**The Heterogeneous and Open-Ended Project of Assembling Family**

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*Consistency necessarily occurs between heterogeneities, not because it is the birth of a differentiation, but because heterogeneities that were formerly content to coexist or succeed one another become bound up with one another through the ‘consolidation’ of their coexistence and succession.*

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 1987, 330

Research using an assemblage theory lens to examine consumption is limited (Canniford and Shankar 2013; Epp and Price 2010; Epp, Schau and Price 2014; Lury 2009; Price 2013). This volume engenders a broader disciplinary encounter with this significant perspective. Not surprisingly, assemblage theory collects a broad range of thinking that shares distinctive expression, but nonetheless remains heterogeneous just as Deleuze would anticipate (Allan 2011; Delanda 2006; LaTour 1999, 2005; Marcus and Saka 2006). Simplifications, amplifications and applications of assemblage thinking abound, bringing unique expressions to problems of body, disease, geography, ecology, history, nature, organizations, politics and myriad other topics (Bennett 2010; Buchanan and Thoburn 2008; Colebrook 2002, 2006; Hickey-Moody and Mahlins 2007, 2008; Canniford and Shankar 2013; Sassen 2006). Remarkably, with few exceptions, research has not addressed how assemblage theory applies to one of our most important collectives—the family (c.f. Epp et al. 2014, Wise 2000).

Drawing on key elements of assemblage theory this chapter highlights the role of consumption in the open-ended project of becoming a family. To us, it seems natural to view family as an assemblage, that is, as a consistency among heterogeneities that have become bound up with one another (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Rather than trying to adhere to one scholar, variant or vocabulary, our goal is to explore the avenues of inquiry (or lines of flight) made possible by thinking of families as assemblages, with consumption practices and materiality as vital actors. Consistent with Deleuze’s emphasis on the diversity of becoming—that is, the way that encounters between heterogeneous actors open up new creative possibilities and paths—we too amplify and take liberties with assemblage theory, molding key elements to fit the diversity, dynamism, instability and challenges of contemporary family life (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Colebrook 2002; Giddens 1991). For example, our lens highlights emergent relational capacities and identifies and explains the unique potentialities of consumption and materiality that emerge in contemporary family assemblages (Epp et al. 2014; Price 2013).

In the first section of this chapter we describe family as an assemblage, illustrating how this contrasts with other perspectives. We unfold five key properties of assemblage theory as it applies to consumer research on families: (1) unity across difference; (2) open-endedness and morphogenesis; (3) practices and repetitions; (4) human and non-human relational capacities; and (5) territories, homes and milieus. Within this discussion, we illustrate how these properties provide new avenues for theory and research on families.

In the second section, we examine inhibitors and releasers that modulate family assemblages (Epp and Price 2008, 2010, 2011, 2011b; Epp et al. 2014; Epp and Velagaleti 2015). Assemblage theory is especially well suited for examining disruption and evolution of family because of a focus on (de)stabilizing forces among heterogeneous actors (Epp et al. 2014; Epp and Velagaleti 2014). As such, we provide an assemblage lens to explain the making, unmaking and remaking of family. We conclude with a research agenda that spotlights the special roles of consumption and materiality as drivers of experimentation, innovation and change in the open-ended project of assembling family.

**Assembling Family**

An assemblage perspective characterizes family as an unfolding and ever-changing assortment of human and non-human actor interactions and future possibilities that in their synthesis form a distinctive consistency and expression—that is, a collective identity (Epp and Price 2008; Delanda 2006; Price 2013). Exhibit one highlights some broad characteristics and implications of thinking about family as an assemblage.

**Exhibit 1**

**Family Assemblages**

**What is a Family?**

* Family is an assemblage of heterogeneous components (e.g., bodies, practices, objects, stories, and everyday interactions) that form contingent relations across time to produce an emergent whole with a collective identity (Epp and Price 2008; Price 2013).
* Family identity is a type of connection and trail of associations between heterogeneous human and non-human components with material, expressive and imaginative capacities that “might be assembled anew in some given state of affairs (Delanda 2006; Latour 2006, 5; Price 2013; Epp et al. 2014).
* The properties of any family are contingent on the relations formed between component parts and the capacities that emerge when one part comes into contact with another part (Epp and Price 2010; Epp et al. 2014; Price 2013).
* The family assemblage is made up of other assemblages (relational units with distinct practice and object configurations) that have capacity for purposeful action (Epp and Price 2011).
* Rather than thinking of families as having boundaries (static and fixed) we think of them in terms of territories that are blurred, dynamic and dependent on family movements and relations within and without.

