retain elements of the traditional” (p. 501). In this view, a more accurate and less theoretically monochrome way to conceptualize recent family change is to see how “kinship ties and obligations provide the context for choice” (p. 498), and that such individual choice is formed on a “continuum. . . where individualization and tradition are balanced” (p. 499). Individuals do not just make sense of their lives *ex nihilo* but are embedded in webs of relationships that provide the raw materials from which they then reflexively pick and choose the parts that are most meaningful for them. Likewise, Pahl and Spencer (2010) argued that good empirical research demonstrates that, “far from being isolated, anomic, or narcissistically self-focused, people may still feel connected and committed to others, through their personal communities, in a significant and meaningful way” (p. 207). In this way, a diversification approach claims to offer a better characterization of the current state of family change than individualization accounts. Recent family change that involves a shift away from a social institutional family exposes how personal life today is a reflection of how individuals construct relationships through drawing on institutional elements in diverse and creatively adaptive ways.

A different approach to theorizing diversification focuses on placing processual or practice-oriented conceptions of family and family change as the theoretical center (Morgan, 1996). This approach emphasizes how there are multiple ways to “do” family (Bulanda, 2011; Hudak & Giammattei, 2014; Nelson, 2006; Sarkisian, 2006; Takacs & Kuhar, 2011). In acknowledging that family can be understood in many ways (Bernardes, 1986, 1999), this approach centers on thinking of *family* as an adjective or a verb instead of a noun (Morgan, 1996, 2011) or as a performance instead of a fixed identity (Butler, 1988). Such

a practice-centered approach avoids individualization by showing that “one’s actions have to be both conveyed to and understood by relevant others if those actions are to be effective as constituting ‘family’ practices” (Finch, 2007, p. 67). Only through these acts of display can participants “thereby confirm that these relationships are ‘family’ relationships” (Finch, 2007, p. 73). Consequently, even though individuals will “do” family in the way they understand it, they will also focus on making sure they display their doing family in a way that can secure others understanding of it as family (Dermott & Seymour, 2011; James & Curtis, 2010). Consonant with a resistance to social institutional framings, practice-centered approaches emphasize that family life is oriented to its relational context “rather than [to] conformity with a typical organizational form” (Smyth, 2016, pp. 679–680), but in contrast to deinstitutionalization accounts, such practices entail creative and reflective institutional constructions.

Although other diversification scholars focus more concretely on theorizing changes in family meanings (Gillis, 2002; Gross, 2005; Lewin, 2004; Wall & Gouveia, 2014) or family configurations (Schadler, 2016; Widmer, 2016; Widmer & Jallinoja, 2008), the basic argument across these approaches is that both the singular normative social institutional family and the individualized “pure relationship” exist only in the abstract as theoretical idealizations (Jamieson, 1999). What is needed is a way to recognize the contemporary diversity of family life while also maintaining an ability to theorize the institutional aspects of family life. As Sprey (2009) argued, the “choices to divorce, to remarry, to be a stepparent, to cohabit contractually, or to marry someone of the same sex need to be understood and studied as components, rather than problems or weaknesses, of the institutionalization of the contemporary family and marriage” (p. 17). Thus, the multiplicity that characterizes contemporary family life is interpreted less as a sign of deinstitutionalized individualism than as the transformation of “family” to incorporate its (former) “alternatives” into some kind of common frame. As Lauer and Yodanis (2010, p. 68) emphasize, recognizing diversity does not require theorizing the loss of institutionalized family forms: “We consider alternatives to marriage to be parallel with marriage, and more or less institutionalized themselves, but the institution of marriage

can remain intact alongside these alternatives” (p. 68).

Nevertheless, just how to theorize this institutional aspect is difficult, especially in the wake of a social institutional approach that framed institutional elements in terms of their externality to the individual actor. How are we to understand the claim that, as Charles, Davies, and Harris (2008) emphasized, individuals in contemporary relationships are to be understood as highly reflexive actors who understand “the inevitability and necessity of social connectedness but direct their own behaviour according to internalised standards rather than following externally imposed rules” (p. 13)? How do we recognize the “inevitability and necessity” of “social connectedness” even as we theorize participants as directed by “internalized standards” and not “externally imposed rules”? How does one provide a coherent account of such a postinstitutional family conceptualization?

