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August, 2013

The Borderland between Civil Society and the Personal Sphere

The research questions used as guidelines for this project are:

- How can we understand the lack of interest in the borderland between civil society and the personal sphere among both civil society and personal life scholars?
- How can a theorization of this borderland contribute to our knowledge about civil society and its role in society at large?
- Is there a need for an analytical distinction between civil society and personal life – on what grounds, to what extent, and in what way?

Most time has been spent on studying different theoretical discussions within the ‘personal life’ field – in search of theoretical and analytical frames that can be useful in the development of analytical tools for this borderland. So far, valuable theoretical themes have been found within the discussion of how the process of individualisation has affected family and friendship relations, as well as within the feminists’ critique of the public–private distinction. As for analytical frames, the conceptual shift within family research, from institutions to practice, together with, for example, the description of personal life as both doing and thinking, provide tools that are also useful for the ‘civil society’ part of this borderland.

The main aim of this project is to contribute to the theorization of the relationship between civil society and personal life. Although the term ‘borderland’ is still used in this abstract, the usefulness of concepts like spheres and boundaries are questioned. Using an alternative understanding of a more flexible, intertwined, and seamless relationship as a point of departure, the aim is to develop an analytical framework that combines a focus on practice with the importance of context, embeddedness, and relationism. This framework will also include cognitive dimensions of how individuals interact within, and with, this borderland, such as through imaginations, memories, and meaning-constitutive traditions.

A secondary aim is to provide examples of how the use of such an analytical framework can shed light – both theoretically and empirically – upon aspects of civil society that as yet have attracted little or no interest.