Theorizing Family Change: A Review and Reconceptualization

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Abstract

We review recent family scholarship that interprets and theorizes recent family change and offer a reconceptualization. Although most scholarship conceptualizes family change in terms of a process of deinstitutionalization and increasing individualization, this view has been challenged by those who would argue for a more post-institutional framing of increasing diversification. We review this debate and show that theorizations of family change invoke their own conceptualizations of the nature of the familial, the individual, and the institutional in order to frame the story they tell. We present a Weberian institutional logics framework as an alternative that is more capable of taking up essential questions dealing with the character of family change and understanding that change in the context of modernity as a field of competing institutional logics or value spheres.
The most recent *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Families* (Treas, Scott, & Richards, 2017, p. xvi) opens its overview of current scholarship on families by proclaiming: “We live in extraordinary times.” Indeed. A prominent family historian assesses that “the relations between men and women have changed more in the past thirty years than they did in the previous three thousand” and then proceeds to argue that “a similar transformation [has occurred] in the role of marriage” (Coontz, 2005b, p. 4). We live in fascinating times for family scholars as the scope and depth of social change has 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 should family scholars approach theorizing recent family and social change? The topic is so expansive and challenging that it would tax the limits of the very best of scholars to attempt to fully address it. In some ways, virtually all contemporary family research and scholarship might have something to offer the formation of an understanding of contemporary family and social change. Undoubtedly, both the range of possible research to include as well as the theoretical approaches one could incorporate are beyond the scope of any single article. Nevertheless, in what follows, we seek to advance theorizations of family change and do so with a clear realization that our review and reconceptualization is only one of many possible ways of approaching this challenging topic.

We engage the question of family change selectively. First, we take a broad framework of an interpretive perspective that understands human life and therefore family change as in some way grounded in a theorization of meaning and its related practices. A focus on changes in family meanings and practices reflects an interpretive approach informed by Max Weber which is often juxtaposed against the more structural, holistic, and naturalistic approaches of Karl Marx.
and Emile Durkheim as well as more contemporary positivistic approaches (Martin, 2011). Secondly, we focus questions of changing meanings on a review of how an “institutional” (or lack thereof) framing of family has been and continues to be a common way of theorizing family change. Although just what “institutional” means is often unclear and in need of further theoretical work, we show how an “institutional” framing is commonplace among both demographers, historians, and sociologists because it facilitates theorizing family change in ways that are productive and enlightening. In our review, we develop a typology that places current research and theory on the institutional nature and status of the family into four different frameworks: Institutional, Non-Institutional, Post-Institutional, and Institutional Logics. We show how each framework relies upon interpretations of individuals and institutions that results in their theorization of family change in its own terms as either family decline, deinstitutionalization, diversification, or differentiation. We conclude by arguing for theorizing family change in terms of Weberian institutional logics that will enable family scholars to better assess and highlight the contours of family change and the issues involved.

**Deinstitutionalization**

Most conceptualizations of recent family change theorize a movement away from the “institutional” family, often describing the family as in a state of “deinstitutionalization” (Cherlin, 2004), “decline” (Popenoe, 1993), “disintegration” (Purcell, 2002), “detrads” (Gross, 2005), “disorganization” (Smyth, 2016), “disappearing” (Bourdieu, 1996), “demarriage” (Théry, 1996), and all together being “devoured” (Arendt, 2013, p. 33 Footnote 24). Deinstitutionalization has long been a common way of conceptualizing 20th century family change as family scholars saw the family moving “from institution to companionship” (Burgess & Locke, 1945). Yet, contemporary scholars theorize recent family
change as in many ways unprecedented, leaving behind the historical solidity of an institutional form to something more unclear and unstable, even if more emotionally grounded and attenuated to individual desire. Within this framing of family change, some scholars interpret these changes as loss or decline (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1993), and cite the detrimental effects of such changes (Duncan, Wilkerson, & England, 2006; Eissa & Hoynes, 2000; Evans & Kelley, 2004; Fagan, 1995; Keyes, 2002; Lerman, 2002; Lillard & Waite, 1995; Parke, 2003; Putnam, 2001; Sanchez & Gager, 2000; Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Wells & Rankin, 1991), while others celebrate progressive and liberation themes (Coontz, 2005b; Gillis, 2002; Hartmann, 1981; Snyder, 2006). What binds both interpretations together, however, is the perception that the family is becoming increasingly “deinstitutionalized.”

Just what scholars might mean by “institutional” can be both easily accessed, but yet, also surprisingly difficult to ascertain with further examination. Although a common term in sociology and other discourses, it has been used to refer to a dizzying array of social phenomena. As Abrutyn (2016, p. 208) remarks, the term “institution” has colloquially referred to “an enduring organization or association (e.g., Harvard; a research center), a long-standing member of said organization (e.g., a professor whose existence is synonymous with the department) or a formal position (e.g., the Presidency); it may also refer to an enduring custom (e.g., the handshake) or law.” Additionally, social scientists have referenced as institutional such diverse social phenomena as any enduring, patterned action, legal relations, or broader forms of social structure like religion, capitalism, the state, and so forth that provide varying levels of normative, regulative, and cognitive-cultural mechanisms for social control.

Keeping in mind the diversity of ways in which institution can be thought, perhaps the most common way of thinking in mid and late 20th century sociology emphasized examining the
family as a social institution which makes contributions to the functioning of a society, system, or individual well-being of its members. For example, Jonathan Turner (1997, p. 6) defines a social institution as “a complex of positions, roles, norms, and values lodged in particular types of social structures and organizing relatively stable patterns of human activity with respect to fundamental problems in producing life-sustaining resources, in reproducing individuals, and in sustaining viable societal structures within a given environment.” This framing was most famously applied in the work of Talcott Parsons who interpreted family change as a process of specialization that enabled the family household to “perform its other functions better than in its earlier form” (Parsons, 1966, p. 22) and that the nuclear family was thus the “natural and desirable culmination of social evolution” (Gillies, 2003, p. 5).