**Implications of an Assemblage Perspective on Families:**

* When a new product, technology or practice enters the family it increases heterogeneity and establishes novel relations that may deterritorialize, disrupt or change the assemblage (Epp and Price 2010).
* Displacement of component parts, such as loss of an inalienable object, change in membership or disruption of place or practices can also disrupt and alter the family (Curasi, Price and Arnould 2004; Epp, Schau and Price 2014).
* Family members sometimes decouple from family assemblages because of unbridgeable identity heterogeneity with cascading consequences for individual members (McAlexander, Dufault, Martin and Schouten 2014).
* Family actors can diagnose, boost and realign component parts to reassemble disrupted relations and practices (Epp et al. 2014)
* Imaginative capacity along with material and expressive capacities play a crucial role in reassembling disrupted relations and practices (Epp et al. 2014).
* Replication, reassembly and intergenerational transfer of practices within families, rather than faithful repetition is better viewed as creative response to preserve the essence of what holds the family together (Mosio, Arnould Price 2004; Epp et al. 2014).

Much like the songbirds described by Deleuze and Guattari, family can be viewed as a *“*space-time consolidation, of coexistence and succession,” an assemblage that “form[s] a complex rhythmic personage,” holding “heterogeneities together without their ceasing to be heterogeneous,” (1987, 329). In their discussion of songbirds, Deleuze and Guattari address how this consistency among a heterogeneous consolidation is possible. A fuzzy aggregate *becomes* consolidated and takes on coexistence and succession, and this happens through reorganizing functions and gathering forces (329). We will discuss these more when we examine factors that modulate family assemblages.

Given classic, structural accounts of family and kinship filled with rules, boundaries and constraints, it might seem strange to view family in a more fluid and happenstance way. Yet dynamics, open-endedness and non-human agency are apparent even in more familiar accounts of family and kinship (Godelier 2011; Goody 1983; Lévi-Strauss 1956). For example, Goody (1983) stresses how the characteristics of European families emerged in interaction with the power of the organized Roman church leading them to be established in their current and still dynamic form. Godelier (2011) stresses that networks of relations formed by families and related individuals “are open, with boundaries that depend on a number of factors which have nothing to do with kinship” (3). He provides a rich account of sweeping changes in kinship, and kinship studies, drawing on his own ethnographic research. Implicitly he gives agency to non-human actors, for example, when he observes “fire was a crucial factor that led men and women to cooperate durably in ways not found in the most closely related primate societies,” (464). Moreover, he highlights how basic interactions of keeping and sharing “establish the various social ties linking both individuals and groups,” (469). Nonetheless, although Godelier and others hint at characteristics that we may associate with an assemblage view, their primary focus is on the social structures, human relations and human choices that keep families as they are or define their trajectories. Deleuze’s major contribution “in opposition to structuralism,” was an insistence on “difference and becoming,” (Colebrook, 2002, 2). Rabinow (2003), contrasting assemblages with more sweeping apparatuses for change, observes that assemblages are a “distinctive type of experimental matrix of heterogeneous elements,” that are comparatively effervescent with a qualitatively different temporality (56). When we view families as assemblages we can greatly enrich our understanding of the open-ended dynamics of families and better account for emergent forms of relations.

In Table 1 we identify several general properties of assemblage theory that provide new avenues for theory and research on families. These characteristics are not intended to fully represent the many lines of flight of assemblage theory, but rather constitute an opening of avenues for future family and consumer research.