In our review of a vast, and rather disorganized, literature, we interpret the diversification approach as attempting to theorize individuals as reflexively constructing their own life meaning in the context of personally significant, even institutionalized, relations while also allowing for the resulting configurations of family and their associated meanings to vary substantially. As such, a diversity of family forms must be acknowledged and affirmed, with none being considered as making any significant difference either theoretically or substantively. In this way, the diversification approach insists on a pluralistic dimensionality of family but in terms that also require horizontal relationality, a relationality that results in a theoretical and substantive leveling of all relationships that manage to fall within the rubric of “family” diversity (Gilding, 2010). Therefore, central to the diversification framework is its commitment to the view that the diversity of family forms must be positioned as parallel to one another in a strictly horizontal conceptualization of different family types (Askham, 1984; Lewin, 2004; Pahl & Spencer, 2010).

The combination of a plural dimensionality and horizontal relationality is often celebrated as a basis for realizing a hope for individual emancipation and the affirmation of all families (Mason et al., 1998). Yet just how to theorize family in postinstitutional terms remains an ongoing task. For example, diversification scholarship often expands the theorization of family

such that it can be “deployed to denote something broader than the traditional relationships based on lineage, alliance and marriage,” showing that it can refer to “kin-like networks of relationships, based on friendship, and commitments ‘beyond blood’” (Weeks et al., 2001). As such, the theorization of diversity can certainly stand opposed to its rejected theoretical alternatives, such as the social institutional and deinstitutionalization approaches, but the question remains whether, by itself, it provides affirmative grounds for theorizing (Abbott, 2006). For some, the worry is that, despite the value of recognizing diversity and renewing “ideas about personal life and kinship informed by notions of relationality rather than individualism. . . [such conceptualizations] cannot deal with any meaning of family as a collective fusion beyond an aggregation of individual persons-in-relationships” (Edwards et al., 2012, p. 735). It may be that theorizing family remains “hard to grasp through theoretical and methodological frameworks that emphasize the individual, however relationally conceived” (Edwards et al., 2012, p. 735).

Although some scholars are concerned about the loss of a more collective conception of family in a diversification framework, in our review, we frame the question more theoretically: Just how does one theorize a plural dimensionality within a horizontal relationality? Is this even theoretically viable? Although we recognize that many diversification scholars appear to imply, at the very least, the coherence of such an approach, we end this section by noting that questions remain. As Sprey (2009) argued: “It raises questions such as how diverse a process, such as the family or marriage, can be before it becomes chaotic or loses its cognitive identity. How many and what kinds of behavioral forms can find shelter under the cognitive umbrella of either the family or marriage? And are some familial or marital forms more or less compatible than others?” (p. 11). Just what are the varieties of families a diversity of? What is the common substance or element that brings them together into a common frame such that they can then be understood as “diverse”? Or, as Donati (2012) recently put it, “What is it about a family that makes it a family compared with another social form that is not a family?” (p. 10).

In our view, such questions are difficult to address within a diversification framework primarily because it remains trapped in an institutional framework inherited from the social

institutional approach. This inheritance leads diversification scholars to conceive of the institutional as external to the individual, equivalent to normative regulation that is counterposed to the individual, and as dependent on conceptions of vertical relationality that tie the institutional into some sort of broader system functionality that unjustly privileges some family forms over others. All these conceptualizations of the institutional can be rethought within the Weberian framework to which we now turn.

INSTITUTIONAL LOGICS: DIFFERENTIATION OF THE FAMILIAL

In this section, we suggest that by reframing how we theorize the institutional character of family we can avoid problematic positions that merely assume family as a necessary part of society (social institutional), deny it (noninstitutional), or relativize it (postinstitutional). Much like the diversification approach, we see the need for a framework that recognizes institutional elements of family life without returning to the problematics of the earlier Durkheimian and Parsonian social institutional approach (Duncan, 2011; Smyth, 2016). Yet, in contrast to the diversification approach, we agree with Gilding (2010) that “to reconceptualize the family as reflexive practice [postinstitutional] or dispense with it altogether [noninstitutional] throws out the baby with the bath water” (p. 774). In light of our review of recent theorizing of family change, we suggest an alternative to the social institutional framework and the deinstitutionalization and diversification approaches that have developed out of it.

