Linking Ages – un/doing age and family in the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Objective: In this paper we ask how and through which social practices age and family are relationally being un/done in the course of the pandemic in Germany, and how these un/doings shape, shift or even break intergenerational relations.

Background: The spread of the coronavirus and the attempts of governments to slow it down are severely affecting livelihoods worldwide. The institutionalised ageism underlying these government measures affects the youngest and oldest in society in particular (Ayalon et al. 2020; van Dyk et al. 2020). Intergenerational relations of social reproduction enacted, inter alia, through practices of eldercare, grandparenting, or voluntary work, are significantly limited in the current pandemic, as older adults are framed as an 'at-risk group', children as 'silent transmitters', and young adults as a 'risky group' (Ayalon et al. 2020; Stokes & Patterson 2020). These constructions contribute to the constitution, stabilisation and 'doing' of age in the pandemic.

Method: We present findings from longitudinal research that was conducted through qualitative, problem-centred interviews between March 2020 and February 2021 with persons of different ages living in different household and care constellations in Germany.

Results: Whereas in non-pandemic times *doing age* can be constitutive for *doing family* – as a constellation traditionally perceived to comprise multiple generations – we see the opposite happening in the pandemic: as age-based government measures to contain the spread of the virus limit intergenerational relations, older adults face the risk of being excluded from families. Hence, *doing age* can lead to a *redoing* or even an *undoing* of family.

Conclusion: The paper outlines the potential of a 'linking ages' approach for the study of family lives and of intergenerational relations in times of crises.

Key words: Covid-19, intergenerational relations, un/doing age, Doing and Undoing Family, social practices, linking ages

1. Introduction

The spread of the coronavirus and the attempts of governments to slow it down are severely affecting livelihoods worldwide. In Germany, the first lockdown occurred from late March to early May 2020 as a key tool of the Covid-19 restrictions. Public life was shut down through no-contact orders based upon what was classified as a "household", retailers were forced to close, and crowds were banned in public and private areas. Kindergartens and schools remained closed during the lockdown and, unlike hair salons, for example, beyond the end of the lockdown, until the end of June 2020. However, children of parents in system-relevant professions (e.g., in the medical field) were able to take advantage of emergency care in kindergartens and after-school programs. There were particularly strict contact restrictions in nursing and senior homes. Residents were not allowed to receive visitors and were additionally isolated in their rooms. The second lockdown took place from mid-December 2020 to the end of January 2021. The measures taken were similar to those of the first lockdown, although emergency care for children in kindergarten and after-school programs was no longer dependent on the system relevance of their parents' profession.[1]

Although the usefulness of these measures is by no means to be disputed here, it becomes apparent that these measures do not address the population independently of their chronological age, but rather as members of certain age groups. This differentiation into the age groups of childhood, young adulthood, and older adulthood is problematic because it constructs homogeneous groups of people and assigns certain attributes to each of these age groups while denying other attributes. Thus, children are addressed as 'silent transmitters,' young adults as a 'risky group,' and older adults as an 'at-risk group' (Ayalon et al. 2020; Stokes & Patterson 2020). These one-sided attributions not only obscure the diversity that is evident within age groups but also contribute to differentiation into at-risk and non-at-risk groups based on chronological age, which can activate age stereotypes and reinforce ageism. For example, the precept of self-isolation of older adults, often expressed as well-intentioned advice at the beginning of the Corona pandemic, can lead to actual restrictions on the self-determination of these people, or to older people being seen as a burden (Kessler 2020; Pelizäus & Heinz 2020). This kind of institutionalized ageism underlying government measures affects the youngest and oldest in society in particular (Ayalon et al. 2020; van Dyk et al. 2020). Age-based differences and the attributions formulated about them become virulent within certain social environments. The family, in which, by definition, several age groups live together or with each other, is one of the most obvious, and in public discourse, most present. Intergenerational relations of social reproduction, enacted, inter alia, through practices of eldercare or grand-parenting, are significantly restricted in the current pandemic, while the effects of home office, home schooling, and home study place new strains on family relationships. Therein, the family becomes a site of negotiating governmental restriction policies, intergenerational care

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1   https://www.bundesgesundheitsministerium.de/coronavirus/chronik-coronavirus.html?stand=20200508 [retrieved 15.08.2021].

practices and individual expressions of being categorized as "at-risk":[2] In these negotiations age is being constituted, stabilized and un/done in the pandemic.

