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Doing exclusivity by doing family? 'Noble' family practices between transformation and persistence

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Abstract

Objective: This paper looks at how family is being created, displayed and negotiated in the context of German nobility associations that want to uphold noble traditions and history.

Background: While there is extensive historical research on the German nobility and its understandings of family, there is a research gap regarding current self-understandings and practices of families that regard themselves as descendants of the German historical nobility. Furthermore, while research in the field of family studies focuses largely on transformations of family practices as a result of social change as well as family forms beyond the hegemonic heteronormative model, the paper focuses on family practices that rather seem to resist change and adhere to traditions and norms.

Method: The empirical material for this paper consists of 11 guided narrative interviews with members of different German nobility associations and field notes. The research process is carried out with the Grounded Theory Methodology, the coding process of the Grounded Theory is used to analyze the data.

Results: Within the context of nobility associations, the noble family is constructed as exceptional (historically significant and widely ramified), while at the same time it is frowned upon taking pride in this exceptionality. In the context of formal structures such as nobility associations as well as some family associations, different practices of inclusion and (heteronormative) exclusion revolve around the question of who is considered noble and who is not. Family practices within the field of nobility associations seem to oscillate between holding on to (gendered and class related) traditions and cautiously opening up to social change.

Conclusion: The practices of doing and displaying family in this field are closely intertwined with what I call doing exclusivity: the making and perpetuation of an exclusive circle.

Key words: German nobility associations, elite, privilege, displaying family, exclusion, heteronormativity

1. Introduction

Family is a central topic when it comes to the activities of the descendants of the historical nobility in Germany. Family practices here include family trees that can be traced back for centuries, family days where family members from different branches of a family come together, even family associations which for many families form an organized structure with its own rules for membership. In Germany, the nobility lost its prerogatives when the Weimar Constitution came into effect in 1919.[1] So, the question of whether "being noble" still means anything is mostly a question of faith (de Saint Martin, 2003: 11ff). Family practices such as family days seem to be an important component in keeping this belief alive.

The empirical material for this article mostly consists of guided narrative interviews with members of different German nobility associations. Nobility associations have set themselves the goal of ensuring the cohesion of the group of the descendants of the historical nobility and the continuation of noble traditions. The umbrella organization "Vereinigung der Deutschen Adelsverbände" (Union of the German Nobility Associations) forms the roof for regionally organized nobility associations and historical nobility corporations (Conze, 2000: 393). The basis of existence for nobility associations is that their members belong to the historical nobility (Deutscher Adelsrechtsausschuss, 2024; von Elverfeldt-Ulm, 2001). As the historian Conze points out, members of nobility associations "maintain an exclusivity based on bloodline and biology through the alignment to the noble registers of the time before 1918" (Conze, 2000: 394).[2] However, these organizations and their members do not depict "the German nobility", as only a small proportion of all bearers of historically noble names are members of one of these organizations (Wienfort, 2011: 112).[3]

Nobility associations are based on the principle of "family" in various ways. An historically noble family background determines membership. Also, activities of nobility associations are associated with family in numerous ways. One interviewee described his nobility association itself as a family, others like to connect with family members and distant relatives on events of their association or even found their spouses there. Furthermore, so called family associations - a structure in which many noble families are organized - can be institutional members of nobility associations. Since the second half of the 19th century, more and more families formally formed family associations in order to counter accelerated change with stabilization (Conze, 2021: 86; Malinowski, 2004). After the loss of noble privileges, status and influence in the 20th century, family associations were seen as important to provide and maintain the "sense of family" constitutive of the nobility (Seelig, 2015: 158). From the beginning, family associations were intended to promote family cohesion by maintaining family history, holding regular family days, and providing resources for impoverished family members (Wienfort, 2006; 2011). Some of the interviewees of this study are part of such a family association, some are members of a nobility association individually. In all the interviews, however, family is an important topic in connection with the question of belonging to the historical nobility.

If one looks at the recent field of family sociology, especially in the European context, it is noticeable that different processes of social change are being addressed. So-called "non-normative" family models are being examined in various formations such as LGBTIQ+ families (Teschlade et al., 2023) or patchwork families (Breitkreuz et al., 2021), parenting after adoption (König & Niederbacher, 2022), after reproductive medicine (Peukert et al., 2020) or co-parenting (Bower-Brown et al., 2023). What all these studies have in common is that they are concerned with the transformation of family forms and with family practices that go beyond the hegemonic heteronormative model. While this is a very essential concern, it is nevertheless important to also look at family practices that tend to resist change, that hold on to traditions and norms (Thiessen, 2024). Such a perspective can be found at the intersection of family research and elite or upper-class research, for example in the study of entrepreneurial families (Caspary, 2023; 2017; Lueger et al., 2018; Stamm, 2023; 2013) or of parenting and privilege (Sherman, 2017; 2020). This paper can be categorized as part of this field of research, as it engages with a group that is concerned with family history, relies on traditions, and takes historical rules seriously.

[1]However, the law on names in Germany continues to make the former noble titles and predicates ("von") visible. Nonetheless, they are no longer titles but only name components.
[2]All German quotes were translated into English by the author.
[3]Historian Conze estimated in 2000 that only one eighth of all noble name bearers are members of one of those organizations (Conze, 2000). For a historical insight into the development of nobility associations, see Malinowski, who provides a differentiated account especially for the crucial years between 1918 and 1933 and during the Third Reich (Malinowski, 2004).

This article asks how the noble family is created in the field of nobility associations and how it is negotiated. What does family mean here and how is it produced? The paper is mainly based on the analysis of 11 narrative interviews (Helfferich, 2004) using the Grounded Theory coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1996). Relying on the concepts of doing and displaying family (Jurczyk, 2020; Finch, 2007) as analytical tools, the analysis of the empirical material shows that doing and displaying family within the "noble" family encompasses the construction of its exceptionality and various practices of drawing boundaries externally as well as internally.