In the limited space remaining, we present an approach to theorizing family and family change that draws on Max Weber’s conception of modernity as a field of competing and differentiated value spheres (Bellah, 1999; Brubaker, 2013; Symonds, 2015; Weber, 1978, 2004) as well as institutional logics theory (Friedland, 2009, 2013, 2014b; Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, 2008; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). Within a Weberian framing, the institutional dimensions of modernity are understood in terms of distinctive and competing “life orders” or “value spheres,” each of which is formed in terms of its own “inner logic” or “immanent lawfulness,” as Weber (2004) would put it. Each value sphere has its own inner logic, but it is also enabled, identified,

and constituted through the differentiation of its institutional logic from against other competing institutional logics. While Weber delineated as “value spheres” certain aspects of modernity such as the familial, the scientific, the political, the economic, the religious, the aesthetic, and the erotic, more contemporary institutional theorists add as institutional orders such things as communities, professions, law, and corporations (Fairclough & Micelotta, 2013; Thornton et al., 2012).

To our knowledge, no scholars have explicitly used this framework to examine family or family change, with the exception of Friedland’s comparative analysis of Italian and Southern Californian logics of romantic love (Friedland, 2014a; Friedland & Gardinali, 2013; Friedland, Mohr, Roose, & Gardinali, 2014). Therefore, our argument is theoretical and proposes shifting the framework within which family scholars conceptualize central issues and questions. An institutional logics approach reconceptualizes the nature of the institutional as the confluence of subjects, objects, and practices ordered in terms of a logic associated with an institutional substance. The institutional aspect of family life is no longer characterized in terms of something exterior, something outside the subject, that imposes order on the subject (Smith, 2003, 2010, 2015). Neither are institutional aspects simply conceived in terms of orderly patterns produced through habituation or normative powers (Berger & Kellner, 1964; Lauer & Yodanis, 2010). Likewise, the individual subject is reconceptualized as neither the passive, socialized subject of a social institutional approach nor a recalcitrant, autonomous source of agency and individualized subjectivity as in noninstitutional and postinstitutional accounts. With a family sphere theorized as having its own institutional logic, family scholars will not be limited to theorizing family and family change as something produced by a social system for itself (social institutional), by individuals acting for themselves (noninstitutional), or as merely the product of reflexive agents pursuing personal relationships through negotiation and adaptation (postinstitutional).

For an institutional logics approach, the subject–institution relation is not antagonistic but constitutive, such that we find it difficult to theorize one without the other. The relation of the subject to the institutional is such that the subject is a “true believer” or a “lover” of

the substance of the institutional. Building on Weber's sociology of religion, the substances that center institutional logics are framed as like "gods" that are loved or worshipped by their subjects (Friedland, 2014b). Thus, the human subjects who participate in institutional orders (e.g., scientist, politician, business owner or leader, artist) are formed through a relation to a "divine" institutional substance, a relation that possesses the subject in the sense of experiencing a power that is greater than the self and enables the subject to be the subject he or she is. Charles Taylor's (1985) distinction between weak and strong evaluation develops this point well (Smith, 2003). Applied to family, the argument is that there is an institutional order of family if and when family relations are undertaken in terms of strong evaluation(s) that involve being moved by the "higher good" of familial life. Familial subjects "are moved by what is good in it" rather than by how it might benefit them in some instrumental way. In other words, institutional subjects "experience [their] love for [the higher good] as a *well-founded love*" (Taylor, 1989, p. 74). As such, it is a love that exceeds the subject, a love in which one gives oneself over to another and yet is given oneself by that other (Friedland, 2014a; Marion, 2007). This conceptualization of the subject is quite distinct from a reflexive self taking up institutional fragments and constructing diverse forms of family life, as in the diversification approach.