In this paper we ask how and through which social practices age and family are relationally being un/done in the course of the pandemic in Germany, and how these un/doings shape, shift or even break intergenerational relations. To do so we present two case studies, chosen from 60 qualitative, problem-centred interviews[3] (Witzel 2000) that were conducted between March and August 2020 and from November 2020 to February 2021 with persons between 21 and 87 years of age, living in different household and care constellations in Germany. By focusing on intergenerational contact restrictions and the ways in which they are discussed, performed, mediated (for example through new technologies), and experienced, we show how age-based differences are stabilised or intensified, questioned or made irrelevant. Based on this we reconstruct the practices of *un/doing age* while *un/doing family* in the pandemic. In conclusion, we outline the potential of a 'linking ages' approach for the study of family lives and of intergenerational relations in times of crises.

2. Theoretical approach: *un/doing age* and *un/doing family*

In order to show how age-based differences are stabilised or questioned in the discussion, performance, mediation, and experience of intergenerational contact restrictions, we develop an analytic framework that combines the concepts of *un/doing age* and *un/doing family.*

In recent years, conceptions of a *un/doing age* have been developed in childhood research (e.g., Lee 2008), critical adulthood research (e.g., Burnett 2010), and age(ing) research (e.g., Schroeter 2012; Höppner & Wanka 2021). These were first derived historically-institutionally, as in Phillippe Ariès' (1962) theses on the invention of childhood or Martin Kohli's (1985; 2007) theory of the institutionalized life course. Kohli even calls the standardized sequence of life stages primarily tied to chronological age - and thus the life course - the primary socialization program of our time. This sequencing is constructed and underpinned by implicit and explicit norms and knowledge orders, which Elizabeth Freeman (2010) describes as chrononormativity(ies). Chrononormativity refers specifically (but not exclusively) to ideas about the 'right' time for specific life stages and transitions, such as starting school, starting a family, or retiring. These ideas are manifested and stabilized through legal regulations and an executive-institutional organization, such as compulsory schooling and the corresponding school system linked to age, the right to marry, or the retirement age, as well as in social institutions such as gainful employment or family.

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2   Notwithstanding the fact that these practices homogenize families in the same way as we already see with age.

3   The problem-centered interview is conducted using a partially standardized interview guide whose questions focus on a specific object of investigation - the "problem." This interview aims at gaining knowledge by overcoming the supposed contradiction between theory-guidedness and openness through a combination of inductive and deductive questions.

From these more structuralist approaches, symbolic-interactionist approaches also developed over time, such as the *doing age* concept of the sociologist of aging Klaus Schroeter (2012), who locates the production of aging in the enactment of social practices on five levels: 1) in symbols and representations, 2) in institutions, 3) in interactions, 4) in bodies, things, and spaces, and 5) in affects and senses. In addition, materialist *doing age* conceptions have developed in both childhood research (Lee 2008) and ag(ing) research (Höppner & Urban 2018), in which the importance of materialities such as bodies, spaces, and things for the production and shaping of the difference category of age receive special attention (Höppner 2015; Endter 2016; Wanka & Gallistl 2018).

The concept of *un/doing age* (Höppner & Wanka 2021) combines structuralist and interactionist explanations in the analysis of age in order to be able to grasp production processes of age constructions in a multi-perspective way. The concept of *un/doing age* sensitizes us to consistently think not only about the construction processes of social categories of difference (doing) but also about their deconstruction practices (undoing). Thus, age can be denied, negated, or reversed in the sense of *undoing age* in the short or long term, situationally or generally; performances can deviate from age norms, undermine them, and/or contribute to making age irrelevant in the first place. It does so by focusing on the practices that constitute, stabilise, question or make age (categories) (ir)relevant. Hence, age becomes understandable as contingent, changeable and processual. This multi-perspectivity is extended by a consistent consideration of age as a 'metric variable' with possible manifestations from 0 to over 100 years, which on the one hand multiplies the number of possible overlapping memberships, but on the other hand also still dynamizes them in continuous, processual shifts, since we are not only a certain 'number' old, but also constantly getting older (van Dyk 2015; Kampmann 2015).