2. Theoretical framework: Doing and displaying family

In the research project[4] this article relies on, I ask how exclusivity - both in the sense of exclusion and exceptionality - is produced in exclusive clubs and associations (von Bose, 2023). By exclusivity, I mean two things: firstly, that these clubs and associations are considered prestigious and sometimes "elitist," and secondly, that access to them is limited. For the analysis, I work with a concept I call doing exclusivity. With this approach, I borrow from West and Zimmerman's doing gender (1987) as well as doing family (Jurczyk et al., 2014; Morgan, 1996) and assume that exclusivity and the feeling of belonging to a particularly select circle are produced in everyday life. Correspondingly, in this article, I work with praxeological approaches in family studies that focus on social practices which produce and shape the concept of family. In addition, I draw on historical research on the nobility and introduce the concept of exclusivity to analyze the particularities of noble family practices (see section 3).

Two theoretical approaches to family research are especially fruitful for my analysis: the concept of doing family (Jurczyk, 2020; Jurczyk et al., 2014; Morgan, 1996) and the concept of displaying family (Dermott & Seymore, 2011; Finch, 2007). The latter can be seen as part of the former (Jurczyk, 2020). As Morgan, who first developed the concept of "family practices", states: "family is about process and doing" (Morgan, 2013: 5). Family is not a static entity, but something that emerges in practice and is embedded in social relations. Following the German sociologists Jurczyk, Lange and Thiessen, doing family as a praxeological and practice-theoretical concept focuses "on the practices of establishing and shaping personal relationships between generations and, where applicable, genders." (Jurczyk et al., 2014: 8) It is not about what family is or should be, but about the concrete production of family in everyday life and in the life course. Doing family is characterized as an "analytical grid" (Jurczyk & Meysen, 2020: 28) that can be used empirically. It is based on fundamental assumptions of practice theory (Lange, 2020) and draws on the social constructivist theory of "doing gender" (West/Zimmerman, 1987). Jurczyk and Meysen distinguish between two basic forms of doing family: firstly, balance management, which addresses the organizational level of everyday life, and secondly, the construction of commonality, which refers to the production of an identity as a group that belongs together through everyday interaction (Jurczyk & Meysen, 2020: 29ff). The authors distinguish three variants of this second form of creating group belonging. *Firstly*, the creation of belonging through inclusion and exclusion:

> „For although the family is not a closed group, it is procedurally 'exclusive' in the sense of the necessity of procedures/practices for the individual selection of membership, which in turn require the recognition of others." (Jurczyk & Meysen, 2020: 30)

This becomes particularly clear in Nelson's work (2006), who analyzes how rural, White single mothers are doing family by including and excluding their own mothers or the men in their lives during care arrangements. *Secondly*, intimacy and closeness are created by producing a sense of "we", which can be done through rituals such as shared meals or festivities (Audehm, 2021) or through practices such as "joking, gentle teasing and laughing" (Hedin et al., 2012: 625). The *third* variant is the concept of "displaying family", which was developed by Finch (2007). Building on the earlier work on family practices by Morgan (1996), according to Finch, "display" means

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> "the process by which individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant audiences that certain of their actions do constitute 'doing family things' and thereby confirm that these relationships are 'family' relationships." (Finch, 2007: 67)

This seems all the more necessary, because contemporary families are usually not limited to one household in which all of the family members live. In addition to divorce or co-parenting, Finch also mentions "broader kin relationships" (Finch, 2007: 68). Although Finch bases the need for "displaying" family relationships particularly on the increasing fluidity and diversity of current family relations, she deliberately does not limit the concept to that:

> "In a world where families are defined by the qualitative character of the relationships rather than by membership, and where individual identities are deeply bound up with those relationships, all relationships require an element of display to sustain them as family relationships." (Finch, 2007: 71)

As I will show, noble family practices such as family associations are still strongly characterized by the question of membership. Nevertheless, the "element of display" is relevant here because the conditions for membership itself have to be debated, negotiated, and defended. Also, as Finch suggests, in every family, relationships change over time and must be renegotiated, and therefore "displayed," in order to achieve social reality. This is particularly true for families that cultivate historically noble traditions, as the nobility and its traditional understanding of family are in need of explanation in modern times.[5]

3. State of the art: "Noble" family practices

The state of research on noble families in the German context is largely limited to historical studies. Research on contemporary practices of descendants of the historical nobility is scarce (Langelüddecke, 2020; von Samson-Himmelstjerna, 2016; von Kuenheim, 2013; de Saint Martin, 2003). First and foremost there is the sociological study on the nobility by the French sociologist de Saint Martin (2003), in which the noble family as well as individual family practices play a major role. In Strobel's analysis of novels from "daughters of the nobility" around 2000, despite the diversity of noble narratives, the projection onto the noble family as an almost timeless constant becomes clear (Strobel, 2016). Another pioneering study is that of German historian Langelüddecke (2020), who examines how noble families returned to post-socialist Brandenburg after the reunification of Germany in 1990. While her focus is not on familial practices, some characteristics of noble families do become apparent through this work, such as their focus on family history and the passing down of this history from generation to generation.

While the scarce research on contemporary noble practices touches on the subject of families, the research on family in historical studies on nobility is all the more extensive.[6] One reason for this may lie in what Conze and Wienfort note for the historiography of the nobility: the "noble identity" and habitus can only be assessed if one also takes the noble family, the family unit and the noble individual into consideration (Conze & Wienfort, 2004a: 6). Family in the nobility typically means "the totality of kinship relations" (Conze, 2000: 343): "In its self-image, the noble family was never a nuclear family limited to parents and children, but primarily, as a clan or lineage, a family group defined by blood lines of patrilineal kinship and a common consciousness of descent." (Conze, 2000: 343) Historically, the main function of the family was to exercise and secure power and dominance (Conze, 2000). For the East Elbian nobility, Seelig points out that in contrast to the nuclear family, the noble family not only included all currently living members of the family line, but also ancestors, recently deceased and future family members (Seelig, 2015).[7]

[5]Morgan suggests that the idea of display could also be used to explore "the overlap between class practices and family practices" and refers to the exceptional example of "members of the Royal Family on the balcony of Buckingham palace" (Morgan, 2013: 63).
[6]On the history of the German nobility, especially in the 19th and 20th century, cf. Marburg & von Kuenheim, 2016; Reif, 2012; Wienfort, 2006; Conze & Wienfort, 2004b; Malinowski & Funck, 1999. Overviews as well as specific accounts of the history of the nobility in Europe can be found in Demel, 2011; Leonhard & Wieland, 2011; Dronkers & Shift, 2011; Mosse, 1993; Wehler, 1990; Lieven, 1992.
[7]"Even after the 'collapse of 1945', the East Elbian nobility held on to the traditional noble view that a noble family is a unity of past, present and future generations that transcends time and space." (Seelig, 2015: 153) After their loss of influence and other possibilities