**Table 1**

**Assemblage Theory and Avenues for Research on Family and Consumption**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Properties** | **Description** | **Key Implications** | **Examples** | **Key Question & Future Research** |
| **Unity Across Difference** | (1) Heterogeneous elements hold together without forming a coherent whole  (2) Describes wholes without losing sight of agencies and relations that form assemblages  (3) Emphasizes the power of differences | (1) Focus on relations, capacities and arrangements rather than actors and organisms  (2) Investigate whole to part relations within families—how does the relational capacity of actors in interplay affect holding together | (1) Families negotiate heterogeneity to hold together. Various arrangements and relations contribute to unity in the context of family vacations (Epp and Price 2011a) and family time (Epp and Price 2011b).  (2) New heterogeneous actors can be introduced into a destabilized family assembly to stabilize and hold the family together (Epp and Velagaleti 2014; Barnhart, Huff and Cotte 2014). | How do families hold together?  (1) How do different logics interact and exert agency in families?  (2) What modes of interactions and relational capabilities hold family together?  (3) How do actors come together, hold together and what is the form of the unity?  (4) What are the “gaps, fissures, and fractures” that accompany family processes of gathering (Anderson and McFarlane 2011; 125)?  (5) What are the labors of holding together? |
| **Open-endedness and morphogenesis** | (1) Life in general proceeds by creatively maximizing its potential  (2) All elements are just moments in a flow of becoming  (3) Becoming is not given by some series of past events it is emergent lines of flight from interactions that create possible worlds | (1) Elements of a family are always entangled with other elements and assemblages  (2) Differences prompt processes of morphogenesis—encountering differences destabilizes assemblages, and prompts change  (3) Stabilization is forged on an ongoing basis and always open to volatility (Allen 2011, 156)  (3) Imaginative relational capacity is key to becoming | (1) New actors (such as a new consumption object) and relations (among objects, people, practices and spaces) prompt changes in family practices and identity and create new lines of flight (Epp and Price 2010).  (2) New space-time relations within the assemblage destabilize and prompt change (Epp et al. 2014).  (3) Changes in actor capacities and relations within the assemblage prompt destabilization and create new lines of flight (Price and DuFault 2014). | How do families change?  (1) What are the processes of morphogenesis?  (2) How does consumption act as a catalyst for morphogenesis in families?  (3) How malleable is the form that unity takes—the stretching of family assemblages over time, space and differences?  (4) How does deterritorialization contribute to change processes?  (5) What are the labors of morphogenesis? |
| **Practices and Repetitions** | “Every time that we encounter a variant, a difference, a disguise or a displacement, we will say that it is a matter of repetition, but that suppresses the thickness in which repetition occurs and unfolds, even in the case of matter and death” (Deleuze 1994, 271) | (1) Focus on practices not as faithful repetitions but creative responses  (2) Establish flows, movements and capacities central to becoming  (3) Enactment of a practice is always unique to relational capacities among component parts  (4) A different view of habits as more malleable and subject to changing relations | (1) Practices and repetitions are assemblages that are always becoming, open to volatility and subject to gaps, fissures and fractures (Epp et al. 2014).  (1) Reorganizing functions and gathering power are important to enable repetitions to enact the essence of the family practice (Epp et al. 2014; Epp and Price 2011b). | What is the relational capacity of practices and repetitions for holding families together and changing them?  (1) How are practices experienced as creative responses within families?  (2) How do relational capacities affect practice enactment?  (3) How does experiencing practice as a creative response affect practice succession? |
| **Human and Non-Human relational Capacities** | (1) Organisms and objects are understood through the variety of capacities they have to form assemblages with organic and inorganic elements—that is their potential power to relate  (2) Non-human and non-organic elements, in addition to humans, have combining power in their: molecular and temporal affordances; content; collective expression and difference (Bennett 2010)  (3) An assemblage is an ad hoc grouping of a diverse range of vital materialities of various sorts—a vibrant, throbbing collective with uneven topography (Khan interview with Bennett 2009) | (1) There is no central power and it is not distributed equally, rather it is multiple coexistences and power in transformation  (2) Assemblages are distributed agencies (Bennett 2005)  (3) Agency is constantly being reconfigured in response to relations and arrangements  (4) “Freedom requires moving beyond the human to affirm life,” (Colebrook 2002, 129); “Grant reality full autonomy from the human mind” (Delanda 2002, 4)  (5) Habits are a mechanism for territorializing assemblages (Wise 2000) | (1) Agency is exerted at the individual objects, relational (human-to-human, object-to-object, object-to-space) and collective levels to alter family assemblages and practices (Epp and Price 2010).  (2) The combining power of consumption objects increases their agency in the morphogenesis of practice and family assemblages (Epp et al. 2014; Price and DuFault 2014).  (3) The co-constitution of practice trajectories offers resources for thinking about the emergence of assemblage possibility and productivity (Epp et al. 2014; Epp and Velagaleti 2014). | How can we understand relational capacities?  (1) How are relational capacities and agencies distributed among human and non-human elements within families?  (2) How are flows and lines of flight afforded by these relational capacities?  (3) How do objects that come into the territory of the assemblage stabilize or destabilize it and how do they attach themselves to the assemblage?  (4) Can we refine our understanding of material, expressive and imaginative capacities as they interplay in an assemblage? |
| **Territories, Home and Milieus** | (1) As elements are brought into relations of composition with each other (holding together) they constitute a specific territory for the elements and the assemblage that endures for a specific duration  (2) The territory of an assemblage is contingent unstable, partial and situated  (3) To sustain territory through time, delimitation, contiguity and coherence have to be constantly reproduced (Painter 2010) | (1) The way that things hold together in assemblages is about relatedness “rather than simply their topographical setting and location,” (Allen 2011, 156)  (2) Distinctions such as local and global and conceptions of space and distance become less relevant  (3) Circulation may be more important than fixed positions  (4) The character of agency is radically reconfigured through relations that integrate organic and non-organic elements (Callon and Law 2004)  (5) Identity is territory (Wise 2000) | (1) Tensions, negotiated territory boundaries, and destabilizing forces are a central part of family assemblage life (Epp and Velagaleti 2014; Price and DuFault 2014).  (2) Family assemblages are filled with lively and enchanting albeit non-purposive forces played out against territorial and ecological challenges. | How are territories sustained through time?  (1) How are processes of gathering (territorialization) and dispersion (deterritorialization) initiated in assemblages?  (2) Under what conditions of relatedness do increases in heterogeneity increase rather than decrease family assemblages holding together?  (3) In a period of globalization, disruption of domestic spaces, and dematerialization of relations, how is the territory of family assemblages best understood?  (4) What are the labors of sustaining territory through time? |