At the same time, family research is turning away from structure-based explanatory models of the development, continuation and dissolution of families and research on attitudes toward the family. Instead, a practice-theoretical perspective with the concepts of *Doing Family* (first developed by Morgan 1996, 2011a, 2011b; see also Jurczyk et al. 2014) and *Undoing Family* (Jurczyk 2020) is gaining in importance, according to which people do not simply have a family or are a family, but rather, family must be done and can also be undone. What is new about this perspective is the research programmatic view, which makes it possible to accompany the actors and their activities as a contribution to the production of family and thus to empirically analyze the practical and co-productive activity from the perspective of different actors, in which families are founded, maintained, changed and dissolved in everyday life. Thus, family is not understood as a natural, prior structure, but as a social fact, and as a socio-cultural construct that has to be continuously produced and accomplished in its form (Jurczyk 2020: 27). For Karin Jurczyk families are done on an organizational level by activities of so-called "balance management" (Jurczyk 2020: 29), which includes coordinating processes of the family members so that they experience a common life context, and on a meaningful-identity level by means of activities that help to produce commonality and family values, and which take place in everyday interactions, mutual references, and symbolic representations. Empirically, a family can be described by "the production of social bonds through processes of inclusion and exclusion", "by the production of a we-feeling" and the

"displaying family"[4] that is, the staging of family constellations that do not conform to norms (Jurczyk 2020: 30).

In addition, Jurczyk points out that the everyday and practical travails of caring relationships not only produce family constellations in all their facets, but practices of damaging, dissolving, distancing, neutralizing, and putting to rest can also make families undone. Just as with the notion of *un/doing age*, the notion of *Doing and Undoing Family* makes it possible to analyze a family as changeable, contingent, and gradually different in the life course and in family processes (Jurczyk 2020: 10-14).

Bringing both approaches together, and thus ag(ing) research and family studies into a dialogue, makes the fact that practices and processes of *un/doing age* and *un/doing family* are relational and even co-constitutive apparent. Through practices of doing age, families can be formed and changed (for example, when children become part of a family); and, vice versa, through practices of *doing family* age can be made (ir)relevant (for example, when adults become grandparents and thereby start feeling 'old'). Whereas social relationships - from romantic relationships to friendships and relations between colleagues - are shaped and co-constituted in relation to age differences, the un/doing of age is particularly heavily engrained in the un/doing of family as a traditionally multi-generational figuration.

With this as a backdrop the paper asks how and through which social practices age and family are relationally being un/done during the course of the pandemic in Germany.

3.   Empirical case studies: *un/doing age* and *family* during Covid-19 in Germany

To approach the question *how* (through which social practices) age and family are relationally being un/done during the course of the pandemic in Germany, we draw on data from the German research project "Provisioning and Support during the SARS-CoV-2-Pandemic (VERSUS-Corona)", conducted at the Institute for Social Research and the Research Training Group "Doing Transitions" at Goethe University Frankfurt am Main. In the course of this project, a quantitative online survey (n=1.000) was combined with 60 qualitative problem-centred interviews conducted between March 2020 and February 2021 with persons between 21 and 87 years of age living in different household and care constellations across Germany, Austria and Switzerland.[5] Participants of the quantitative survey could state their willingness to be involved in qualitative interviews, which formed the basis for qualitative sampling. Persons interviewed in the qualitative sample were between 25 and 82 years old; three quarters were female, one quarter male; nearly half of them lived alone, one third with children and one fifth in partnerships without children. Selected study participants interviewed throughout the first wave of the pandemic (March to August 2020) were invited for a follow-up interview during the second wave (November 2020 to February 2021) to analyse changes and developments in their experiences of living

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4   The concept of displaying family was first developed by Finch (2007).

5   Since this analysis uses only cases of people living in Germany for reasons of limited space, Covid-19 restrictions in Austria and Switzerland are not considered further here.

with the virus. Interviews were fully transcribed and initially coded based on a constructivist Grounded Theory methodology (Charmaz 2006) using analysis software MaxQDA. Initial codes were condensed into focused codes and mapped using situational analysis (Clarke, 2005). Situations were thereby defined as practices (e.g. grandparenting practices, volunteering practice), hence resulting in different situational maps for different practice constellations that were first created per and later across participants.