Another distinguishing feature of many noble families are family foundations and family associations that became particularly relevant in the 19th century as a reaction to the loss of positions of power (Wienfort, 2006: 120). Family associations aim at the preservation of family unity and family history (cf. section 5.2). Wienfort therefore argues that the conceptualization of the German nobility in modern times as a purely cultural behavior pattern with a system of values and habitus ("Adeligkeit": Malinowski & Funck, 1999: 245ff.; Wienfort, 2006: 153ff.) is insufficient, as the nobility to some extent legally remains preserved in civil law (Wienfort, 2011).

Conze distinguishes between the horizontal and vertical dimensions of family when it comes to noble families, which are interdependent (Conze, 2000). The horizontal dimension refers to the broad web of kin relationships, which individuals must be aware of, however, in order for it to work as a network. Thus, according to Conze, a "widely extended family consciousness" (Conze, 2000: 344) is required. For this, he sees as constitutive the "knowledge of common ancestry," (ibid.) ideally of a common ancestor who functions as a "point of reference and orientation" (ibid.). This gives rise to an "identity of descent" (ibid.). Malinowski points to the ability of the nobility to trace their own ancestors back five, ten or more centuries as well as to the selective memory of the nobility to know above all their outstanding ancestors (Malinowski, 2004). The historically evolved understanding of nobility's exceptionality is thus closely linked to family (Clemens, 2011).

A field of research to which the question of contemporary noble family practices connects, albeit in a limited way, is that on entrepreneurial families (Caspary, 2023; 2017; Lueger et al., 2018; Stamm, 2023; 2013). Here, too, family structures differ from other family forms. In entrepreneurial families, the company is in the foreground as a joint property and joint transgenerational task. Similar to the nobility, what family means thus transcends the level of the nuclear family, both with regard to the sequence of generations and with regard to kinship relations. For in the sense of preserving the enterprise, even more distant kinship relations can become relevant (Caspary, 2023: 3). Moreover, the family's common reference to a material possession may parallel noble families, although by far not all noble families are wealthy. In some cases, these fields certainly overlap when an entrepreneurial family has a noble origin.

Although today coming from a noble family does not automatically mean that someone is affluent or influential, the continuation of noble traditions and history within the context of nobility associations at least suggests that their members have an interest in the class privileges and status that the nobility once enjoyed. By using the term exclusivity instead of "elite", in the project I do not presuppose the concept of an elite and its meaning for the research. Rather, the concept is itself part of the object of investigation: instead of merely asking how "elitist" circles reproduce themselves, the project examines the relevance of ideas of elites in the practices of doing exclusivity of clubs and associations. However, the extensive research on elites and on more specific topics such as wealth and inheritance, particularly, but not only, in German-speaking countries, is an important point of reference for my research (Burzan & Vogel, 2023; Beckert, 2013; Daloz, 2012; 2010; Demirovic, 2003; Druyen et al., 2009; Szydlik, 2011; 2004). Although there is no systematic body of research on contemporary "noble" family practices within this field of research, at least studies on related topics can be consulted for a broader understanding of the field. Two studies are particularly noteworthy (König, 2017; Sherman, 2020; 2016). In her insightful study "Gattinnen" (wives), that is, women of German elites, König examines noble circles among many others. König analyzes some of their family practices such as the early introduction of children into "good society" (König, 2017: 121). Sherman's work on rich and affluent New Yorkers is particularly interesting because she decidedly examines the moral and affective components of privilege (Sherman, 2020) and elite parenting (Sherman, 2016). She creates a complex picture of lives of privilege that also reveals ambivalences and moral issues of the interviewees. Sherman also points out that research on elites and privilege lack a perspective on the elite's own accounts on social inequality, living with privilege and especially "conflicted feelings" they might have about it (Sherman, 2020: 5). The extensive research on educational inequality and "elite" educational structures in Germany also serves as a reference point for my research (Helsper et al., 2018; Hummrich, 2017; Krüger & Helsper, 2014; Kalthoff, 1997). What these areas of research have in common is that they contribute to an interdisciplinary study of social inequalities that focuses less on the marginalized and more on those social positions that are considered influential and "elitist" or see themselves as such.

of distinction after 1945, for at least parts of the German nobility, the family once again took on the function of setting one apart from non-nobles (Seelig, 2015: 157).

Drawing on this state of the art and the theoretical framework described in section 2, in this article I analyze how doing and displaying family in the field of German nobility associations contributes to establishing exclusive belonging.

4. Material and method

The empirical material this article draws on was collected primarily between 2018 and 2022 and includes 11 guided narrative interviews with members of different German nobility associations, field notes of visits to members as well as auto-ethnographic field notes. In contrast to the field of exclusive clubs, where I was able to conduct extensive ethnographic field research (von Bose, 2023), access to the field of nobility associations was much more complicated. With the help of gatekeepers, I found members who were willing to participate in an interview or even invite me to their homes and show me their family heirlooms or archives. However, I was denied access to events for conducting participant observation: "nobody likes to be observed", as one person I talked to put it. Hence, I was not able to conduct participant observation in families or on family days of family associations.[8] However, my personal family background did help me in terms of gaining access to the field, as it enabled me to establish contacts with members of nobility associations. My surname was certainly a prerequisite for finding interview partners, but it was not sufficient on its own: writing to people who did not know me did not lead anywhere. I needed advocates who would contact acquaintances and thus support me.