**Unity Across Difference**

A guiding inspiration of assemblages is that “heterogeneous elements can hold together *without* actually forming a coherent whole,” (Allen 2011, 154). We need not choose between a traditional characterization of family as a unit with well-defined shifts and formations, and a motley, disorganized collection of uneasy relations between entangled people, practices and things (Allen 2011; Epp and Price 2008). The co-existence of diverse logics and priorities pulling in different directions along with the relations, capacities and arrangements that allow family to more or less hold together suggest a different view. Within the overall song of the family are the counter-points of individuals, and coalitions of siblings, couples, and so on that sustain as smaller heterogeneous assemblages in shifting patterns of not always harmonious relations and varying capacities to relate (Epp and Price 2011a). Our research on family vacations was an attempt to move beyond both marketing strategies targeted at the heterogeneous elements of the family (e.g. something for mom, something for dad, something for the kids) and a view of the family as an organism—a bounded whole with an identity and an end (e.g. something for the family) (Colebrook 2002, 56). Instead, we sought to recognize how heterogeneities hold together through different relations, capacities and arrangements during a family vacation (Epp and Price 2011a). That is, the emphasis was on developing strategies and understandings around the connections among heterogeneous elements including their diverse logics and priorities. We demonstrated that despite heterogeneous elements, there are organizing capacities that allow dynamic patterns of assembling and reassembling that create their own consistency and identity within families. Moreover, related research shows that heterogeneous actors can enter into and interact with the assemblage, challenging and changing relational patterns, but also helping to stabilize the family assemblage and hold it together (Epp and Velagaleti 2014; Barnhart, Huff and Cotte 2014).

There are many opportunities to explore how and when families comprised of heterogeneous elements hold together, with particular attention to the relational capacities of consumption arrangements and events for holding family together. For example, we explored how simple modifications in collective spaces on family vacations such as pool areas and hotel living areas can change the relational capacity to hold heterogeneous elements together. In related work on family time, we also illustrated how relational capacity might shift from one collective practice (such as family dinner) to another (such as family game night) to accommodate shifting actor priorities and relations while holding together (Epp and Price 2011b). Table 1 highlights several other research questions around how families hold together.

**Open-endedness and Morphogenesis**

Deleuze’s work is ultimately centered on how becoming emerges from the open-endedness of relations and differences (Colebrook 2002; Delanda 1999). His philosophy is at odds with structuralism, which suggests that becoming is composed of some pre-given forms or series of events. Instead, he argues that possible intersections and encounters can “produce unheard of lines of new becoming, or ‘lines of flight’,” (Colebrook 2002, 133). Again from Colebrook, “from life itself, we imagine all the becomings of life, using the human power of imagination to overcome the human,” (128).

Viewing family as an assemblage helps account for how a large dining room table, through its interactions with families over time, can constitute a “line of flight” for collective identity within the family. More specifically, the table alters family through “unthought-out and unintended connections and proliferations,” (Colebrook 2002, 5; Deleuze and Guattari 2011, Epp and Price 2010); in these interactions, the table too is at stake, and its meanings and uses are revised across various reconfigurations.

Assemblage theory also helps us understand how families’ “complex rhythmic personage” reflected in family practices is disrupted, such as when families reassemble their proximate practices across technologies and over space and time disruptions (Epp et al. 2014). Drawing on how Deleuze understands repetition, we introduce how a practice (such as a bedtime ritual) is reassembled not as a faithful repetition of a practice, but as a creative response (Deleuze 1994; Colebrook 2002). When successful, it seeks to preserve exactly those elements that are central to its force to hold family together. It’s not literally copying movements, it requires feeling the inventive force at the heart of those movements (Colebrook 2002). Table 1 provides examples and uncovers important questions related to the dynamics and malleability of family assemblages.

In the philosophy of Deleuze, morphogenesis plays a particularly interesting role. Morphogenesis (from the Greek *morphe* – shape - and *genesis* – creation; literally “beginning of the shape”) is the process that causes an assemblage to develop its shape and also takes place in existing assemblages at various levels of aggregation. Much work remains to be done on the processes of morphogenesis and becoming within families. Especially interesting is the malleability of actors and assemblages to destabilizing forces. How do families use gathering and reorganizing processes to reassemble following the loss of one or more actors including, objects, spaces, people, pets, and so on? How do families use gathering and reorganizing processes to boost or realign relational capability when a given actor’s relational capacity is diminished or changed? For example, addressing the problem of assembling child-care in families, Epp and Velagaleti (2014) demonstrate how new actors are gathered into the family and explain the important role of tensions in assemblage formation and reconfiguration of child care activities.