Later scholars, such as David Popenoe (1988, 1993, 2005) will agree that the family as a social institution has “been stripped down to its bare essentials—just two adults and two main functions” (1993, p. 540) of childrearing and the provision to its members of affection and companionship, but, in contrast with Talcott Parsons, will question the viability of contemporary family change. Popenoe interprets concern for recent family change as stemming from several possible sources: one, the family is getting worse at carrying out its functions, possibly because individuals lack the motivation; two, the family is either unsuccessful at meeting society’s needs or society doesn’t ask much of the family anymore; and three, other institutions have taken over functions previously unique to family, such as “organized religion, education, work, and government” (1993, p. 538). All of this together, he argues, “breeds disinvestment in the family, as rational actors direct time, money and effort to individual investments” and is explanatory of the “trend for familism as a cultural value to weaken, for the family to lose functions, and for family units to become smaller, more unstable, with a shorter life span, and less cohesive”
In other words, contemporary family change can be seen as a problematic case of disintegration and a loss of institutional viability.

Although Popenoe’s interpretation of the decline of the family as a foundational institution for a good society has met with hostile criticism (Cowan, 1993; Stacey, 1993), more recent work that also frames family change in terms of deinstitutionalization is much more delimited and enjoys rather widespread acceptance. Most current deinstitutionalization approaches shift the theoretical focus from the place of family in society to an examination centered on the internal formation of the familial, on how “family” is constituted in the contemporary scene. For example, if we examine 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 is virtually always central to any institutional framing. Yet, in a much more delimited way than prior systemic formulations, the focus narrows to whether and how family life might be characterized as a form of life that expresses a broader cultural set of 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. When the culture provides a set of normative directives for human belief, emotion, and action, then it can be described as “institutionalized.” When it lacks those features and individuals are faced with a lack of normative ordering, a context filled with ambivalence and requiring individuals to actively construct meaning and practice without established cultural rules, then that aspect of life lacks institutionalized structures.

Cherlin’s early work (1978) on remarriage illustrates this approach in that the theoretical focus centers on the internal constitution of the social relation and aims at demonstrating how a
lack of consensus among members of stepfamilies about the roles and normative expectations surrounding the actions and practices each person should take was in stark contrast with the normative ordering common to first marriage. Although Cherlin in the late 70s would interpret this lack as a sign that remarriage was as yet an “incomplete institution,” the intervening 25 years would not help solidify a new set of cultural norms adapted to and enabling remarriage as an institutional form. In fact, he would later argue 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 would establish one as married “would have to be resolved family by family.” In Cherlin’s framing, what is distinctive about recent family change is that now 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” (2009, p. 7), patterns reflected in the changing demographics (Cherlin 2010).

A shift has occurred in how to understand family in institutional terms. Instead of a framing centered on a social institution that is part of a complex of institutions functioning in a broader society, the framing of contemporary family scholarship is centered on the individual and how that individual constructs their life. Although an older form of family as social institution is still available today, and some fractured and disorganized remnants of this approach remain in functionally-oriented research on “family” variables and social outcomes, most theorizations of family change today have shifted the center from family in society to family as context for the self (Cancian, 1987). This approach has shifted the meaning of “institutional” to more narrowly describe a social and cultural context that structures and regulates individual life
and does so in ways that make individual participation in this process passive. Thus, a “deinstitutionalization” thesis is less about the changing character of family and its role in society and more about the weakening of cultural and social structures that historically constructed individual life in highly “institutionalized” ways. One common way of formulating this deinstitutionalization is to interpret recent social and family change as exemplifying a process of individualization (Bauman, 2000, 2002; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, 2004; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 2007; Giddens, 1992).

Scholarship that frames family change either explicitly or implicitly in terms of an individualized deinstitutionalization thesis therefore both tells a particular story of family change and also exemplifies that story (Amato, 2004, 2012). Cherlin depicts marital change as moving from an institution where family patterns were produced through normative and other controls to companionate marriage where normative controls were still operative but grounded internally to the marital partnership and finally, to an individualized marriage where there is a lack of normativity and openness to individual life formation (Cherlin, 2005, 2014; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007). In the new individualized marriage of the late 20th century, the primary obligation one has is to oneself and all family relationships are subsidiary to life centered on the individualized self. It follows from this that relationships are understood as grounded in individual choice, as lifestyles for which there must not be any normative ordering, and entry and exit into relationships are dependent upon individual judgments and feelings (Cherlin, 2009, p. 31; see also Giddens, 1992, p. 154; Kagıtçıbaşı, 2005, p. 411). In other words, in the story Cherlin and others tell, what is new and unprecedented in contemporary family change is that there are no normative or “institutional” orderings for marriage or family life. We can now discern a distinctively Non-Institutional form of family life that perhaps best distinguishes itself in
opposition to any “institutional” features that might seek to structure and form marriage and family life today. As we proceed to further discuss this framing of family change, we pause to note that this framing itself exemplifies the story it tells: what “institutional” means has been reframed to a story that itself centers around the self.