For this article, I mainly draw on the analysis of interviews with 11 members of nobility associations, for which they gave informed consent. Furthermore, I analyzed field notes regarding the interview settings and atmospheres as well as field notes from visits at the homes of interview partners. Within the research process, I followed the Grounded Theory Methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1996). In line with this research style, the empirical material was thus compiled according to the concept of Theoretical Sampling, constantly alternating between periods of data collection and phases of data analysis (Breuer, 2009). The decision on who to interview, which contexts to visit, and which documents to review was made step by step in the course of the research according to the criteria of minimal and maximal contrasts (Mey & Mruck, 2011). The sample is diverse both in terms of social criteria and attitudes towards the nobility associations. I conducted interviews with older as well as with younger members (two interviewees were in their 20s and 30s, the others were between 40 and 75 years old) and spoke with women as well as with men. As far as the category of social class is concerned, most of my interviewees seemed to have an academic education and to be financially well off. The older interview partners mostly are or have been professionally successful in business or in professions such as law, the younger were in the early stages of their careers or going to university. I spoke with members who consider the regulations of the nobility associations to be very important and suitable for the future as well as with members who were willing to discuss the exclusionary principles or were even critical of them. The sample includes both those who are no longer active in a nobility association and those who are actively involved in it or at least have a very positive attitude towards it. Also, I have spoken to descendants of the historical nobility who are not members of nobility associations and take a critical view of them.

The interview guide of the narrative interviews (Helfferich, 2004; Kruse, 2015) included questions about the (biographical) connection of the interviewees to the nobility association and to their family association (if they had one) and about how they and their family members are or were involved in activities of these associations. However, the topic of family also came up in parts of the interview where I hadn't asked about it. As nobility associations and the topic of family are very closely linked, the interviewees automatically talked about their family or their family values in connection with the topic of nobility (associations). It was not the original aim of my research to investigate family practices. Rather, it was through my research that I became aware of the high relevance of the topic for my field. The fact that I am writing about doing family in the context of nobility associations is therefore already a result of this research.

The interviews were fully transcribed and for the analysis, the software MaxQDA was used. To analyze the data, I used the Grounded Theory coding method (Breuer, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1996). The ethnographic field notes were coded in the same way as the interviews. Through open, axial and selective

[8]The *Deutsches Adelsblatt* (German Nobility Journal) contains reports on family days of large noble families (e.g. Deutsches Adelsblatt, 2024: 28f).

coding (Breuer, 2009) I used the action-theory based coding paradigm to structure the data (Strauss, 1998). The material was sorted and analyzed on successively increasing levels of abstraction: "Coding represents the procedures by which the data are broken up, conceptualized and put together in new ways." (Strauss & Corbin, 1996: 39) So-called memos, i.e. written analyses within the process of analysis, played an important part in bringing together the different materials and results. They served to develop the first theoretical condensations (Strauss & Corbin, 1996), which also included sensitizing concepts such as research literature, historical studies, theoretical approaches as well as the analysis of my own biographical and everyday experiences and affects. The theoretical framework of this article serves as such a sensitizing concept. The categories presented in this article were developed within this coding process.

5. Empirical findings: doing and displaying family in the context of German nobility associations

In the following, the analysis of the material is presented on the basis of two categories: Establishing family exceptionality (5.1) and creating belonging (and not belonging) to the noble family (5.2). The first category shows a specific way of displaying family, while the second category shows other aspects of doing family: the creation of belonging and not belonging through the distinction between noble and non-noble name bearers and through heteronormativity.

5.1 Establishing family exceptionality

When my interviewees talked about family, they referred to a much larger circle than the conventional nuclear family. Family here seemed to be mostly characterized by kinship relationships, some of which widely branched. Most of my interviewees emphasized this fact and presented their own understanding of family as special and distinctive in relation to others. For example, a man in his 60s explained to me:

> "And this focus on family, you can call it Christian or conservative or noble, I don't know, and this understanding that my children of course also get from knowing how many cousins they have and they all show up here and play a role here, I think this meaning of family, with it also a historical meaning/[9] When my kids are asked about family in class, they share something about their grandparents and great-grandparents and cousins and the others just talk about their brother." (Interviewee A)[10]

The first thing that stands out from this quote is that the respondent looked at his understanding of family through the eyes of his children and chose the framework of school to explain it. After all, that is where they encounter children that are not considered noble. From his point of view, his children experience a greater richness where other children quickly reach a limit. Unlike others who remain confined to their nuclear family, his children have a great resource of family relations and, equally important, an awareness of those relations.

In the interview, he also emphasized that he just loved to spend time with his family, and told me the number of all the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of his family. This fits well with his socialization in a context where the historical nobility still plays an important role. After other functions of the noble family had subsided, it seemed of utter importance to families that they established and continued a "sense of family" and "intimate sense of belonging" and solidarity amongst themselves (Seelig, 2015: 158). The interviewee himself did not characterize his understanding of family as genuinely noble, it might also simply be "Christian or conservative". It nevertheless links to the specific understanding of family that is attributed to the nobility.

Genealogy and historical awareness are other important aspects that the interviewees emphasized in relation to family. Almost all respondents mentioned that they found it important to know their own family history. Some of them devoted their free time to their family history, whether by maintaining family

[9]The slash indicates a discontinued sentence in the interview.
[10]The interviews were conducted in German. The quotes used in this article were translated by the author. Some quotes were also edited slightly for better readability.

archives and family history websites, or preserving or collecting items that were of historical significance to their family. An interviewee in her 50s emphasized that there were no differences between her "bourgeois" family of origin and her husband's "noble" family in terms of "behavior" and "values".[11] However, the historical dimension seemed to set them apart:

> "The only thing, so to speak, that was new to me was a family that you can trace back over so many centuries, eight hundred years. That was new to me. And to deal with that and to see what that also did, so that's really very, very interesting [...] it was just really also a very significant family." (Interviewee B)

Although she particularly emphasized that there were hardly any differences anymore and thus almost dissolved the exceptional nature of the noble family, fascination resonated when she talked about the significance of this family. Like her, also other interviewees told me details about a particular ancestor or about specific achievements made in the name of the family over the centuries. As a member of such a family, one seems to be part of a greatness that endures for centuries - and thereby, perhaps, also gains significance oneself.