Consumption and materiality play a special role in facilitating processes of morphogenesis within families while still enabling them to hold together with revised actor relations and identity (Bennett 2010; Borgerson 2005, 2009; Price 2013; Price and DuFault 2014). Much prior research highlights consumption practices and consumption as key elements in constructing, sustaining and changing family identity (Curasi, Price and Arnould 2004; Epp and Price 2008; 2010; Mosio, Arnould and Price 2004). Bringing together recent thinking on materiality and assemblage theory, we posit that consumption practices, because of their ability to bond in several different ways with other elements of an assemblage, have high capacity to catalyze interaction among heterogeneous actors (Price and DuFault 2014). An element’s relational capacity depends on its material, expressive and imaginative capacity to insert itself into a territory and then bind, gather and act on other elements within that territory. In addition, its transformative potential depends on its capacities to catalyze lines of flight by releasing new opportunities. Finally, whether and how an element is imbedded in and inhibited by mechanisms of learning, history, culture, structure and institutions can affect its expression. A combinatory consideration of these aspects suggests why and how consumption can be such a powerful catalyst. We revisit this point in the conclusion and agenda for future research.

**Practices and Repetitions**

Practices and habits play a creative role in assemblage theory. Most prior work on social practices treats practices as the unit of analysis and explores how a practice is learned, repeated, and follows a trajectory (c.f., Shove, Pantzar and Watson 2012). By contrast, assemblage theory views practices and habits as contingent and evolving, with relations among components constantly in flux (Deleuze 1994; Colebrook 2002). That is, practices and habits are also seen as assemblages with component parts that collect together, with heterogeneous logics and differing relational capacities. This is easy to understand if we think about the performance of any ritual such as how fathers might teach their child to ride a bike. Consideration of what elements and performances are key and how they come together among the bike, sidewalk, human actors and landscape are highly contingent, fragile and variable (Epp and Velagaleti 2014). We can seek inspiration and acquire relational capacities from prior performances of a practice or habit, but ultimately the next event is unique and mapped to the relatedness and particulars of component parts. This is an important departure from prior social practices research because it highlights the becoming character of practices and habits. In turn, these practices and habits are critical to gathering (or dispersing) assemblages such as families, religions and institutions. When habits and practices are viewed as assemblages rather than organisms or unified wholes they move from powerful and entrapping to fragile and contingent. The focus shifts to understanding relational capacities of their component parts and territories that gather their collective spirit.

Recent work outlines lines of flight for practice assemblages as they reassemble across technologies, space and time (Epp et al. 2014). This research shows the malleability and fragility of practices, but also how repetition of practices is a creative response that seeks to reproduce the essence of prior performances across different relations, capacities and territories. For instance, the family bonding garnered through game nights may be translated to a geographically-dispersed version of the practice that happens online, asynchronously and with different collections of family members. The study further illustrates how potential relations among components are activated, boosted, and realigned to gather and hold the practice assemblage together with implications for holding and changing the family.

Much work remains to be done using an assemblage perspective on repetition, habits and practices. Certainly the repetition of song-elements is central in holding together the rhythm of the assemblage that fends off chaos and creates the resonance of a collective identity (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Wise 2000). At the same time, a new emphasis on creative differences among performances may be important in understanding how habits and practices are experienced and drive holding together against conditions of deterritorialization.

**Human and Non-Human Relational Capacities**

One of the most difficult demands of assemblage theory is to embrace a view of agency that fully departs from a dominant, powerful human actor to embrace that life itself is a becoming driven by the interplay of all elements (Bennett 2005; 2010; Hill, Canniford, and Mol 2014). This view can be freeing and encourage us to learn about how flows and lines of flight are created within an assemblage and in interplay with other assemblages (Epp and Price 2010; Epp, Schau and Price 2014). This is an agency “both of sums and of distinctive parts,” (McFarlane 2009, 566).

However, a world viewed as distributed agents may also problematize human causality and responsibility. Hence, assemblage accounts, while useful, may also need to consider humans as arbiters of at least some of these gathering and dispersion processes (Bennett 2005; McFarlane 2009; Greenhough 2011). For example, applications of assemblage theory to family practices and family identity return to whether and how humans are motivated to form, sustain, and reassemble family despite deterritorializing and destabilizing processes (Epp and Price 2010; Epp, Schau and Price 2014; Epp and Velagaleti 2014). Moreover, these applications suggest marketer and policy interventions that could boost the relational capacity of particular products, brands and commercial spaces—suggesting a vital role for motivated human actors. Across family consumption studies, numerous provocative examples illustrate human efforts to mobilize material, expressive and imaginative relational capacities in the interest of gathering family (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). These efforts may meet with resistance, such as when it becomes impossible to house the family table in the spaces available in the new house (Epp and Price 2010), or sustain family meals against relations of exteriority exerted by soccer practice or cultural meanings of what constitutes family (Epp and Price 2011b; Figueiredo 2015).