In this deinstitutionalization account, the movement from an “institutional” family to a companionate or love-based family is an important and necessary step at arriving at a more fully deinstitutionalized family form. As Cherlin notes, “The increasing focus on bonds of sentiment within nuclear families constituted an important but limited step in the individualization of family life” (Cherlin, 2004, p. 851). Or as Coontz (2004, p. 978) puts it, the emotionalization of marriage, its coming to be grounded so fully in “love,” “the very values that invested marriage with such emotional weight in people's lives, had an inherent tendency to undermine the stability of marriage as an institution even as they increased the satisfactions of marriage as a relationship.”

Deinstitutionalization scholars recognize that older cultural models of marriage are still available to individuals. People still talk about and value marriage as the best way to live life and as ideally a permanent, sexually exclusive, commitment. Individualization does not necessarily result in the disappearance of marriage, but it does change its character: it is no longer institutional. Whether to opt for a cultural model of marriage with normative components has become itself another individual choice (Cherlin, 2009). Yodanis and Lauer (2014, p. 184) compare the institutional and individualized (or non-institutional family), saying that in the former, “marital behavior was defined external to the relationship rather than negotiated internally between spouses.” Giddens (1992, p. 75) also distinguishes between these two orientations, saying that in a society “[w]here large areas of a person’s life are no longer set by
pre-existing patterns and habits, the individual is continually obliged to negotiate life-style options. Moreover – and this is crucial – such choices are not just ‘external’ or marginal aspects of the individual’s attitudes, but define who the individual ‘is’. In other words, life-style choices are constitutive of the reflexive narrative of self.”

Cherlin argues that the individualization of marriage is reflective of the culture model of expressive individualism that developed and became widespread during the twentieth century. 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” (2004, p. 851). Such a view leaves individuals in the position of having to search “sometimes again and again, for the kind of spirituality and family ties that fit their needs” (Cherlin, 2009, p. 114). The point here is that even as deinstitutionalized and individualized family forms arise, some individuals still find attractive a commitment to more traditional cultural models. Deinstitutionalization does not presuppose an absence of older institutional forms but only that individuals associate themselves differently with those forms, if and when they do. For Cherlin (2009), then the proper characterization of marital life today is something akin to a “marriage-go-round” which is a play on words to describe the increasingly common cycling back and forth (like a merry-go-round) by individuals between institutional ideals of marriage and the cultural ideals of expressive individualism.

Ironically, Cherlin argues, by making 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, p. 41; Seltzer, 2004). Reflecting this movement from institution to an individualized, deinstitutionalized state, Cherlin writes how
marriage, “evolved from a marker of conformity to a marker of prestige.” Where “[i]t used to be the foundation of adult personal life; now it is sometimes the capstone” (2004, p. 855). When in the past, people would marry for the social benefits that marriage could provide, now, they marry “for the personal achievement it represents” (p. 857 italics added). Marriage remains but has now become a marker of status and recognition for individuals; its valuation may appear to remain somewhat constant but its internal core and meaning has shifted in historically unprecedented ways (Coontz, 2005a; Finkel, Hui, Carswell, & Larson, 2014; Lewin, 2004; Treas, Lui, & Gubernskaya, 2014).

With deinstitutionalization every form of conduct in these families, it could be argued, is a choice, including the formation of the families themselves (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001). With increasing individualization, nothing is to be taken as given or ascribed (Smyth, 2016, p. 679). Normative dimensions are associated with a conceptualization of “institutional” as something external to and regulative on individual life. Thus, previous forms of “institutional” marital life are understood as having “required women and men to sacrifice individual goals and interests for socially defined complementary, integrated, gendered marital roles” in order to make a “marital unit.” In contrast, in contemporary marriages, “spouses are now believed to act as independent individuals” (Yodanis & Lauer, 2014, p. 185). Giddens describes these as “pure relationships,” relationships “in which external criteria have become dissolved: the relationship exists solely for whatever rewards that relationship can deliver” (1991, p. 6). An individual versus institutional dynamic frames the constitution of the subject and its relations.

With choice central to relational formation, individualized reflexivity in the construction of personal life becomes essential to theorizing change. 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). Although most will interpret such changes in terms of some kind of emancipatory lens (i.e., individuals are now free to choose their own lifestyles instead of having their style of life chosen for them), the key theoretical point is that now relationships are seen as lifestyle choices and, as Regan (1993, p. 62) puts it, “a lifestyle is not constitutive of identity. Rather, it is an object of choice-something one has, rather than something one is.”

This individualization of family relations gives relationships a market quality (Friedland, 2011, pp. 84-85; Gregory, 2012; Veroff, Douvan, & Kulka, 1981, pp. 140-141) that both favors and presupposes individual self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2010; Levinson & Huffman, 1955) and leads to a way of conceptualizing personal relationships that considers marriage to be “just one life-style among others” (Giddens, 1992, p. 154). The presumed leveling of social relations is a key feature of deinstitutionalization. In considering relationships as fundamentally grounded in individual choice, a Non-Institutional framework argues that they therefore cannot be understood in other than egalitarian terms. One freely chosen relationship is just like another other freely chosen relationship and markers of distinction become more difficult to theorize or maintain in lived life.

Although most deinstitutionalization scholars focus on changes in the constitutions of adult relationships, others emphasize how similar, although perhaps not as fully developed, changes are transforming parent-child and other familial relations (Blankenhorn, 1995; Furedi, 2001; Gillies, 2011; Lee, Bristow, Faircloth, & Macvarish, 2014; Rosenfeld, 2007). Edwards, McCarthy, and Gillies (2012, p. 733) examine how, “Ideas about autonomy and equality have ousted… the traditional obligations and gendered and generational hierarchies associated with family.” This has affected parenting such that strongly gendered mother/father roles have been
replaced with gender-neutral parenting and care-giving. Smyth (2016, p. 679) elaborates, “[T]he decline in the legitimacy of authoritarian parenting appears to have undermined hierarchies of age, as relationships between parents and their children are newly democratized, and negotiation, persuasion and reasoned argument replace command and obedience.” Though, as some have noted, while children may have gained more power to negotiate, they are also losing a normative or institutional claim to their parent’s care, as they once had. Dizard and Gadlin (1992, pp. 89-90) explain how “more and more parents are in effect saying that their needs are as legitimate and pressing as their children’s.”