Family life is therefore composed of familial subjects who are constituted and ordered in a vertical relationality to a familial life that is higher than themselves and who express this constitution in and through objects and practices that are also ordered to an institutional logic. The unification of subjects, objects, and practices in an institutional logic is formed through referencing an institutional substance that stands at the heart of each institutional order. These institutional substances "join subjects, practices, and objects into bundled sets that have an inner referentiality, a performative order, but in which the foundational object—the substance—is unobservable, while being endlessly invoked by name and enacted in practice" (Friedland, 2014b, p. 245). For each institutional order, a valued substance forms subjects who engage in practices with objects that express the substance. Yet even though there is "something" there to which subjects, objects, and practices

are ordered, the institutional substance, "by comparison to the presence of things, . . . is an absent presence towards and around which material practice incessantly moves, known only through this movement" (Friedland et al., 2014, p. 335). The basic idea is to highlight how there is "something," a something that is neither an idea or value (located merely in the mind or some evaluation imposed by a subject) nor a material object (located merely in the external, visible world) that draws humans to live for it, to receive it as something of such immense importance that it is capable of providing a center around which subject formations, coherent practices, and diverse objects take shape.

This language may be difficult for family scholars, as it takes its inspiration from Weberian sociology of religion and recent work in organizational theory to develop the institutional logics approach, yet it enables the expression of a vitally important component that is missing in current debates about family and family change. There is something about family life that is not reducible to individualization or reflexive accommodation in ways that diversification scholars have framed it. This something has its own inner logic or coherence to it, and this something is not reducible to any particular discourse on family, family form, set of family practices, and so forth. Instead, each of these familial subjects, objects, and practices is "familial" to the extent that it references and expresses the familial substance or inner logic of the familial. Perhaps using the adjective *familial* as a noun is helpful here, for we can designate the familial in adjectival ways that relate to or are suggestive of an institutional substance that will remain an absent presence that maintains its own "immanent lawfulness," as Weber (2004) would put it. Within this approach, it is possible to talk about the familial without reducing such to "the family" or any fixed form. Indeed, the reduction of the familial to any singular dimensionality is what is being expressly denied when the theory insists that the institutional substance always remains other than any of its particular expressions.

Therefore, an institutional logics approach explicitly denies any reductionism to a singular dimensionality and affirms a plurality of ways of expressing, practicing, and objectifying the familial, but it does so in ways that prevent an accompanying horizontal relationality. The familial, as an institutional logic, can exist only

in the mode of a “well-founded love” or a respect and devotion that constitutes the subject as oriented to something beyond the subject. As such, a proper appreciation of contemporary family change will require analysis that restores vertical relationality but without a return to the problems of a social institutional approach. The point here is not, as Gillis (1996) argued, that contemporary families create their own family values and family ideals—imagined families that they seek to live *by* and then suffer when the families they are *with* don’t measure up. Such a theorization of the familial is still beholden to a diversification account that is formed in the shadow of a horizontal relationality also hostile to institutionalized family forms. Instead, what a Weberian framework appreciates and seeks to bring to light is how the familial is not merely something we live by but an institutional substance that we live through and live for, even if we may do so in pluralistic ways.

In what ways can an inner logic of the familial be specified? Just how do we characterize this something about family life that makes certain subjectivities, objects, and practices expressions of an institutional logic of the familial (Knapp, 2000)? In our view, this is the question most in need of rigorous critical theorizing (Knapp, 2009) and for which there has been, perhaps surprisingly, a lack of adequate attention. There have been debates over family forms and their diversity, as well as over family practices and their functionality, but little attention to the character of the familial itself. If there is no clearly worked-out answer to these questions, what might a theorization of an institutional logic of the familial look like? To help answer this question, we turn to the recent work of Roger Friedland on the institutional logic of romantic love to illustrate.