This resonates with the "vertical dimension" of the noble family concept (Conze, 2000: 344), a feeling of connection to one's ancestors (Malinowski 2004; Seelig 2015). Conze describes the even greater importance of maintaining family history since the nineteenth century as a means of preserving noble distinction despite processes of modernization and conveying to individuals that they are part of a chain, and that family continuity holds value (Conze, 2021: 85; Clemens, 2011: 191). Thus, both the vertical and horizontal dimension of the noble family according to Conze are recognizable in the interviews: awareness of the widely ramified family, which begins at an early age, and interest in the history of one's own family and in individual outstanding relatives.

While these representations of the noble family resonate with a rather pre-modern model of extended family, where belonging is established through family ties, (late) modern elements can also be found in the narratives, especially regarding the larger context of the nobility associations. A young man, portrayed his widespread kinship as well as the nobility association as a network. His understanding of family included not only his immediate or extended family, but also the contacts he gained through the nobility association, which in his view itself felt like a family. When asked about what he associated with the nobility association, he among other things described how he benefited from these family ties when traveling abroad:

> "So it's such a great, such a great trust through these family ties that it's no problem at all that I'm traveling in Southeast Asia and my father then says to me, yes, there are people in [Southeast Asian city], ask if you can stay overnight with them. And that works out. So I go there, there's a gin and tonic, I get a guest room. I don't know them personally at all, but that's not just a leap of faith, it's an absolute, yes, that's something very special, I would say, that that's possible." (Interviewee C)

This narrative presents family as similar to other late-modern networking practices (Reckwitz, 2017: 213): through a third party, contacts were provided that had previously been unknown. The image that emerges here, however, first and foremost, is one of privilege. Instead of describing the encounter with his hosts, he painted a picture of luxury and comfort they provided for him all due to his family connections.

The way the interviewees portrayed their families can be interpreted as a way of displaying their family relationships and their understanding of family to the outside world (which is represented by me as the interviewer at this moment). They presented their own exceptionality by either presenting themselves as belonging to a very old and well-established family or to an useful family network.

However, they also emphasized that they did not want to stand out from others. Pride in one's own family origins from the nobility or even arrogance in light of this was explicitly rejected. As one man in his 70s told me:

> "Of course, you will immediately notice that every family you meet was the most important in their region. That alone I think is an (laughing) important point, to recognize that. So the relativization is

[11]This interview partner is a member of a nobility association, although she herself comes from a "non-noble" family. According to my interviewees, women who marry men who belong to the historical nobility can become members of nobility associations. This might rely on the patriarchal historical understanding of the German nobility that someone's status is determined by the status of their father or husband (von Elverfeldt-Ulm, 2001: 22).

also a, what is crucial, the relativization of one's own importance and supposed greatness. Noble origin may not result in pride." (Interviewee D)

It is not essential at this point to decide whether this credo is actually lived or whether this is again a demarcation from others who do not know how to deal with one's own origins in an "honorable" way. What is more interesting is that such affirmations can be counted as part of a self-presentation that can be described as an "understatement" typical of the historical nobility. It is considered important to be able to laugh about oneself and not to appear too "elitist" or unworldly. Moreover, it is part of the equality postulate of modernity: to see oneself as something better because of one's own origin is no longer suitable or justifiable.[12]

The oscillation between establishing one's own exceptionality and a certain understatement is part of the practice of displaying family in this context. This includes both the practice of maintaining family relationships across generations and widely ramified branches of the family, as well as the display of one's own modesty regarding these practices.

5.2 Creating belonging and non-belonging to the (noble) family

The practices of families within the context of nobility associations that can be retracted from the interviews appear to at least partly revolve around the question of nobility itself, the question of who, according to the historical understanding of nobility (von Elverfeldt-Ulm, 2001), is or is not considered to be noble. This dividing line can even run through families. In the case of one of my interview partners, the children of his son are considered noble according to the historical understanding of nobility, but not the children of his daughter, who married a "non-noble" man. Thus, while the children of the son can later become members of a nobility association, the others would be denied this access. This interviewee did not find that problematic, but some of the interviewees questioned or strongly problematized the regulations of membership of their nobility associations.[13] They recognized that these rules no longer applied in a modern world and, as a consequence, thought about the future of nobility associations as organizations. An interviewee in his 40s found it "absurd" how discussions about membership in nobility associations were stuck in the past. However, he still understood the dilemma in which they found themselves: "At the same time, of course, they rightly say, yes, then we can actually abolish ourselves. So of course that's a very big tightrope walk for them, so to speak." (Interviewee E) Since the nobility no longer exists politically and legally and the only basis that remains for this type of organization is an outdated law, the construct of the nobility threatens to collapse if this basis is essentially called into question. Hence, most of my interview partners did not fundamentally question the historical rules as a basis of nobility associations.

One family practice specific to this context is the organization of family in so-called family associations. These can themselves become members of nobility associations and are historically directly related to the question of belonging to the nobility (Conze, 2000; Wienfort 2011). Family associations are a form of organization that many noble families that are widely branched and historically far-reaching use as a structure to pursue common concerns. These can include the preservation of shared traditions and family history. In addition to common activities such as family days and work on family history, family associations provide care for their members, which Jurczyk et al. (2014) place at the center of the concept of doing family. Family associations historically have always provided support for family members in need (Wienfort, 2011: 109f.; Malinowski, 2004: 54), and active relationship maintenance is practiced here. What is central to this form of care work is that it encompasses not only the immediate family, but also extended kinship relationships. One interviewee told me that as a family association board member, they often drove across country to visit "old aunts" to check on them and make them feel like they mattered and belonged. Another told me about their family days when all name bearers were invited: "And we had a family day last fall, a get-together, where over 80 percent were there. Which is extremely high when you look at other associations. [...] And everyone enjoys seeing each other and looks forward to each other" (Interviewee F).[14]

[12]However, my sample certainly has a bias, since the people I was able to talk to were interested in reflecting on their own practices and beliefs about the subject.

[13]This, again, might reflect the specifics of my sample: those who were interested in talking to me about nobility associations were open to reflecting on its underlying principles, rather than viewing them and their regulations as non-negotiable facts.