For this paper, we chose a case studies approach to reconstruct the ways in which age-based measures to combat the spread of the virus – hence, measures of *doing age* or making age irrelevant – related to the un/doing of family, and, more particularly, to identify the social practices of *un/doing age* and their relation to practices of *un/doing family*. Case studies as a common approach in social sciences are particularly suitable for this purpose. They allow for an in-depth understanding of the doings described by the interviewees. They make it possible to describe developments within a family in detail and to determine these developments as being a particular family way of dealing with Covid-19 restrictions.[6] In our analysis, the ways of dealing with the restrictions can be summarized as an *undoing family* by *doing age* (first case) and a *redoing family* by *doing age* (second case). These different ways of dealing with the restrictions can then ultimately be compared with each other.

For the case studies, we selected two women living in Germany who were therefore confronted with the same jurisdiction and similar contact restrictions during the two lockdowns[7] – a fact that is important for the comparison of cases. We also assume that, as women, they each hold a specific social position in their families, with which certain expectations and tasks relating to femininity and caring are involved (Speck 2019). Due to their age – Esther Król was born in 1952, Jessica Schmidt in 1988 – we want to highlight an intergenerational perspective on *un/doing family* in the sense of a 'linking ages' approach. Finally, the two cases were selected in terms of maximum contrast in the family ways of dealing with Covid-19 restrictions.

3.1 Undoing family by doing age – The case of Esther Król[8]

Esther Król was born 1952 in an Eastern European country and emigrated to Germany in 1985, where she worked as a clerk up until her retirement in 2015. She has three sons, two of whom are married themselves, and two grandchildren (3 and 9 years old), and was married, but she divorced her husband in 2000. Today she is living alone in an apartment in a bigger city in West Germany. Both of her parents have already died, and she took care

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6   We are aware that doings and undoings can be collected best by the method of participant observation. Due to contact restrictions at the times of data collection for the study presented here, it was not possible to participate in everyday family practices. Therefore, interviews were selected for data collection and analysis of age-based contact restrictions.

7   This is relevant as there were significant differences in government measures to combat the spread of the virus in the three countries of analysis: for example, contact restrictions in Austria were much stricter than in Germany, involving an actual curfew. However, we cannot provide a systematic international comparison in this paper.

8   All names were pseudonymized.

of her mother, who lived in a nursing home in Germany until her death two years prior to the interview. She was interviewed both in July 2020 and again in January 2021.

Before the pandemic, Esther recounts close-knit family ties, especially to her sons and grandchildren. Born shortly after the war, she remembers her own upbringing as "living in poverty, but we had each other as a family, and that was enough". Consequently, it is important to her to be in close contact to her sons, and she takes a lot of pride in being a crucial caregiver in her family: she took care of her mother until her death, she supports her three sons financially, and she is an affectionate and attentive grandmother to her two grandchildren.

With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the respective measures in the first wave, particularly home office and closing of kindergartens and schools, she felt that her sons needed her more than ever:

> *"And well, then the home office measure started: the children at home, my son is already at the end of his tether, two small children, one from school at home, the small one from kindergarten at home. The daughter-in-law works from home, my son works from home, no personal contact with other people, so that was very, very difficult."*

In the beginning of the first wave, she would take care of her grandchildren even more than before to enable her son and daughter-in-law to work from home. As a retiree, she has the time to provide this caregiving and thereby partly to compensate for the closing of schools and kindergartens. Hence, we see a reconfiguration of intergenerational relations of provisioning that stabilises and intensifies her position as a crucial node in the practices of *doing family*. Hence, we can see a redoing of family in the onset of the pandemic.

However, this support would come to an end when age was increasingly discussed as a risk factor for severe morbidity and mortality related to the virus. Ultimately, her daughter-in-law would prevent her from having any contact with her grandchildren out of fear that Esther could be infected with and might die of the virus due to her age and respective assignment to a potential risk group.

> *"[...] the [note: daughter-in-law] already reacted fearfully, she actually forbade me as a grandmother to have contact with children, with my grandchildren, and so that depressed me unbelievably."*

Whereas in the beginning of the pandemic Esther's position in the family was stabilised and her integration into the family intensified, we can see here how processes of exclusion set in soon after. By making age relevant as a risk factor, her daughter-in-law establishes a distance between Esther und her grandchildren, thereby dissolving care relationships. The boundaries between where Esther's family begins and ends are being re-drawn, and, from the son's family's perspective, this reconfiguration of intergenerational relations of provisioning constitutes a redoing of family. From Esther's perspective, however, it contributes to an undoing of family, suggesting that doing, redoing and undoing are all sides of the same coin or process.