In framing family change as a movement from institutional to noninstitutional forms, deinstitutionalization is presented in terms of a dichotomy between the social that structures, regulates, and controls and the individual that is free and active. The change is almost conceptualized in 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. Conceptualized as part of a wider individualization process that comes with modernity (Bauman, 2002) and a detraditionalization of virtually everything in society (Gross, 2005; Heelas, Lash, & Morris, 1996), a deinstitutionalization approach emphasizes that a “qualitative change in the character and meaning of commitment and relationships” has occurred (Edwards et al., 2012, p. 733). Theorization of this qualitative change is reflective of the very change it claims to represent. Theorization shifts from being centered on macro institutional analysis to an approach centered on the individualized self and its renewed capacity to form relationships designed by and for itself.
Diversification

Although the theorization of family change in terms of deinstitutionalization and a movement towards individualization is certainly one of the predominant approaches to understanding social change, another competing framing is also common among family scholars today. In this approach, the empirical changes in family life we see today reflect a *diversification* of the institution of the family rather than a deinstitutionalization or individualization of it (Bernardes, 1986, 1999; Morgan, 2011; Skolnick, 1993, p. 3). Diversification scholars attempt to rethink the deinstitutionalization process in such a way as to keep the critique of the old institutional family even as they recognize that the plurality of family life needs to be theorized in other than individualistic terms.

In creating this group, we find a much less clear and delineated theory of family change and an approach that is filled with some ambiguity and contradictory elements. Nevertheless, in our formation of this approach we see two main points of commonalities and differences with the deinstitutionalization thesis. First, they share with a deinstitutionalization theory that family life has changed radically, and in many aspects, unprecedented ways and that today there is clearly no singular institutional family. In fact, this approach goes further and becomes even more adamant on removing from empirical and theoretical consideration any singular conception of “family” as normative. Instead of allowing for competing cultural models as with deinstitutionalization accounts, this approach insists, perhaps contradictorily, that the only singular normative order operative is the recognition of diversification: there is not and should not be any singular normative order with respect to conceptions of family. Secondly, that although family life is no longer singular but constituted in terms of a plurality, this approach is opposed to interpreting this plurality as a manifestation of a pure individualization. Just as there
is no singular family form, so there is also no singular process of individualization available to depict recent changes.

The diversification framework emphasizes that “the family no longer holds a monopoly on the experience of intimacy; there is now more competition from other personal relationships” (Regan, 1993, p. 63). Yet, the competing personal relations are not forms of individualization and in fact maintain some institutional features. Diversity without deinstitutionalization can be heard in the conclusions drawn by Treas et al. (2014, p. 1517) when they write:

The tentative conclusion is that there is more normative change regarding alternatives to marriage than regarding marriage itself. Some core values on marriage have resisted change… this development seems more in line with an adaptive institution than a declining one. Rather than weakening, norms for marriage may simply be consolidating around a new normal.

And as Sprey (2009, p. 17) similarly theorizes recent family change, “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.” Or as Lauer and Yodanis (2010, p. 68) put it :“[W]e 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.”

Diversity is less a deinstitutionalized individualism than it is a proliferation of transformed, yet, nevertheless, in some way still institutional, alternatives. Yet, even while recognizing some remnant of institutional features, this approach also clearly signals opposition to any singular institutional conception. Lauer and Yodanis, like all theorists working in this
approach, frame all family forms as parallel to one another thereby positioning the diversification of family life in a strictly horizontal conceptualization of different family types (Askham, 1984, p. 11; Cherlin, 1978; Giddens, 2009, p. 30; Lauer & Yodanis, 2010, p. 68; Lewin, 2004, pp. 635-636; Pahl & Spencer, 2010, p. 207). In this way, recognizing diversity means both adopting an institutional framing and at the same time adopting a critical stance toward this institutional dimension. We therefore characterize this approach as “post-institutional” in the sense that it accepts some of the features of an institutional framing but is nevertheless “post” or critical of them even as it accepts them.

Just how to reject a singular, normative theorization of the institutional as well as a deinstitutionalized individualization is not an easy theoretical task. What can be seen most clearly, however, is that a post-institutional approach shares with deinstitutionalization a shift to theorizing family change in terms of the internal constitution of familial relations. What forms the theoretical center remains the individual subject; only now, this approach seeks to conceptualize individuals as autonormative (self-normative) rather than anomative (deinstitutionalized individualization) (Lash, 2003). In this way, the dangers of a truly anomic individualism are acknowledged but are also challenged as being overdrawn and not reflective of family change. For example, Charles, Davies, and Harris (2008, p. 13) interpret individuals in contemporary relationships as highly reflective actors who “understand the importance of contributing to society and the inevitability and necessity of social connectedness but direct their own behaviour according to internalised standards rather than following externally imposed rules.” According to this approach, “the actual unity of family life has its existence not in any legal conception, nor any formal contract, but in the interaction of its members” (Burgess, 1926, p. 5). Without formal obligations and externally dictated roles, “individuals can relate to each
other simply ‘as such,’ without the interference of ‘distorting’ social forms” (Gardner, 1987). This broadens and diversifies the possibilities such that “family” can be “deployed to denote something broader than the traditional relationships based on lineage, alliance and marriage,” but can refer instead to “kin-like networks of relationships, based on friendship, and commitments ‘beyond blood’” (Weeks et al., 2001). Mason, Skolnick, and Sugarman (1998, p. 1) for example, write how families today come in many different varieties and that, “Facts about family life are far more complex than they seem… to speak of ‘the family’ often obscures more than it reveals.” Therefore, to inquire about “the family” in the singular is not only taboo amongst family scholars, but theoretically impossible with autonomic individuals since, as Levin (1999, p. 93) describes, “the individual’s social construction of family suggests that not only one, but numerous concepts of family exist.” With a plurality of family life emphasized, most researchers 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).