[14]Family associations differ from the larger structure of nobility associations in the very fact that they are intended to strengthen the cohesion of the (noble) family. While the decision to join a nobility association is presumably based on a genuine interest in the project

Family associations usually have an advisory board or executive committee, often presided over by a so-called "senior". Depending on the organizational form of such a family association, who is or can become a member can be based on the principles of the historical German nobility law that nobility associations rely on. Interviewees that told me about debates on these rules emphasized that membership did not influence whether someone was invited to festivities or family days, but only determined formal matters such as voting rights at meetings. According to an interviewee, not every family association abides by the rules of the historical nobility law, but a family association that is or wants to be a member of a nobility association as

an organization is supposed to adhere to it.[15]

As Finch with reference to Elias points out, names can express both individuality (first names) and kin relationships (surnames) (Finch, 2008: 711ff). In the case of families who still uphold noble traditions in the German context, the family name holds even more meaning: it indicates a connection to the historical nobility. However, name and nobility are not automatically linked. One of my interview partners pointed out:

> "The subject of nobility name right is an immense subject. Today, I don't have to tell you, you can't actually communicate that to people your age. The young women say, why? Well, I have my name. Whether it's noble or not, but why should I give it up? To the point of, why shouldn't I pass it on?" (Interviewee G)

What the interviewee was referring to here is the increasing discrepancy between the understanding of nobility from before 1919, which nobility associations follow, and the constantly updated naming law in Germany (Conze, 2021: 178). Nobility associations and also some family associations rely on the historical principle that nobility and name are inherited only through the "male line" via marital descent, women born into non-noble families can acquire nobility through marriage to a noble man (Deutscher Adelsrechtsausschuss, 2024). Women, however, lose their noble status when marrying a non-noble man. What in some interviews seemed like a simple membership category for nobility associations (either one is noble or not) seemed to pose more questions upon closer inspection. As became clear through the interviews, according to this principle, members can be men that are considered descendants of the historical nobility, their wives, and children. Daughters who marry a non-noble man in some nobility associations can remain members themselves, but their husband and children cannot become members. Adopted children cannot become members of a nobility association (unless they themselves are considered noble), and the same is true for children of unmarried parents. Also, a woman should not pass her noble name on to her (non-noble) husband and children. Hence, within the field of nobility associations, kin relationships seem to be crossed by the issue of nobility/non-nobility, which is not attached to the name itself, but to its transmission in the paternal line and to consanguinity.

In the case of a family association that relies on this historical model, this means that while all family members are welcome at family days, festivities and meetings, some cannot vote on decisions and, most importantly, are not considered noble. One interviewee explained such a case to me: a woman in her extended family had kept her noble name after marriage and had passed it on to her children. The interviewee worried about the consequences of this decision for this relative's children:

> "Your children grow up with a seemingly noble name that is not noble. And they grow up in this kind of consciousness, they belong normally, and then when they want to be accepted, for example, in a nobility association, if it goes badly, they find out for the first time that they don't belong. [...] And then the damage is much greater than if you say from the beginning, look, I've always felt comfortable in

of preserving the concept of nobility, membership in one's own family association may have simpler motives such as an attachment to one's own kin relationships or interest in the family history.

[15]Wienfort describes how, in re-establishing family associations after 1945, the noble families relaxed the rules for membership. This resulted in the emergence of a wide range of regulations: conservative associations, consistent with nobility associations, were oriented towards the historical nobility in order to maintain a "traditionally exclusive genealogy" (Wienfort, 2011: 110), while others wanted to reach the largest possible number of members and for example also included married daughters and adoptees. This range of regulations is also reflected in the narratives in my sample. Furthermore, some of my interviewee's families do not have a family association at all and some are not organized in the described form.

this family, I love this name, I'm happy to pass it on to you, but you just have to know, you're not noble." (Interviewee G)

The interviewee drew the distinction between the "seemingly noble" name and the noble status that can only be passed on through the paternal line. She seemed to be empathetic towards the individual consequences of this rule based on the historical nobility law and argued for open communication about it so that it would lose its emotional impact on the individual. In the interview, the interviewee weighed the arguments for and against maintaining the historical rules for membership and problematized their exclusionary consequences. However, in this example, she questioned how this specific relative dealt with the knowledge of the facts of membership in nobility associations. Had the relative taken on her husband's non-noble name or communicated the historical principles of nobility to her children, those children still would have been excluded from the possibility of membership in a nobility association, but in her view would have been spared the late discovery of not belonging.

One of the interviewees, who was in his 70s and a board member of his family association, explained the membership rules of his family association by mentioning a "case" that seemed to challenge the regulations and also those who stick to them:

"So at the moment, so it is relatively clear in our bylaws, this legal descent through the male line. We have adhered to this until now. [...] But we have a very original case coming up. Namely, the son of a cousin is openly gay and has a life partnership. Charming guy, both very nice, and he has now asked, how is it, if I marry now. That has never been intended at all. [...] But (laughing) no idea what happens then. You have to think about, how does that continue. Is there an analogy, you say, yeah okay, if he passes on the name, that's just meant for men, but then how is it in a same-sex partnership." (Interviewee F)

In contrast to other cases he had named earlier (adopted children and unmarried women passing on their name to their child), he labeled the example of a gay couple, who wants to marry, as "a very original case". In reflecting on this, he hinted at why he thought it was unique: that in this case, the "male line" would be maintained, but in a manner that "has never been intended" by the age-old, heteronormative rules of patrilineality. Perhaps he also considered this case to be a novelty because marriage between same-sex couples has only been possible in Germany since 2017. In any case, the fact that this "charming" young man approached him as a board member of the family association can be interpreted as a wish or perhaps even an attempt to challenge the rules. The interviewee mentally played through the possibility of accepting the spouse in this "case" as a member: "You have to think about, how does that continue". It remains unclear what exactly he meant by this - the future of his family association with softened rules or the consequences of applying the principle of the "male line" to a gay couple? In any case, he did not seem to be willing to take that step but stuck to the old principles. As became clear through the interview, in his view, the family association needed a clear direction to ensure cohesion. However, he distinguished between the individual and structural levels of the family association: he emphasized that everyone was welcome to participate in social events such as family days. The exclusions only had an effect on the structural level, as he explained to me. He minimized the significance by referring to the brevity of the meeting where this would become relevant at all:

"Everyone, everyone welcome, great. [...] As long as the contact is lively, everyone can be there. [...] But I always emphasize that now we'll have a very brief ten-minute association meeting and only they can vote. That's how it is." (Interviewee F)

While other respondents advocated for opening the structures of both family and nobility associations in order for them to survive in the long term, this interviewee argued for a clearly defined structure in his family association in order to guarantee cohesion. He did not relate this to the individuals themselves or to social interactions on family days ("everyone welcome, great"), but the decision to stick to the old regulations leads to the exclusion of the very people who do not fit within the rigid boundaries of historical nobility: only family members that are considered proper descendants of the historical nobility (in the "male line") can vote in the association meeting.