The undoing of family for Esther caused a strong affective reaction up to a point where she expresses depressive symptoms, suicidal thoughts, and sheer anger.

"Sometimes I'm sad, sometimes I'm depressed, so sometimes I'm super aggressive. [...] the thought of suicide appeared very often, very often."

She is well aware that this exclusion from her family relations and her former social role as a crucial caregiver is based on her age, and feels misjudged and unfairly treated thereby.

"And the worst thing for me was, I have to say, honestly. The worst thing for me was that we have to protect the elderly. Because I am at risk. So my God. That's when I thought, guys. In December I was still the old granny, the old environmental pig[9]. And now the government wants to protect my life at all costs. What a paradox. What kind of nonsense are they telling me?"

In the above quote, Esther recognizes the ambivalent and, from her perspective, contradictory practices of addressing her 'as an older person': Before the pandemic, she felt her age group was addressed as the one that caused the environmental damage for younger generations (she is referring to the Fridays for Future movement[10] here in particular) that are suffering from and scandalizing it at this moment in history. In the beginning of the pandemic she was addressed by her family as a crucial caregiver to compensate for the closing of central caregiving institutions, but soon after, she became addressed as the opposite: a frail at-risk group. Hence, the way her age is made relevant in the process of before and through the pandemic changes, from a powerful aggressor, to a highly relevant and needed caregiver, to a vulnerable care-dependent.

In search of social contacts, Esther increasingly turns to her neighbourhood and the people living in her apartment building in particular. She expresses the realization that her neighbors have all migrated to Germany *("In my house [....] we are all foreigners")* and based on this shared transitional experience, together with Covid-19, they form a community that they did not have before.

"The relationship with the neighbors has actually changed. We've sort of grown together a bit and we've been talking all the time and that's sort of bonded us together. So this solidarity between neighbours has grown."

One of her neighbors eventually introduces her to *Querdenker*, a political movement of people in Germany that protest the measures to contain the spread of the virus,

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9   The phrase 'environmental pig' was used in a video that went viral in German social media and television, portraying older adults as the group responsible for environmental pollution and climate change, and framing them as opposed to environmental movements that attract mainly younger people, like Fridays for Future.

10 Following the example of Greta Thunberg, the initiator of this global movement, students take to the streets on Fridays during class time to protest for fast, comprehensive and efficient climate protection measures. Their reproach is that the young generation will later have to pay for prior failures in climate policy.

sometimes deny the existence of the virus altogether, and spread conspiracy theories (Nachtwey et al., 2020). When Esther was interviewed a second time in January 2021, her relationships with friends and family had worsened, and the pandemic had induced tensions and debates with her sons.

> *"And since the second wave, or since autumn, it has changed so much that I have to say I have actually lost everything in my life. Everything. I have nothing left. I've lost friends, I've lost the desire to live, my life no longer has any meaning. I have two sons, one is pro-Corona, the other is anti-Corona, we already have arguments in the family, very old friendships have broken off. [...]"*

However, she has created new meaningful social connections with people active in the political movement that she calls her "newfound family". Asked about the quality of these relationships, she emphasizes the notion of solidarity and being there for each other – just like a family.

> *"When one of us is in a bad way, the other one supports him [...] and when one of us is harassed by [the] police, a group forms and stands next to him and doesn't leave him alone."*

Here we can see how Esther is involved in the ‚doings' of another kind of family, based on elective affinity. In this group, her age is not made relevant – at least not in a way she is aware of and/or discussed. On the contrary, she emphasizes the age diversity and the intergenerational relations she can build with young people within the movement without being judged for her age:

> *"The only positive thing is that this whole measure has brought people together and I've been to demos in big cities a few times. There were old people, there were young people, there were families, there were children. I met some great people there, and we are still in close contact today. There are much younger people than me [...] and I actually have more contact with young people now. Because the people I met, although so mixed, are mostly young people."*

In summary, Esther's case shows how the doings of age – the practices through which age is made relevant – have changed during the course of the pandemic based on the simultaneous redoing and undoing of family and on the position one takes.