As summarized in Table 1 there are numerous research opportunities to better understand relational capacities in family assemblages. Our own work introduces and identifies the importance of imaginative capacity in reassembling geographically-dispersed family practices through technology (Epp et al. 2014; Price 2013). Surprisingly little research has examined components’ relational capacities within families as a way of uncovering opportunities to help them reassemble around gaps, fissures and fractures or identify positive lines of flight. Moreover, as we next describe, research is needed that considers how component capacities enable family boundaries to expand, relax, or change without dispersion. For example, as increasing heterogeneity threatens dispersion, can component capacities be boosted or realigned to create a different pattern of holding together?

**Territories, Home and Milieus**

Attention to globalization and mobility require us to rethink “place, space and belonging” (Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould 2012; Elliott and Urry 2010; Figueiredo 2015; Wiley, Sutko and Becerra 2010, 341). Moreover, new ways of structuring and thinking about family introduce patterns of holding together that are less defined by legal, political or geographic boundaries than in the past (Stacey 1998). An important contribution of assemblage theory is to give us an enriched way of thinking about territories and boundaries. For example, rather than anchoring an individual within a legally, politically or geographically defined territory, assemblage theory views territories as the sum of relations that hold together but are contingent, unstable, partial and situated (Figueiredo 2015; McFarlane 2009; Wiley et al 2010). Hence, family territories are defined less by space and distance and more by circulation and negotiated boundaries that are central to family life (Epp and Velagaleti 2014; Price and DuFault 2014). That is, elements are constantly coupling and decoupling from and with the family assemblage leading to destabilization, tensions and most importantly “becoming” through new lines of flight.

We can return to the songbirds described by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) to illustrate more of how territories form. The songbirds mark an area with sounds, and as those sounds resonate with surrounding elements, the songbirds in relations with others create a milieu: a shape and force of co-existence that is comprised of continual motion, rhythms and communications. More bounded than milieus, a territory is built from aspects or portions of milieus (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 314; Wise 2000). In the context of family identity, families and homes are important territories that often draw on common milieus. Importantly, home as a territory is not a set of possessions but rather how elements in resonance create an expressive space (material and imagined) drawing on a variety of markers and milieus (Bardhi, Eckhart and Arnould 2012; Blunt and Dowling 2006; Figueiredo 2015; Massey 1992, 2005; Miller 2001). As Wise (2000) notes, “there is no home, only the process of forming one,” (303).

Although prior consumer research has implicitly examined the interplay of family and home as fuzzy territories with both intersections and distinctions, more research is needed. Research should explicitly adopt a dynamic and processual view of home, practice and family assemblages and how they interplay, replicate, and reveal material, expressive and imaginative forces. Especially interesting would be to explore the negotiation of these multiple assemblages operating simultaneously within the consumers’ milieu. “Some of these assemblages are slower moving and harder to contest,” (Wiley et al. 2010; 366). For example, the family assemblage can be characterized “with its often patriarchal and always hierarchical logics of power and subject formation,” as an assemblage that has a great deal of inertia and rigidity (Wiley et al. 2010; 366). Perhaps home and practice assemblages are more open to collective or individual intervention and also to changing spatial practices and representations. At the same time, as practice and home assemblages shift we may see accompanying changes in family identity (Epp and Price 2010; Epp et al. 2014). Table 1 illustrates other questions related to how territories sustain through time.

In summary, basic properties of assemblage theory can help us see families in a different way and potentially serve as fruitful lines of flight for future research on families. In the next section, we consider how families hold together and change by highlighting how inhibitors and releasers modulate family identity.

**What Modulates Family Assemblages?**

In the words of Deleuze and Guattari, the distinctive expression of family assemblages “must be considered not only in relation to their aptitude to form motifs and counterpoints but also in relation to the inhibitors and releasers that act on them and the mechanisms of innateness or learning, heredity or acquisition that modulate them, (1987, 331). Sustaining territory through time requires constant and often laborious reproduction of delimitation, contiguity and coherence (Painter 2010; Featherstone 2011). Table 2 is organized around the making, unmaking and remaking of family assemblages with attention to inhibitors and releasers.