Thus, homosexuality is not completely excluded in this context anymore, but nevertheless seems to be far from being included fully - not to mention other gender identities or sexualities within the LGBTIQ+ community. One of my interviewees told me that as a gay man he had neither been supported by his nuclear family nor met with openness in the broader context of his nobility association. He wished this was different: "Would be cool if it was a little more open, of course." (Interviewee H) But in his experience, people in this context "hold on" to the heteronormative model of family very strongly. He is an active member of a nobility association but seems to be accepted only to the extent that this acceptance does not challenge the "heterosexual dominance" (Hark & Laufenberg, 2013: 229) of the context. While he does not hide his homosexuality, it is not addressed by other people except by himself. However, the heteronormativity of the context was also evident in his own narratives:

> "For many it is simply that they are in/, that this model is very, very appealing to them. We are married, heteronorm. [...] We have children, they play with wooden toys, there is a big garden. And two dogs.
> *Interviewer (laughs softly)*
> Just like I've had and that's already really just a/, so really an incredibly beautiful model. [...] I think I would have liked it that way, too." (Interviewee H)

In this passage, the heteronormative nuclear family appears as a "happy object" in Sara Ahmed's sense (Ahmed, 2010) which is based on the othering of queer lives, as Yv E. Nay makes clear (Nay, 2015). The image of the happy family in the interview quote seems overly romanticized especially in light of the interviewee's own experiences: "I really wanted to be part of it. I wanted to belong." (Interviewee H) However, he did not seem to draw a connection between the "beautiful model" of the heteronormative nuclear family and the lack of support he received when he discovered that he himself did not fit into such an image after all. He ultimately portrayed the experience of not fitting into the heteronormative noble context as a moment of awakening, finding a way to spin it into something positive. He presented himself as a person who had learned a lot and had become a better, less snobbish, less entitled version of himself as a result. Also, he normalized his experience by emphasizing how common it was not to be supported by one's own family when coming out and that this experience was not limited to noble circles. But this does not hide the fact that the family model and community he grew up in and of which he wanted to be a part of had left very little room for him. Furthermore, in this case, family is not only constructed as "an institutionalized way to stabilize heteronormativity" (Nay, 2019: 171), but the nobility association as a broader context seems to stabilize it further: "And at the moment, I would say that the tendency is that many in these circles say that it is a good model. I like it, it is something I can imagine, living in a family like that. And behind that then also comes/, comes the whole other thing. That one then knows the other families as well." What exactly he meant by "the whole other thing" remained vague, but suggests that the heteronormative model of family, with dogs and a garden, is supported by a network of (noble) families that live the same model. His narrative hinted to a form of family network to which only those have full access who themselves have a heteronormative family to offer.

Doing family in the context of nobility and family associations my interviewees told me about is both an extraordinary and traditional one. In contrast to most families, technical questions of membership are wrestled with, and the rules for this are not based on current family law but are oriented toward past times. Hence, doing family here is based on drawing external as well as internal boundaries and producing a sense of belonging and of unity (Jurczyk & Meysen, 2020) through the distinction of affiliation or non-affiliation to the historical nobility. All this is based on a patriarchal logic that aims to preserve old privileges, the foundations of which have long since broken down.

6. Conclusion

In this article I engaged with family practices in the context of nobility associations and asked for the production of (the noble) family in this context. Thus I did not study "the German nobility", but a very specific field, since only a small proportion of all bearers of historically noble names are members of one of these organizations. The basis for this article were 11 interviews with members of nobility associations which I analyzed by using the Grounded Theory coding method. For the analysis, I worked with a concept I call doing exclusivity. Instead of presupposing "elite" as a category for this field, I ask for exclusivity in the

sense of both exceptionality and exclusion. In section 5.1, I analyzed how my interviewees presented their families as exceptional, while at the same time emphasizing the importance of not showing pride or arrogance about their family origins. Displaying family in this context seems to include both the practice of maintaining family relationships across generations as well as widely ramified branches of the family, and the display of one's own modesty regarding these practices. In section 5.2, I traced different practices of inclusion and exclusion that revolved around the question of who belongs or does not belong to the historical nobility. This question seems to be relevant for a membership in nobility associations, but also some family associations, a type of organization which some larger noble families use to ensure their cohesion. The analysis highlighted the deeply ingrained heteronormativity embedded in these family practices.

The practices I examined seem diametrically opposed to the "non-normative" practices which current family research mostly focuses on and which the concepts of family practices (Morgan, 1996), un/doing family (Jurczyk, 2020) and displaying family (Finch, 2007) were developed on. However, these concepts are useful tools for analysis here as well. As described, according to Jurczyk and Meysen (2020), doing family consists of two basic forms. The first form, balance management, involves the organization of everyday life and the second form addresses the construction of meaning and commonality on a level of identity. This second form involves the construction of belonging through exclusion and inclusion, the production of a sense of "we" and displaying family. The organizational level of the family practices I focused on includes more than the daily routines of living together. Rather, doing family here also often encompasses the organization of a family association and the nobility association as a larger structure behind it. These organizational structures are intertwined with the vertical and horizontal sense of family (Conze, 2000) that my interview partners displayed – and thus the second form of doing family: in order to create cohesion in the extended family (horizontal) and to maintain an awareness of ancestors, the history of the family as a whole as well as caring for future generations (vertical), even distant relatives are taken care of, family days are organized or the rules of the family association as well as the nobility association are debated. Furthermore, doing family in this field encompasses more explicit forms of inclusion and exclusion than those known from research on un/doing family. The formalized structures of nobility associations and some family associations, which families that are members are woven into, come with their own set of rules of membership. While these rules do not affect every single family and family association, the question who is considered noble and who is "just" a bearer of the name still seems to shape this field. Embedded in these structures and debates specific to this context, relatively common heteronormatively and patriarchally structured exclusions and marginalizations of "non-normative" images of family can be observed. The clear focus on tradition and the orientation towards centuries-old regulations, however, seem to create a condensed normative context. In the context of nobility associations, who belongs and does not belong to the noble family seems to be structured in a deeply heteronormative and patriarchal way. Family members that do not conform to these norms seem to be partially included, but not in a way that would break down the traditional rules in concrete practices. Thus, homosexual partnerships tend to be given the status of anecdotes or are tacitly accepted. The assessment of passing on the noble name via the maternal line oscillates between tentative understanding and rejection. While family members that are considered non-noble according to historical principles are welcome at family gatherings as well as festivities and events of nobility as well as family associations, full membership and belonging is a different subject.