Friedland’s (2014a) examination of the “erotic ecology” of contemporary American (Southern Californian) and Italian (Roman) singles shows that a contemporary institutional logic of romantic love can be differentiated from the dynamics associated with casual sex as well as from an institutional logic of marital love. As Friedland conceives it, romantic “love is an institutional object that one ‘has,’ ‘makes,’ or inhabits as being ‘in’ love. But like property or knowledge, love is neither an ordinary object nor is it just a feeling. It is a social construct, a substance enacted in practices by which one gains access to it, affording emotions and affects

that substantialize it” (Friedland et al., 2014, p. 337). Thus, although it is true that skilled impersonators can fake “love” and use the language, practices, and objects of love as a means to reach their own ends, that is patently not what being “in love” is. A lover is one who is in love, who in saying “I love you” is making love as both subject (the I who loves) and object (love has come to be) while drawing on the institutionalized practices and other objects of love. In Friedland’s terms, “The words of erotic love are performative: they help create the social bond to which they refer” (Friedland & Gardinali, 2013, p. 73).

We might add that practices are likewise performative. For example, in contrast with Roman young adults, for whom sexual relations may be indicative of participation in the institutional substance of romantic love, Friedland finds that for Southern Californians embedded in a social context of casual sex, the practice of holding hands serves as a performative practice to form a romantic love bond in ways that types of sex do not. Unlike casual sex, the institutional substance of romantic love cannot be individualized or reduced to a hedonistic calculus or other instrumentalist logic. In engaging the institution of romantic love, the subject, practices, and objects are all constituted in relation to the standards of love or the inner logic of the institutional substance. Of course, as Friedland points out, “Love is a substance in which one must believe in order to be the kind of subject who can organize one’s life in this way” (Friedland & Gardinali, 2013, p. 77). There is a mutual dependency of substance, subject, practice, and objects.

If there are no easy answers for characterizing the institutional logic of the familial, how can family scholars proceed? Differentiation of the familial from other forms of life is essential. In contrast to postinstitutional approaches that emphasize a diversity of practices taken up by families (Morgan, 1996, 2011), an institutional logics approach directly confronts the concern that “the concept of ‘family practice’ does not give sufficient weight to... the processes whereby some practices prevail over others, and some are privileged over others” (Gilding, 2010, p. 774). Explicitly theorizing the vertical relationality of the phenomenon under study and accounting for differentiation is required with any account grounded in institutional logics. Not all practices and personal relationships are equivalent. Sex without love is differentiated

from sex with love. Lest this point be misunderstood, this is not a normative evaluation or a systemic functional evaluation as in social institutional approaches. Rather, differentiation references the empirical point that the internal constitution of the lived relation is itself evaluative and formed in terms of a vertical relationality.

In what terms, then, can the familial be differentiated from other competing institutional logics and other forms of life? Certainly neither the structural form of family, such as the nuclear family of the social institutional approach, nor the negotiated personal relationships of the diversification approach will provide a basis for differentiation. Further, as the Friedland et al. (2014) analysis showed, practices themselves cannot in themselves serve as the basis for differentiation: Sexual practices in themselves do not organize or differentiate the institutional logic of romantic love. What is needed is some sort of specification of an institutional substance that is more than any of those forms, practices, or subjectivities in relationships. In an early formulation, Friedland and Alford (1991, p. 248) conceptualized the “institutional logic of family [a]s community and the motivation of human activity by unconditional loyalty to its members and their reproductive needs.” Weber (1978) himself would seem to agree, as he positioned the familial sphere as grounded in a nonrational communism or communalism that is differentiated from a rational economic sphere. Other institutional logic scholars have also framed the family as a kind of firm grounded in unconditional loyalty of its members (Thornton et al., 2012). Nevertheless, this work tends to refer only briefly to family before quickly moving on to the delineation of other institutional logics. What is needed are family scholars who embark on the difficult and demanding task of theorizing the institutional character of the familial.