As with the deinstitutionalization account, this approach both provides a story of family change and also represents itself in that story as well. A post-institutional approach renders family change as a diversification of family forms and does so while also shifting the theoretical focus and meaning of the familial. Take, for example, the shift in theorizing the relation between same-sex relations and family. When conceptualizing family as a singular institutional form, the relation would be theorized in dichotomist terms, “The very form of the family works against homosexuality” (“London Gay Liberation Front,” 1971, p. 2) or “straight is to gay as family is to no family” (Altman, 1979, p. 47) and gay activists “encouraged gays to elaborate friendships as polar opposites to kin” (Hocquenghem, 1978) (all cited in Weeks et al., 2001, p. 15). Overcoming the institutional/individual dichotomy thus requires rethinking both sides of relation
and constructing a new way of theorizing the familial. Thus, as Levin (1999, p. 94) summarizes the view of Gubrium and Holstein (1990), “the difference between THE family and family—in definite and indefinite form”—is that the first is “a more static description of ‘the thing’ family, whereas family is a more a processual concept, changing from person to person, according to time and space.” As Goss (1997, p. 12) articulates the shift:

The appropriation of the term family is not an assimilationist strategy of finding respectability in general society. We are not degaying or delesbianizing ourselves by describing ourselves as family. In fact, we are Queering the notion of family and creating families reflective of our life choices. Our expanded pluralist uses of family are politically destructive of the ethic of traditional family values.

As Goss notes, promoting a recognition of the diversity of families “reflective of life choices” also involves taking up a new theorization of family change that subjects both institutional and individualistic conceptions to a form of deconstruction. Such a framing has found widespread support among family scholars (Barrett & McIntosh, 2015; Bourdieu, 1996; Collier, Rosaldo, & Yanagisako, 1982; Smith, 1993; Stacey, 1996).

Yet, just how is this diversification thesis to be theorized and sustained as distinct from a more straightforward deinstitutionalization and individualization thesis? A sampling of the ways in which this might be attempted will help to show the difficulty of the challenge. In remainder of this section we sketch a few different formulations of a post-institutional framing of diversification.

a. Institutional Individualization. Perhaps the easiest to specify and the approach most closely associated with the individualization approach is the argument that individualization itself is just another form of institutionalization. For example, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2004,
p. 505) refer to the “normalization of diversity” or the “institutionalization of individualization” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) and are at pains to theorize it as “a process of institutionalization rather than deinstitutionalization” (Lauer & Yodanis, 2010, p. 63). While in the non-institutional view the individual is free to choose, in a more post-institutional conception the individual has “no choice but to choose” (Giddens, 1991, p. 81). Choice is a condition rather than an achievement, which is reflective of autonomic ‘institutional individualism’ (Beck, 2000, p. 166), or “institutionalized chaos” (Gilding, 2010, p. 762 quoting Beck's 1995 The Normal Chaos of Love), not anomic, non-institutional, individualization. While the non-institutional family glories in the self-determined individual, the individual here is determined to determine themselves.

b. Personal Relationality. Scholars in this approach have explicitly positioned their work against the individualization thesis arguing that such a view of deinstitutionalization overestimates the autonomy of the individual and the individualistic character of personal life. Relationships are what constitute the individual—and what always have. Individuals don’t just make sense of their lives ex-nihilo, but are embedded, or bound, in webs of relationships that provide the raw materials from which individuals then reflexively pick and choose the parts that are most meaningful for them. In general, these scholars challenge an individualistic reading of recent family change, arguing 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) (see also Finch & Mason, 2013, p. 22; Jallinoja & Widmer, 2011; Jamieson, 1999; Kagıtçibasi, 1996, 2005; McNay, 1999; Plummer, 2003; Roseneil, 2009; Roseneil & Ketokivi, 2015; Törnvist, 2016; Williams, 2004).
The work of Carol Smart and colleagues exemplifies this approach (Smart, 2007; Smart & Neale, 1999). Smart and Shipman (2004) argue that a more accurate and less culturally monochrome way to conceptualize recent family change is to see the process of forming family relations as a “continuum… where individualization and tradition are balanced” (p. 499) and that certainly for many individuals today “kinship ties and obligations provide the context for choice” (p. 498). Though many depict modernity and individualization as “marching inexorably forward together,” they counter that “the individualization thesis can slide into becoming less a form of sociological analysis and more a moral rant” (p. 493). In fact, for them, narrow positivistic conceptions of what good social science theory and research involve are in part to blame for the monochrome theorizations one can find in both institutional and individualized accounts. In addition, both accounts offer problematic conceptions of family change that emphasize grand theorizing at the macro level at the expense of good micro-informed conceptions. They argue that good empirical research into how family life is actually lived reveals that even “within one person, there are commitments to both traditions and change” (p. 507). Thus, a key feature of this approach is reliance upon largely qualitative empirical work that examines how relationality, memory, biography, the imaginary, and embeddedness are involved in how family life is formed and lived and finds “elements of individualization mixed with aspirations to retain elements of the traditional” (p. 501).