3.2 Redoing family by doing age – The case of Jessica Schmidt

Jessica Schmidt was born in 1988 in Western Germany. She is a self-employed artist and lives with her husband and two children (2 and 8 years old) in a house in a small German town. As a software engineer, Jessica's husband is the main breadwinner of the family, and Jessica the family's main caregiver. Before the pandemic, her children went to school and kindergarten, and in the afternoons were taken care of by a babysitter for a couple of hours. Her neighbourhood, which she describes as rather rural, is strongly structured by charitable associations for different causes, and social support works quite well, between the generations as well. Jessica, for example, knows of a childcare service run by retired

women – "all 65-plus I would say"– and of technology support provided by young people to older adults.

However, when the pandemic hit in spring 2020, most of these services shut down, as did schools and kindergartens; the babysitter went into quarantine, her husband "locked himself into his study" and Jessica was left alone with all care tasks for the family. Similar to the case of Esther, family boundaries were re-drawn through these measures, excluding people and institutions from the caregiving practices of *doing family*, and Jessica's family is being redone. In contrast to Esther, who is excluded in the process of this redoing, Jessica is positioned in the centre of her family's caregiving practices, with which she feels overwhelmed and overburdened:

> *"I have to be honest, I almost went crazy. So, how do you describe it? Nervous breakdown every few hours for weeks like that. It got loud, too. It got kind of/ That was really bad. It was really, really bad [...] There are no more grandparents who are allowed to look after the children. The children are not allowed to go to other children's houses. All the childcare didn't take place. So really not at all, from one hundred to zero. And especially when you're alone, it's crazy. So that's 24/7 and for, what was it now? 90 days? It felt like a lifetime."*

Asked about how her social relationships changed during the first wave of the pandemic, Jessica mentions three grandparents – one couple and one single woman – of whom particularly the latter insisted on continuing to see her grandchildren. Jessica, however, and despite her desperate need for childcare, turned their offers down because of the risk associated with the virus, and the grandmother's age, again, contributing to a reconfiguration of intergenerational relations of provisioning in her family.

> *"And the grandmother always wanted to see the children and I always denied it. Because she also had a lot of contact aside from us, again and again, all the time. I didn't like that. And all three of them are a bit older, so I didn't want to risk that either."*

In the beginning, her children also frequently asked if and when they could "see and hug" their grandparents again. But very soon, Jessica recalls, this wish faded, even when they were allowed to meet again in public.

> *"That stopped pretty quickly, they [note: Jessica's children] didn't even ask about it anymore. And it's gone so far that now, when the grandparents are at the door/ So we meet in our garden. They are standing in front of the door and the children run up to them, stop just before reaching them, and wave."*

Instead of excluding the grandparents from the doings of family altogether, in this case, grandparents, children/parents, and grandchildren maintained contact via video chatting software and by exchanging of things, such as book swaps. Here, we can see mediated and digitalized configurations of provisioning that change intergenerational relations, and thus reconfigure the practices of *doing family*.

"What I have done is: I hung books on door handles, by request. My mother is a frequent reader and the library was suddenly closed. And then I sent her photos from my collection, ,Do you want this? Do you want this? Do you want this?' and put it on her door, that kind of thing. The grandparents came by quite often and hung presents on the door."

Since the second wave of the pandemic, however, these virtual and mediated forms of contact have stopped. Her children have lost interest in video chatting with their grandparents and instead prefer to spend their time with peers of the same age.

"It has changed a lot with the children, who no longer video chat at all. They don't ask about it either. [...] The grandparents and other relatives with whom we used to chat or talk on the phone, we don't do that anymore. (...) It's somehow (..) more important for them to be with their peers of the same age."

Similar to Esther's case, we hence see a redoing of family that changes throughout the course of the pandemic, and finally leads to an exclusion of the grandparents – an *undoing of family*, from their perspective – whereas for Jessica herself, the boundaries and relations have just been reassembled. As the pandemic continued, the grandparents faded from her narrations, and her husband – who was first described as absent, locked in his home office room – became more central in the provisioning of care and *doing family*. This is mainly due to the fact that he lost his job during the pandemic, which Jessica experienced as a relief, as he would now engage more in childcare. In this scenario, Jessica and her husband could proactively negotiate and plan for the times when schools and kindergartens would close.