**Table 2**

**Forces that Modulate Family Identity**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Description** | **Inhibitors**  Forces that bind to elements and assemblage and “hold in check” actors inside and outside from catalyzing reactions | **Releasers**  Forces that open up elements or assemblages to other elements and assemblages enabling morphogenesis and “lines of flight” |
| **Making Family**  Processes of gathering | (1) Habits, rituals and practices bind, regulate and hold in check elements.  (2) Territories such as home provide a stable base from which to gather family.  (3) Striated space rigidly structures and limits interactions and can limit movements and relations which can hold in check elements from the outside and aid in gathering families. | (1) Processes of gathering into an assemblage depend on reorganizing and decoupling from other relations facilitated by releasers.  (2) Gathering processes depend on the imaginative, material and expressive capacity of elements as they interplay releasing new opportunities for coalescing by adding, boosting and realigning relations. |
| **Unmaking Family**  Processes of dispersion | (1) The pull of other assemblages holding actors in check can deterritorialize family, family practices and home assemblages.  (2) Inhibiters that restrict outside actors from entering the assemblage or relations among actors within the assemblage can backfire by reducing the relational capabilities of the assemblage and its elements. | (1) Even a small change to a socio-material assemblage can affect changes through movements that deterritorialize and allow “cutting edges that insert themselves,” and draw variations and mutations of it (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 333).  (2) Well-placed elements can have a catalytic or exponential impact on assemblage change (Bennett 2010; Deleuze and Guattari 1987).  (3) Instead of opening the assemblage up it can also cause the aggregate to fall into itself, a kind of “black hole” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 334).  (4) Emergent, ever-changing milieus create assemblage movements. |
| **Remaking Family**  Processes of reorganization and malleability | (1) Retreats, vacations, game night can bind family actors helping them re-establish relational capabilities through habits and rituals.  (2) Technologies can act as inhibitors to bind geographically and temporally dispersed actors to the territory and also expand territory boundaries. | (1) Releasers can free territorial assemblages from the mechanisms of structures and institutions and provide openings to alternative forms.  (2) A catalytic operator can collect and bind dispersing elements into new relational bonds.  (3) Open spaces can facilitate new relations and movements that stretch possible relations and boundaries. |

Through a decade of family research, we have observed the becoming of families as they coalesce into unique rhythms and songs; the assembling, disassembling and reassembling of homes and practices; additions of babies and baby things; and the ensuing interactions among these components. We have observed how elements of families disperse, as eruptions from outside the family disrupt the holding together, and we have noted the catalyzing effects of human and material elements to induce unintended and long lasting changes in family, home and practice assemblages. Most readers have also observed these makings, unmakings and remakings of families. Without question, patterns of coupling and decoupling of heterogeneous social and material actor relations within and outside the family “territory” alter the distinctive expression of family, although much work remains to understand and trace these changes—that is, “how do we know when an assemblage has changed or has the potential to change?” (McFarlane and Anderson 2011, 163).

**Making Family**

Godelier (2011) in his examination of kinship writes:

The life of societies, like that of the individuals that compose them, thus rests on two distinct but complementary and necessary obligations: the obligation to exchange and the obligation to keep and transmit (p.470).

Inhibitors (that bind and reduce circulation) and releasers (that open up elements and enable change) are both vital to the processes of gathering and making family, as are the mechanisms of innate qualities, learning, history, culture, structures and institutions that are “in some way prior to and downstream from the act,” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 332). Wise writes, “cultures are ways of territorializing, the ways one makes oneself at home,“ (300). However, as importantly cultures are expressions and exist only in their expression and repetition. Families labor to express a territory that binds elements and holds them in check, but also the territory is constantly borrowing from the milieu “it bites into them, seizes them bodily (although it remains vulnerable to intrusions),” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 314; Wise 2000, 298). Habits are one of the most important inhibitors, but recall that at the heart of repetition is difference and so what makes a family and a home “is the repetition and difference of habit,” (Wise 2000, 304).

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) provide a useful discussion of the territorialization of space, creating for example a space that is home. Such spaces can be understood as striated—rigidly structured and organized to produce particular restricted movements and relations between bodies (Hickey-Moody and Malins 2007; Deleuze and Guattari 1987), but these spaces also offer a stable base for launching becomings. That is, “striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to smooth space,” (Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 474). In fact, homes are both striated and smooth “constructed out of movement, communication, social relations which always stretched beyond it,” (Massey, 1994, 171).

Our work provides examples of how habits and arrangements of objects and space at home (Epp and Price 2010, 2011b), away from home (Epp and Price 2011a) and across space and time (Epp, Schau and Price 2014) act to create the rhythms of family life such as morning rituals that coalesce into a family identity or territory, but also illustrate how creative repetitions enable change and malleability without unmaking family. Much more work is needed to understand tensions of inhibitors and releasers in particular expressions of gathering and making family.

**Unmaking Families**

In the same way that processes of gathering are always at play, dispersion processes are also always in motion (Parmentier and Fischer 2015). Changing relational capacities within, elements of the milieu that insert themselves, and the inhibiting pull of other assemblages such as work life can all deterritorialize family and create unpredictable mutations.