Because more work needs to be done to delineate the character of the institutional substance of the familial, we hesitate to equate a Weberian institutional logics approach to any particular conceptualization of exactly what the institutional substance of the familial would consist. We agree with Friedland et al. (2014) that it is the temporality of the institutional logic of the marital that is a significant feature of its differentiation from romantic love. Romantic love not tied to sexual practices is grounded in the present, whereas marital love maintains an inner logic oriented toward the future. We also agree

that the family sphere is experiencing forms of internal differentiation in which the institutional logic of romantic love has achieved some form of decoupling from marital and other familial institutional logics. Nevertheless, we emphasize that we fully anticipate that the characterization of what makes family “familial” will be contested, and the institutional logics approach welcomes the debates that will ensue over various interpretations of the familial. In fact, we deem such dialogic theorizing to be necessary to good scientific analysis of the familial (Knapp, 2009). Just as the institutional sphere of science itself involves intense conflict over just what science entails and just how to grant scientific claims the status of “knowledge,” so the family sphere itself will involve conflict and debate over its character. And just as a diversity of thought with regard to science does not require a leveling such that all kinds of individualized meanings of “science” are regarded as equivalent, so debates over the character of the familial do not require a commitment to a horizontal relationality. As Weber would show, the significance and vitality of the debates internal to a value sphere (whether it be science, art, or the familial) does not necessarily indicate the lack of institutional order but rather may attest to it. Debates over fundamentals can themselves be a vital element in the performative life of institutional substances.

Finally, we conclude by highlighting that an essential feature of a Weberian institutional logics approach is the conceptualization of each institutional substance as differentiating itself over and against the competing inner logics and institutional substances of other institutional spheres (Friedland, 2013; Symonds, 2015). Understanding *family* change as taking place in the context of a complex, plural relationality of competing institutional goods or substances opens new possibilities for portrayal and interpretation. The familial can now be understood in relation to competing “loves” inspired by the economic or market sphere, by the political sphere, by the aesthetic, the scientific, or even the erotic—each of which has powerful “goods” that pull human beings toward them. Each institutional sphere constitutes itself as a worthy good, even “god,” as we have seen. As such, it inherently seeks to expand its influence: Market-based institutional logics will inspire the worthiness of individualization and consumption, the political will promote formal rationality and ideological purity, the erotic will expand the

eroticization and authenticity of personal life, and so forth. The familial sphere is not immune to these expansions. Therefore, where some scholars see deinstitutionalization, we might theorize the colonization of the familial by economic and consumption-oriented institutional logics and so forth. However, the familial sphere is not without its own institutional powers. How families respond to powerful, competing institutional logics may involve a plurality of family forms and practices that may nevertheless still be quite expressive of the compelling nature of familial institutional goods. Instead of merely diversification, we can theorize new ways of constructing subjects, practices, and objects that all more or less adhere to some form of familial logics and that can still be differentiated from other competing institutional logics. With this approach, family scholars could address some key questions for theorizations of family change. What are the relations between the familial as an institutional logic and the other institutional logics and aspects of modernity (Colaner, 2016; Fairclough & Micelotta, 2013; Regan, 1993)? What are the best ways to characterize the conflicts between the various institutional logics (Thornton, 2004; Thornton et al., 2012)? How do the tensions between competing institutional logics manifest empirically in different historical and social contexts, especially in contemporary personal and family life (Heimer, 1999; Heimer & Staffen, 1998)?

CONCLUSION

Now is a stimulating but challenging time to engage in scholarship on family change. We have reviewed how family scholarship has attempted to move beyond the social institutional approach to interpret recent family change as either deinstitutionalization or diversification. Despite the value of such approaches, reliance on horizontal relationality makes it difficult to theorize family and therefore specifically *family* change. As McCarthy (2012) similarly argued, “A core issue in the meanings of ‘family’ is that it signifies something more than a collection of individuals, or a set of relationships” (p. 72). As Gilding (2010) pointed out, marginalizing a focus on the familial out of a fear that it “obscures contingency and diversity” (p. 757) complicates rather than assists in facing issues in theorizing family change. We suggest that a shift away from the Durkheimian

social institutional tradition to a more Weberian institutional logics framework will facilitate better theorizing of family change. With this shift, family scholars will be able to focus on discerning the institutional character of the familial and in a way that also acknowledges the plural dimensionality associated with the familial throughout the world today. With such an increased capacity, scholars can both enhance their quest for evidentiary warrant for their claims concerning families today and develop with greater theoretical rigor a more adequate interpretation of the extraordinary changes we expect for family life in the 21st century.

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