"We have agreed on fixed contacts for the children, (...) we have also agreed on a procedure in case the school closes, or the classes are cut in half, or 'what do we do if the day care centre closes'? We agreed with the most important grandparents what we would do and how. So under what conditions do we meet at all, if it is possible at the moment. [...] We have a very good division of tasks now."

To summarize, Jessica's case shows how family is being un/done in the course of the pandemic in a similar way as Esther's, but from a different age position, hence experiencing these reconfigurations more as a *redoing* than an *undoing* of family while *doing age*.

4.   Discussion

The two empirical cases show how practices of *doing family* were performed before the pandemic and how they have changed over the course of the pandemic. Through the linkage of 'age' and 'risk', pre-pandemic practices of *doing family* can no longer be maintained. Instead, family boundaries are re-drawn, intergenerational relations of provisioning in families are reconfigured, and families are *being done* in different ways.

This becomes explicit, for example, when Esther's daughter-in-law suspends her contact with the grandchildren or when Jessica foregoes the grandparents' support in childcare for fear of their becoming infected with the virus. The according reconfigurations lead to a shift in positions within families: Esther's position as grandmother and caregiver first becomes more central and then more peripheral, until she is completely excluded from her family. On the contrary, Jessica's position as a family caregiver first becomes more central, and is later accompanied by the increasingly central position of her husband after he loses his job, whereas the grandparents gradually fade out of the family figuration. Despite the differences in movement, both Esther and Jessica initially suffer from these shifts, indicating that changes in practices of *doing family* are also affective. In the course of the pandemic, both engage in new and alternative practices of *re/doing family*: Esther gets in contact with a political movement where she can build new intergenerational relations of provisioning with people that are not biologically related to her, and Jessica engages in the redoings of her family in the negotiation of care work with her now-unemployed husband. Here it becomes clear that both women are trying to reorganize social relationships and redefine their understanding of family; in Esther's case, this comprises even people who were not previous family members. The resumption und re-stabilization of family practices seem to be an important motif in the production of normality and functional order in times of crisis.

In the description of the empirical cases, it becomes obvious that the re-stabilization of family is based on the premise of excluding old-age representatives. Following Jurczyk, we argue that the practices of *doing family* in which Jessica and Esther's daughter-in-law engage in by limiting contact between grandparents and grandchildren cannot only be understood as a *redoing of family* in the pandemic but can also lead to an *undoing family* by distancing older family members or even excluding them from family life. Hence, processes of doing, redoing and undoing are all dimensions of the same phenomenon – the figurations of *un/doing age* and *family* – depending on the position from which one looks at it. For Esther, this means that what has been familiar as family to her has disappeared in the pandemic and she has had to find a new form of family.

This exclusion affects two age groups in particular: the old and the young. The grandmother Esther is excluded from the lives of her grandchildren as much as her grandchildren are excluded from that of their grandmother. However, this re-stabilization can also affect younger family members like Jessica. By excluding the grandparents from taking care of her children she can no longer pursue her professional activities; she is solely responsible for childcare due to her husband's withdrawal and feels overwhelmed and exhausted. Here *redoing family* is a boundary-making process of inclusion and exclusion of family members by age. In contrasting these age-bound perspectives – *redoing family* from the perspective of the middle-aged and *undoing family* from the perspective of young and old people – the contingency of family becomes apparent (Jurczyk 2020: 10-14). Hence, practices and processes of *un/doing family* and *un/doing age* are, first, multi-perspectivist and appear different depending on the age-based (and gender-based, class-based, etc.) position of the participants involved in them. Secondly, the two case studies exemplify that un/doing of age and family are situationally contingent, changeable and processual, leading us to the question of temporality. In age research, it has been common to determine "age" via chrononormativities (Freeman 2010), that is, by means of ideas

about the 'right' time for specific life stages and abilities that are stabilized in social institutions such as family. The two cases show that these ideas change several times over the course of the pandemic, from familiar pre-pandemic chrononormativities to invoking older adults as active caregivers (first phase of the pandemic) to the at-risk group in need of protection (second phase of the pandemic) - ambivalent addresses that might irritate not only older adults but others as well. Interestingly, however, this turning away from a linear causality towards a flexibilization of chrononormativities does not take place by means of an *undoing age while un/doing family*, but by a *doing age* in which constructions of age are confirmed all the more strongly while *un/re/doing family*. This renegotiation of age is accompanied by a renegotiation of family: not only do everyday family practices and the tasks and attributions conveyed by them change, but the exclusion of previous family members - the older generation - is accompanied by a new centering on the "nuclear family" consisting of parents and children; hence, a two-generational and rather heteronormatively-structured constellation of people. This development is to be evaluated critically not only from a developmental psychology or ethical perspective, but also from the perspective of solidarity between the generations (Ayalon et al. 2020) and from a feminist point of view, thinking about new constraints in gender equality (Hipp & Bünning 2021; Villa 2020).