Most research focuses on how families survive despite changing composition caused by death, divorce, loss of home and possessions (Baker and Hill 2013; Bates and Gentry 1994). As already noted, less is known about the malleability of the form that unity takes or the labors of resilience. It seems reasonable to assert that relations can be so dispersed and severed that nothing of the consolidation of co-existence and succession remains—the space is smoothed and elements get bound up into other consolidations including families (e.g., estranged families disperse, and the associated practices, stories, and heirlooms find new homes as members form families of their own). Clearly, cultural institutions provide rules and conditions for disassembling, as do the emergent, ever-changing milieus created by and around assemblage movements.

**Remaking Family**

Assemblage theory offers quite a different lens for examining family processes of reorganization and malleability than existing approaches to family that predominantly highlight structures and languages of kinship, and trajectories of evolution and change (Epp and Price 2008; Godelier 2011). Just because mechanisms are not the central concern of this account of family does not make them less relevant in understanding how family identity is made, unmade and remade (Delanda 2008; Moisio, Arnould and Price 2004). Nonetheless, particularly in the remaking of family, assemblage theory highlights how inhibitors and releasers can create new forms and paths for assemblages and calls into question our assumptions about conventional trajectories such as marriage, childbirth, childhood, empty nests, and blended families (Cross and Gilly 2014; Pavia and Mason 2012).

It would be useful to explore how elements decouple from family, versus when family territories are revised to envelop the changed movements of those elements—that is, how do particular heterogeneous elements drive changes in family identity? For example, as emerging young adults pursue their own identity projects, how do families revise (or not) their territories to encompass and embrace these new birdsongs? Similarly what factors contribute to new elements being held in check on the outside versus let in at the risk of catalyzing reactions (Barnhart, Huff and Cotte 2014; Epp and Velagaleti 2014)? For example, one might examine how technology ecologies, a vital part of the milieu of contemporary families, are held in check or let in and how this changes the way we think about technologies as elements in family identity (Chitakunye and Maclaran 2014; Venkatraman 2012).

**Conclusions**

In this chapter we posited a view of family as an assemblage. We outlined five properties of assemblage theory: unity across difference, open-endedness and morphogenesis; practices and repetitions; human and non-human relational capacities; and territories and milieus. After describing these properties and illustrating their implications for family and consumer research, we highlighted key questions for future research on how families hold together, disperse and change. Next we examined inhibitors and releasers that modulate family identity and described how these forces might impinge on the processes of gathering, dispersion, reorganization and malleability of family, home and practice assemblages.

We also briefly addressed two important limitations of assemblage theory. First, the emphasis on distributed agency makes it easy to underappreciate how motivated human actors strategize to add, boost and realign relations within assemblages—for example, moving a huge table across country and in and out of a garage; strategizing to move material objects across generations; altering arrangements and practices to gather, reorganize and stretch family territories. Moreover, marketers and policy makers can also anticipate and shape material capacities in the service of family assemblages. Second, we note that assemblage theory backgrounds mechanisms that provide rules and common trajectories for relations in order to highlight open-ended becoming. This may downplay the force of these mechanisms as assemblage actors, leading us to undervalue how they constrain and shape movements along conventional trajectories.

Moving forward, future research should use assemblage theory to investigate the role of materiality as a force modulating family identity. Given that new material actors can easily enter the assemblage and can bond in many different ways with actors (much like carbon can bond with many other elements to express differently), we anticipate that these actors can be important catalysts for change.

Prior consumer research has focused on how materiality functions as a weight, burden and constraint in assemblage movements (Belk 1992; Epp and Price 2010, Miller 2009; Price, Curasi and Arnould 2000), that is materiality as inhibiters of movement and change. Research also has emphasized how materiality disrupts and disperses family assemblages (Shor 2004). Less attention has been given to the morphogenetic power of materiality in assemblages to collect and bind dispersing elements into new relational bonds. Returning to Godelier’s example of the power of fire to assemble family, materiality, as compared to many other assemblage actors, is easy to pick out from surrounding milieus and malleable in meaning, use and arrangement. A carefully placed couch or table, introduction of a new consumption ritual, a karaoke game at Thanksgiving so heterogeneous members sing instead of debate politics all might illustrate the binding and becoming potential of materiality within family assemblages. Materiality may have unique catalytic powers to bind heterogeneous actors into new relational patterns (Miodownik 2014; Price 2013). Some recent research, for example, suggests that materiality often inserts itself into deterritorialized family assemblages, and that it can act as an inhibitor or releaser in processes of gathering or dispersion (Price and DuFault 2013).

This raises explicit questions for future research. In moments of deterritorialization, we can ask: What are the characteristics of elements that can best insert themselves into the family assemblage allowing it to evolve into new and unexpected forms? How can well-placed elements have a catalytic impact on assemblages? How can a catalytic operator collect and bind dispersing elements into new relational bonds? Of particular interest for consumer researchers is how and why consumption, rather than other human elements or re-organization of a different sort, might offer important answers.

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