

## Family as a Safe Haven? Families in Social Practice and Narratives in Times of Crises. Introduction

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What connects the homeless woman and her children fighting for a right to social housing with a mother in a non-monogamous relationship and a couple living in the post-socialist village at the EU border? At first glance, their stories barely rub against each other. As social researchers, we also tend to categorise them as if they have little in common, and we accordingly approach them from perspectives as diverse as the sociology of housing, the anthropological or psychological study of sexual behaviours and romantic relationships, and the study of people's economies, power, and politics. However, on a second look, there is one word that does tie them – family. Parents with children who cannot afford adequate housing due to their low or non-existent incomes, lack of social ties, or structural barriers are a family without a permanent home. The parents fostering poly-directional romantic relationships are families without a binary structure – or, rather, families with a structure that goes beyond the known and seemingly given structures. The parents coping with the challenges of transition and material hardship who find meaning in today's struggles through sacralising the bones of the glorious ancestors are a family that strives to keep the matrix of what a village life, and with it, village family life, used to be, incorporating itself in the long line of those who struggled to maintain livelihood and communities

different than the metropolitan ones. The social background, the place of abode, life choices, levels of insecurity and vulnerability, and types of social support are different in these three cases. Differences aside, we speak about families as social structures that are lived, perceived, and narrated in various ways.

We also speak about families that struggle. Despite their contexts being quite different, they all experience certain deprivations, or are neglected, or are rejected and potentially under threat, or are misunderstood in the 'new times', or are 'too new' even for the newest of times. Their micro-struggles take place within macro-societal contexts that are, for a while now, marked by emphatic uncertainty. We try to make and keep families in broader environments ripe with risks of all kinds, and we often feel – as social researchers or not – that Risikogesellschaft does not manage to organise its response to risk well anymore. The sense of crisis is imminent, and the high levels of public distrust in industry, government, and experts, registered by Beck (1986), are today augmented by the general distrust towards media, institutions, parties, and civic society. Families are touched – if not crafted – by and through the cascade of crises (Rosenbaum, Talmor, 2024) that now form a long series of significant calamities and, for many, crashes. Living through environmental, economic, migration, pandemic, and war crises shapes us as individuals and family members, regardless of how directly we are touched by any of these.

Thus, as individuals, we all attempt to make sense of crises in uncertain times. We search for stability, trying to understand what constitutes a threat and for whom (Van den Bos, 2018). Uncertainties originate not only from the actual state of things but are also part of the domain of the imagined or assumed. This ever-continuous state of ambiguity displays itself as a dynamic between certainty and uncertainty (Alimardanian, Heffernan, 2024) through which people navigate their human existence. Of course, one could claim that this statement has a philosophical weight, referring to all humans at all times, so we need to modulate it for our purposes: navigation in the seas of post-democracy and post-truth renders ambiguity ever more indeterminate, ever more inconclusive. When both the future and the present look distant and impalpable, many turn to their families to seek an anchor because we are, as family members, more and less than mere individuals. There, we care and are cared for – even when there is no society, as Thatcher famously said (Steele, 2009), or the state to do the caring. There, dependence is allowed, even if it remains discouraged in all other spheres. Moreover, dependence is often mutual and reciprocal, both in symbolic and material terms. It is there, in the family, that we find our own extension in the future or are ourselves the future of those who begot us to the world. The 'anchoring' can be purely poetic when we search for the ties to the past and promises of the future governed by idealized notions of intimacy and security central to the idea of home (Clarke, 2001). It can also be fully material, such as in reorganizing family patterns or fighting for a roof above the heads of those who comprise a family. We can understand this difference in terms of social practices and narratives, as suggested by the subtitle of our special section. The way families are envisioned and narrativized may or may not overlap with the

social practices that people indulge in as members of families. Today, the family appears as a prominent narrative tool in the debates on a desired society, even if this desired frame is often camouflaged in fears and anxieties about the present. Not only is family the haven again (Lasch, 1976), but it is the only frame we can always fall back upon. Family – as a self-serving, self-subsistent entity – appears as the only safe space in the stormy weather of hyper-crisis society. This family, however, exists more as a narrativized entity than as a bundle of actual social practices. In other words, such a *family* excludes or unsees many real-existing families. Not least those we listed at the beginning of this introduction.

When deciding on the direction of this special section, we were particularly intrigued to understand the tension between narratives and social practices. We were adamant about starting with an assumption that ought not to sound brave or bold: we all have families, whatever their form or composition. How do we live our family members' lives when the tension between narratives and social practices becomes exceptionally high? We created a call for the special section at the moment when the COVID crisis began to ebb, giving way to the multiple crises inaugurated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We keenly remembered how family lives were affected by pandemic-related social policies, which in many ways reinforced the narratives without easing the domain of social practices in dire times (G. Lutherová, Voľanská, 2024). Among many things that the COVID crisis showed us is that uncertain times introduce tensions to family intergenerational or intragenerational relationships, or they enhance those already present. Also, during the lockdowns, it became clear how dependent we are on our family members for help with childcare or caring for other dependents in families. So, we wondered what the role of family is in our everyday practices when we cope with uncertainties.