Likewise, Pahl and Spencer (2010, p. 207) argue 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.” Similar to Smart (2007) in her concept of “personal life,” Pahl and Spencer use the term “personal community” to refer to an alternative way of conceiving personal
relationships that don’t rely upon general categorical distinctions between family and friends. They argue that in the future family and friends will become more blurred making the idea of “personal communities” the most accurate descriptor of contemporary society. Moreover, they distinguish between personal communities and social networks, saying “[t]he latter can be used to refer to the set of interrelationships between people in a specified domain, whereas a personal community refers to the relationships of a focal person.” As they state later, “…the personal community contains only those relationships that are considered significant rather than the full range of contacts a person may have” (p. 205). In this conceptualization, the individual is at the center in that they are the “focal person” who determines which relationships are significant or not. This is evidenced even further in a research technique called affective mapping where “researchers invited participants to generate a list of people considered important at the time, to distinguish different degrees of importance by placing people on a map made up of a series of concentric circles” (p. 206). In this exercise, as any autonormative theory would propose, the self is at the center of each person’s relational and moral universe.

Given the centrality of the individual, questions emerge. Is this approach merely a softer form of individualization that acknowledges that sometimes individuals are constrained by relationships? Or is this an argument for a kind of relationality that shows personal life has an embeddedness and relatedness that characterizes it and not merely constrains it? For example, McCarthy (2012, p. 79) develops the familiar dichotomy of the institutional-self conceived as “a bounded and unique entity that is the outcome of ‘successful’ socialization,” with the individualized self, “a ‘self’ that is experienced as agentic and self-directing – the quintessential ‘individual’ of Western culture.” In contrast to both types, however, the “‘relational individual’,” as she calls it, is “an entity that is produced through, and continually embedded in,
relationships.” In attempting to set this relationality off from an individualistic type, she indicates that “well-being is bound up with the web of relationships to which the person belongs but care of (the unique) ‘self’ is also important.” Of course, even if the point of relationality is well taken, there are ambiguities in just what is being theorized when apparently, in the end, the relationality referred to is still “experienced as a (largely self-directing) individual” (McCarthy, 2012, p. 79).

Thus, even as scholars in this approach emphasize “embeddedness,” they also emphasize the importance of how this relationality, as Gilding (2010, p. 763) describes, “is an iterative process relentlessly reconfigured through reflexivity.” If relationships merely “provide the context for choice” (Smart & Shipman, 2004, p. 498) as something the individual can choose (or not choose) to retain, depending on their aspirations to do so, one’s propensity to follow more established relational forms seems to be based on the level of relational connectedness they feel within themselves. We note here that such a conception of relationality is at odds with other theoretical developments that emphasize the “strong relationality” or “ethical relationality” inherent to human relationships, especially family relationships (Knapp, 2015; Slife, 2004; Slife & Wiggins, 2009).

c. Disorganized Practices. Another approach to theorizing diversification is to adopt a processual conception of family and family change (Morgan, 1996, p. 11). For example, Smyth (2016) challenges the conventional deinstitutionalization thesis by arguing that it conceptualizes institutions as “things.” Such an object-centered conception renders the institution as having a certain “primordial and unchanging character,” whereas a more dynamic and pluralist view “allows an institution to change, and to potentially shift between types, becoming more or less organized in response to the wider context and the practices of agents” (p. 683). Smyth points out that the ontological orientation of the theory drives the interpretation of family change: “If we
regard institutions as static and determining ‘things,’ then the family has indeed been de-institutionalized, as the gendered nuclear form has lost legitimacy” (p. 682). But if institutions are not simply ‘things,’ she argues, then the family has not necessarily disappeared or suffered deinstitutionalization, but rather can be understood as shifting “from an organized to a disorganized institutional type” (p. 678). Though contemporary families lack the uniform structure they are said to have once had, they still generate expectations upon their members as they always have, though such expectations may often be “contradictory and contested” (p. 683). Thus, a more multidimensional and contingent conceptualization is needed to theorize the diverse and often disorganized familial practices and the way actors “act in relation to specific configurations of norms” (p. 683).

Relatedly, other scholars emphasize how there are multiple ways to “do” family (Bulanda, 2011; Hudak & Giammattei, 2014; Nelson, 2006; Sarkisian, 2006; Takacs & Kuhar, 2011) since family can be understood in many ways (Bernardes, 1986, 1999), such as an adjective or a verb instead of a noun (Morgan, 1996, 2011) or a performance instead of a fixed identity (Butler, 1988). Yet, even though individuals will “do” family in the way they understand it, they also focus on the “display” their doing family in a way that attempts to make sure that others understand it (Dermott & Seymour, 2011; Finch, 2007; James & Curtis, 2010)¹ “rather than on conformity with a typical organizational form” (Smyth, 2016, pp. 679-680).

Although other post-institutional scholars focus more concretely on theorizing changes in family meanings (Berger & Berger, 1983; Gillis, 2002; Gross, 2005; Lewin, 2004; Wall &

¹ Morgan (1996, p. 186) argues that family ought to be thought of more as a verb than a noun. The activities or dynamic practices of a family are more constitutive than a static definition of what they are. In this way, he writes, “Family is a facet of social life, not a social institution. It represents a quality rather than a thing.” Finch (2007, p. 67) adds to this idea saying 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.” Only though these acts of display can a family “thereby confirm that these relationships are ‘family’ relationships” (p. 73).
Gouveia, 2014) or family configurations (Schadler, 2016; Widmer, 2016; Widmer & Jallinoja, 2008), the basic argument across these approaches is that both the singular normative institutional family and the individualized “pure relationship” exist only in the abstract as theoretical idealizations. The diversification thesis attempts to theorize families as meaningful rather individualistic in newly institutional ways, ways that facilitate individuals reflexively finding their own life meaning in the context of personally significant relations. As the configurations of family and the associated meanings can vary substantially, a plurality of family forms emerge, with none being considered as having a difference that makes any significant difference theoretically. Family becomes what family means to the socially embedded individual. Despite the advances diversification offers, “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?” (Sprey, 2009, p. 11).