The practices of displaying family studied here seem to be less geared towards asserting oneself against normative ideas of family than in Finch's analyses (Finch, 2007). However, the employed displaying practices also defend something that deviates from the nuclear family: that a wide circle of relatives and sometimes even the nobility association itself is regarded as family. Despite the modesty or understatement of the interviewees, displaying family here is not about having one's family recognized as such, but rather about marking it as something exceptional. Doing family here is thus closely intertwined with what I call doing exclusivity: the making and perpetuating of an exclusive circle and in this case, historically established class privileges. From this we can derive a question for the concepts of family research: in what way and in what contexts are practices of displaying and doing family also about displaying and doing class?

From a theoretical point of view, it is interesting that in contrast to other family forms, the practices of displaying family as going beyond the nuclear family is central here, although, not from a non-normative, but from a traditional direction. A large part of doing family in this context consists of reflecting on what family is and where its boundaries lie, preserving knowledge about ancestors and thinking about future generations. Furthermore, apparently doing family, including its element of display, within the

reproduction of this traditional, normative family structure can go beyond daily routines and encompass constructing, maintaining, and debating larger structures such as associations.

"Noble" families are a rather unusual topic when measured against current discussions in family research. Instead of opening up the discourse to family constellations that are socially marginalized and examining the everyday life of "non-normative" families such as patchwork, "rainbow" or co-parenting families, this topic leads to examining practices of preserving traditional, and sometimes exclusionary, notions of family. I want to argue that the topic is nevertheless relevant for family research. Despite all the changes in family practices, it must not be overlooked that many family constellations still hang on to old structures. This might reflect a desire for continuity and security in the face of disintegrating social structures and the dissolution of entrenched institutions. In the case of the family practices I looked at, this is very much to the point. When oriented toward historical regulations and privileges, social change might seem more threatening than liberating. In the family practices I analyzed, there seems to be little room for alternative definitions of family. At the same time, the analysis of the negotiations and debates around the regulations reveals that even "the noble family" is not an unchanging construct: which case is to be handled how, which tightrope walks must be taken in view of the diversification of family forms? The analysis of all these discussions exposes the construct of (the historical) nobility, which is much more precarious and susceptible to disruption than expected. It also shows that this context is increasingly confronted with the reality of fights for (gender) equality, a diversification of gender identities, sexualities and family forms. Thus, in discussions on the historical regulations, other versions of reality must already be taken into account.

The field seems to vacillate between tentative change and the persistence of traditional and exclusionary structures, whereby persistence seems to predominate so far. The family practices analyzed mostly perpetuate the exclusivity of some and the exclusion of others. The heteronormative and patriarchal structures that lie beneath these specific practices point beyond the specific issue of German nobility associations. They can be seen as a social phenomenon that can shed light on practices of exclusion, the preservation of privilege, and forces of persistence, while at the same time revealing potential for transformation.

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Information in German

Deutscher Titel

Doing exclusivity by doing family? ‘Adlige’ familiäre Praktiken zwischen Wandel und Persistenz

Zusammenfassung

Fragestellung: In diesem Beitrag wird untersucht, wie Familie im Kontext deutscher Adelsverbände, die adelige Traditionen und Geschichte aufrechterhalten wollen, hergestellt, dargestellt und verhandelt wird.

Hintergrund: Während es umfangreiche historische Forschungen über den deutschen Adel und sein Verständnis von Familie gibt, zeigt sich eine Forschungslücke in Bezug auf das aktuelle Selbstverständnis und die Praktiken von Familien, die sich als Nachkommen des historischen deutschen Adels verstehen. Bezieht sich die Forschung im Bereich der Family Studies außerdem weitgehend auf Transformationen familiärer Praktiken als Folge gesellschaftlichen Wandels und Familienformen jenseits von Heteronormativität, widmet sich der Beitrag familiären Praktiken, die sich Wandel eher zu widersetzen scheinen und an Traditionen und Normen festhalten.

Methode: Das empirische Material besteht aus elf leitfadengestützten narrativen Interviews mit Mitgliedern verschiedener deutscher Adelsverbände sowie Feldnotizen. Der Forschungsprozess folgt der Grounded-Theory-Methodologie, für die Analyse der Daten wurde der Kodierprozess der Grounded Theory verwendet.

Ergebnisse: Im Kontext von Adelsverbänden wird die adlige Familie als außergewöhnlich (historisch bedeutsam und weit verzweigt) konstruiert, während zugleich darauf geachtet wird, diese Außergewöhnlichkeit nicht mit Stolz oder Arroganz zu verbinden. Im Kontext formeller Strukturen wie Adelsverbänden sowie einiger Familienverbände drehen sich verschiedene Praktiken der Inklusion und (heteronormativen) Exklusion um die Frage, wer als adelig gilt und wer nicht. Familiäre Praktiken im Bereich der Adelsverbände scheinen zwischen dem Festhalten an (vergeschlechtlichten) Traditionen und einer vorsichtigen Öffnung für gesellschaftlichen Wandel zu changieren.

Schlussfolgerung: „Doing family“ und „displaying family“ sind in diesem Bereich eng mit dem verknüpft, was ich als „doing exclusivity“ bezeichne: das Herstellen und Aufrechterhalten von Exklusivität.

Schlagwörter: Deutsche Adelsverbände, Elite, Privileg, displaying family, Exklusion, Heteronormativität

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