Working together on another project, where we delved more into the narrative dimension of the family (Zaharijević, Wawrzyniak, Dohotariu, 2024), we decided to leave the space open for a variety of social practices that do not fall under the rubric of the dominant narrative on what family is or ought to be. This was important to us as a way of scholarly rebellion against the reduction and simplification of our lived family practices to one, especially when this one is termed 'natural' or 'traditional'. Today, we are all fully aware of a tendency that was, until recently, observed mainly by scholars who worked with anti-gender politics. Family is at the centre of many extreme and less extreme right-wing political discourses that want a forceful return to the 'natural order of things'. Bearing this in mind, we wanted to see how the crisis-induced narrativisation of families restricts the lived forms of familial life. How are individuals affected by the political attempts to reduce the family to a single legitimate form? How does such politicisation of family further the crisis through polarisations, erasures, and devaluations of everyday practices deemed 'unnatural'?

In this special section, the selected papers delve into the social lives of families, exploring both intragenerational and intergenerational dynamics during times of uncertainty and beyond. Miroslava Hlinčíková in her article *Homeless Families in the*

*Circle of Continuous Change. Housing Crisis in the Slovak Context* explores this complexity by examining the housing strategies of single homeless parents, who are particularly vulnerable to the scarce social rental housing stock in Slovakia. Hlinčíková reveals how housing policy, shaped by a broader discourse centred on personal responsibility, traps these families in a “cycle of constant housing changes”, perpetuating a state of chronic precariousness. Antonina Stasińska, in the paper titled *Doing Mothering in Non-Monogamous Relationships. Strategies and Practices of Women in Poland*, adds another layer to the discussion by shedding light on the relationship between family structures, trajectories, and societal discourse. In her study of Poland, often perceived as a conservative country, Stasińska delves into public debates on family planning, which frequently centres around “the nature of family, gender roles and ultimately, the Polishness”. By examining the experiences of women in consensually non-monogamous relationships, Stasińska explores how they exercise agency in resisting traditional expectations of mothering. Ines Chrťan shifts the focus on gender relations and performativity within the families of transnational migrant workers moving from Serbia to Slovakia in her article *Gender Dynamics in the Process of Transnational Labour Migration: Case Studies of Serbian Migrant Couples in Slovakia*. She examines migratory processes as an “arena where the battle for reproduction and (re)negotiation of gender dynamics” reveals how migration serves as a space for redefining and challenging traditional gender roles.

Jana Nosková and Sandra Kreisslová demonstrate how the family’s functioning is deeply rooted in the shared history, influencing each family member across generations, from the original witnesses to their descendants. They highlight this through the intergenerational transmission of traumatic experiences shared by the descendants of displaced Sudeten Germans in the article *Transgenerational Trauma and Family Memory? The Legacy of Sudeten German Expulsion after World War II*. Matej Butko demonstrates how families’ perceptions of their past shape their resilience and cooperation today, focusing on the role and significance of family networks in a rural Transcarpathian village, helping people to survive “the tough times”. As Butko’s case shows in the article “*Ties That Matter the Most*”. *Family Connections in Memory of the Transcarpathian Village Community*, families do not exist in isolation; they are constantly interacting with and shaped by their socio-political, cultural, and material environments. This interaction creates a complex and interwoven relationship between family practices, systemic structures, and societal narratives about family life.

Together, the papers in this special section create a rich mosaic of diverse family forms, structures, and agencies that reflect the complexities of social reality. By challenging the notion of a singular, traditional family model, they disrupt the idea of a homogeneous family experience, revealing instead that diversity indeed is an inherent and ‘natural’ aspect of human relationships.

The issue also contains an off-topic article *Meanings and Uses of Material Cultural Heritage in the Town of Hvar* written by Jasna Čapo and dedicated to the topic of the

meanings and uses of material cultural heritage in contemporary society. This article is based on the ethnographic research in a tourist destination on the Croatian coast. It interrogates what happens when built culture and urban public spaces are still part of living culture in a locality, on the particular example of the historical town Hvar. The given article also demonstrates dissonant meanings and uses of heritage that arise from the intangible and socially constructed nature of material heritage for local users and shows the limits of local community engagement in heritage processes.

This special issue of *Slovak Ethnology* is based on the panel with a similar title and thematic scope. Our double-panel took place at the SIEF Congress in Brno in 2023. The question – whether family is indeed perceived as a safe haven for individuals living in ‘uncertain times’ – was elaborated from a variety of sides by the finest scholars from different disciplines. When we reached out to ask them to work with us again, we learned that Maria Reimann tragically lost her life only a month after we had the luck and privilege to hear her. This is a sad loss for us and the academic community. Maria Reimann was a cultural anthropologist and co-founder of the Interdisciplinary Team for Childhood Studies at the University of Warsaw. To her memory, we wish to dedicate this special issue.

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