**Differentiation**

In this section, we briefly delineate an alternative approach to theorizing family change that can be distinguished from the older institutional, non-institutional, and post-institutional approaches reviewed above. We are not alone in seeing the need for a framework that recognizes more fully the family as an institution without returning to the problematics of the earlier Parsonian institutional approach. As Gilding (2010, p. 774) shows, despite the fact that an emphasis on reflexivity and relationality in the construction of diverse family forms is an important correction to deinstitutionalization, “to reconceptualize the family as reflexive practice [Post-Institutional] or dispense with it altogether [Non-Institutional] throws out the baby with the
bath water.” Edwards et al. (2012, p. 735) likewise worry that despite the value of “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.” As McCarthy (2012, p. 72) puts it, “…a core issue in the meanings of ‘family’ is that it signifies something more than a collection of individuals, or a set of relationships,” and moving away from the language of family complicates rather than assists in facing these issues. For these scholars, “the notion of family enables analytic attention to a sense of connected ‘close-knit selves’ and the ‘social person’ that is hard to grasp through theoretical and methodological frameworks that emphasize the individual, however relationally conceived” (Edwards et al., 2012, p. 735). In brief, recent conceptualizations of family change find it increasingly difficult to adequately address the question, “What is the character of the familial?,” a question that must be central to any theorization of specifically family change.

In the limited space remaining, we argue for adopting an approach to family change that draws upon institutional logics theory (Brubaker, 2013; Calhoun, 2013; Colaner, 2016; Friedland, 2013; Pels, 2003; Swedberg & Agevall, 2005; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, 2008) as well as Max Weber’s conception of modernity as a field of competing and differentiated value spheres (Bellah, 1999; Symonds, 2015; Weber, 1946, 1978, 1993). In contrast to an old institutionalism framework that would seek to understand family change in terms of its place within a larger societal and cultural system, a Weberian institutional logics approach advocates taking up the question of family life in modernity in terms of its possible institutional logics in relation to other, distinctive and competing “life orders” and institutional logics. Capable of incorporating the insights of both deinstitutionalization and diversification approaches, the
argument outlined here is that there are nevertheless dimensions of the familial that can be distinguished in terms of its differentiation of institutional logics (Dromi, 2016; Weber, 1946), each of which are formed in terms of their own “inner logic” or “immanent lawfulness,” as Weber (1946) would put it. In brief, this alternative approach seeks to maintain an ability to take up the difficult and taxing question of the familial and avoid problematic positions that merely assume it (institutional), deny it (non-institutional), or relativize it (post-institutional).

We argue that a Weberian, institutional logics approach offers an attractive line of thought for family scholars, a way of theorizing and researching family change through two basic, interrelated questions: 1) In what ways can an “inner logic” of the “familial” be specified? Is there something about “family life” that makes such forms of life an expression of an institutional logic of the “familial”? And then, how would one deal with the obvious empirical challenge of the diversity of the “lived reality” of family life in modernity and assess any changes developing? And 2) What are the relations between the “familial” as a value sphere or institutional logic and the other institutional logics and aspects of modernity? What are the best ways of characterizing the conflicts between the various institutional logics? How do the tensions between the competing institutional logics become manifest empirically in different historical and social contexts?

Weber delineates as “value spheres” certain aspects of modernity such as the familial, the scientific, the political, the economic, the religious, the aesthetic, and the erotic, while institutional logics theorists add as institutional orders such things as romantic love, professions, law, and corporations. Each of these institutional orders are centered in the valued substances that “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, a valued substance forms subjects that love the substance and engage in practices and with objects that express the substance. It is through a love for science, a being possessed by the esteemed value of science, expressed through the practices and discourses of science and the objects associated with such practices, that science provides a performative ordering of human activity and the lives given over to it. By invoking the language of “value spheres,” “inner logics,” institutional logics and orders, this approach aims to highlight how there is “something,” a something that is neither an “idea” (something located merely in the mind of a subject) nor a “material object,” that draws humans to live for it, to receive it as something of such immense importance that it is capable of providing a center or anchor around which subject formations, coherent practices, and diverse objects take shape. The substance or cultural content matters but “by comparison to the presence of things, an institutional substance is an absent presence towards and around which material practice incessantly moves, known only through this movement” (Friedland, Mohr, Roose, & Gardinali, 2014, p. 335).

A Weberian institutional logics approach agrees that the deinstitutionalization framework needs to rethink the institutional/individual dichotomy. In terms of theorizing the subject, the post-institutional emphasis on embeddedness and relationality is a worthy critique of both old institutional subjects and the highly individualized subject. However, it doesn’t go far enough in thinking through how the subject lives familial relations. For a Weberian approach, the substances that center institutional logics are like gods that are loved by their subjects. In contrast with Durkheim who saw the social in divinity, Weber sees divinity in the social (Friedland, 2014b, p. 228). For example, the vocation of science, in Weber’s terms, involves less a rational commitment to an ideal than a love for the “god” of science and all that it means. For Weber,
becoming a scientist is akin to coming to love in “religious” ways the “substance” that is named, practiced, and capable of producing “scientific” objects worthy of devotion. The relation of the subject to the institution is such that the subject is a “true believer” or a “lover” of what the institutional logic consists in. Hence, neither an external normative and regulative order, nor an individualized relationality are adequate to describe the subject and its relations to institutional practices and objects. Thus, a scientist, a politician, a business owner/leader, an artist, and so forth are all ways in which human subjects 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 them to be the subject they are.

Reconceptualizing the subject/institutional relation bears significantly on how family change is theorized. Both individualization and diversification accounts fail to adequately develop the character of the familial subject and in different ways subjectivize the relation. Perhaps Charles Taylor’s distinction between weak and strong evaluation would be helpful here. Familial relations undertaken in terms of strong evaluation involve being moved the “higher good” of familial life and being moved in such a way that we “are moved by what is good in it rather than that it is valuable because of our reaction…. We experience our love for it as a well-founded love” (Taylor, 1989, p. 74). It is a love that exceeds the subject. A love in which one gives oneself over to another (whether individual or institutional substance) and yet is given oneself by that other (Friedland, 2014a, p. 302; Marion, 2007). From this perspective, framing family change in terms of normative regulation or relational embeddedness is insufficient. Instead, the deeper and more substantive question is “What are the character of familial ‘loves,’” the familial substances that inform familial subjects, and how are they changing?
Institutional substances do more than inform subjects, they also require practices and objects. As Friedland explains, “Institutional logics point to socially regionalized orders of meaningful practice that are simultaneously orders of subjectification and objectification, that is, orders of practice that depend on the particular identities of subjects and ontologies of objects, which in turn depend on these same orders of practice” (Friedland et al., 2014, p. 334). Institutional subjects are dependent upon institutional substances that themselves induce “ontological enactments” or practices that produce institutional objects: a “what done through a how.” Institutional logics require subjects, objects and practices that cohere and are mutually constitutive in a relation to an absent presence that is the institutional substance.

Friedland’s (Friedland, 2014a) examination of the “erotic ecology” of contemporary American (Southern Californian) and Roman singles shows that an institutional logic of “romantic” love as can be distinguished from the dynamics associated with causal sex as well as a differentiated 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 a skilled impersonator can fake “love” and use the language, practices, and objects of love as a means to reaching 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 that loves) and object (love has come to be) while drawing upon the practices and other objects of love. Unlike casual sex,

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2 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 such that “holding hands” among some of this group may serve to create a romantic love bond in ways that “sex” does not. Of
love cannot be individualized, nor reduced to a hedonistic calculus or other instrumentalist logic. In engaging the institution of romantic love, the subject, practices and objects are all subject to the standards of love or the “inner-logic” of the institutional substance.

An institutional logics approach overcomes the concern that “the concept of ‘family practice’ does not give sufficient weight to embeddedness and convention; specifically, the processes whereby some practices prevail over others, and some are privileged over others” (Gilding, 2010, p. 774). It can and must explicitly take up a hierarchical understanding of relationship formation and it accounts for the privileging through an appeal to institutional logics. Not all practices, relationalities, and diverse relational forms are equal.³ Sex without love is differentiated from sex with love. Strikingly, in the Friedland, et.al., (2014) analysis, sexual practices themselves do not organize or differentiate the institutional logic of romantic love. Of course, such was not the case historically and may still not be the case for some forms of an institutional logic of marital love. Love today, however, has often accomplished some form of decoupling from marital and other familial institutional logics.⁴ Counter to what Gilding (2010) refers to as the “new orthodoxy” of the diversification approach, Weberian institutional logics does not marginalize the familial out of a fear that it “obscures contingency and diversity” (p. 757). Instead, it insists that scholars focus on discerning the institutional character of the “familial” but that they do so in a way that also acknowledges the plurality of institutional

³ Lest this point be misunderstood, this is not a moral evaluation nor a systemic evaluation in terms of placing the relation in the context of performing functions relative to a broader context (as in older institutionalism). Rather, this references the empirical point that the internal constitution of the lived relation is itself hierarchical and evaluative.
⁴ Significantly, in our view, Friedland et al. (2014) notes that the temporality of the institutional logic is a significant feature of differentiation. Romantic love, not tied to sexual practices, is grounded in the present, while a marital love has an inner logic oriented toward the future.
substances that serve today to anchor institutional logics associated with the familial throughout the world.

Finally, in addition to recognizing forms of interdependency and tensions in the plurality of the familial institutional field, a Weberian institutional logics approach conceives of the familial as adhering to an inner-logic or institutional substance that differentiates itself in its own terms over-and-against the competing inner-logics and institutional substances of other institutional spheres (Friedland, 2013; Symonds, 2015). Although certainly there exist forms of life that can be conceptualized in other than institutional terms (i.e., casual sex as expressive of a hedonistic calculus), this approach theorizes any diminishing power of the familial “gods” or institutional substances as reflective of the growing power of other, competing institutional “gods.” The “loves” inspired by the economic/market sphere, by the political sphere, by art, science, or even the erotic (i.e., Weber has conceptual resources to theorize casual sex dynamics as exemplifying an inner logic of the erotic) pull human beings away from more familial loves. Instead of deinstitutionalization, we have shifting dynamics in a field of competing institutional logics. Instead of merely diversification, we have new ways of constructing subjects, practices, and objects that all more or less adhere to some form of familial logics.

We conclude by providing a summary table of our review and then reconceptualization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table I: Typology of Family Conceptualizations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Singular</strong> (Family/Non-Family)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Horizontal Ranking</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I: Institutional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II: Non-Institutional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Plural</strong> (Familial/Families)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vertical Ranking</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV: Institutional Logics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III: Post-Institutional</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I → II: Deinstitutionalization
I(II) → III: Diversification
I(II,III) → IV: Differentiation
References