5.   Conclusion

This paper set out to address the question of *how* and *through which* social practices age and family are relationally being un/done in the course of the pandemic in Germany. Based on two qualitative case studies from longitudinal research following people of different ages and in different family constellations through the pandemic, we could reconstruct how – in the very specific current circumstances – the doing (making relevant) of age can initiate reconfigurations of intergenerational relations of provisioning that lead to a redoing of families. Whereas in non-pandemic times, *doing age* can be constitutive for *doing family* - as a constellation traditionally perceived to comprise multiple generations – we see the opposite happen in the pandemic: age-based government measures to contain the spread of the virus limit intergenerational relations, older adults face the risk of being excluded from families in the process of their redoing, i.e. redrawing of boundaries, reconfiguration of provisioning, and reallocation of positions within them. Hence, *doing age* can lead to a *redoing* or even an *undoing* of family. However, while the concept of *Doing and Undoing Family* (Jurczyk 2020) systematically integrated un/doings of gender, it hardly acknowledges the relationality and co-constitution with *un/doing age*.

Yet, the two cases also show that this relationality is, on the one hand, dependent on the position taken within the family configuration (and the respective perspective), and on the other hand, situationally contingent, changeable and processual. In the course of not even one year, the positionality of older adults in family configurations, for example, had already changed a couple of times, and by the time of the writing of this paper, we cannot tell how it will develop: grandparents might stay excluded, or they might be included again when more (older) adults are vaccinated. Methodologically, this calls for longitudinal and

multi-perspectivist approaches towards *un/doing age* and *un/doing family*, taking into account the experiences of different age groups and relating them to each other in a 'Linking Ages' approach (Freutel et al., to be published) and following them for longer periods of time.

In terms of future research pathways, the results also touch upon the question of who, what and how family is, and how it changes. Throughout the pandemic, certain forms of family relations were normalized and others were excluded by the concept of "household" used in many measures. The legal regulation of contact restrictions through the classification of "household" led to problems for patchwork families as well as for roommates. They did not correspond to the legal idea of family as a "household" and accordingly, many family constellations fell through the cracks of infection control measures. But neighborly relationships and relationships in the social space also gained new importance, especially for older people. For example, the provision of food and medicines for older people was often organised informally by younger people from the neighborhood. And it became clear what role non-human actors, like digital devices and the accordingly digitally-mediated contacts, can have for maintaining family in the sense of *doing family*, or how the lack of access to digital technologies can cause an *undoing of family*.

One more aspect became apparent in the pandemic: the triple burden on women – which, considering also caring for relatives, can easily become a quadruple burden - is a central feature of the pandemic (Hipp & Bünning 2021). This can also be observed in Jessica's case. She is the one who has to combine childcare, household and paid work. She does this without the support of grandparents. Her husband is of no help to her. This multiple burden often occurs in middle age, but the pandemic exacerbates the situation of this group. Under the premise of care, middle age is broadened to include those who have to combine childcare with paid work, as well as those who additionally take on care work, or those who care for family members and have to go to work. Here, a homogenizing effect occurs, as we have already stated with regard to the group of older adults. This effect is an outcome of the political actions taken to deal with the pandemic. But in contrast to the homogenization of older age, it can be observed here how homogenization does not aim to exclude groups of people, but to include them, even if this inclusion aims at maintaining care work under the constraints of the pandemic. This affects women in particular; they are the ones who do the most care work (ibid.). Here, political efforts are called upon to be sensitive to these homogenizing effects in order to make visible the shift of care work to women that is taking place in the pandemic, especially in fields of child care, domesticity and informal care, and to offer appropriate support services and infrastructures.

The pandemic has made it clear that there are age groups that are particularly affected by the restrictions; making them invisible in their different needs by homogenizing age leads to a masking of power and inequality. A linking age perspective here also aims at making visible the needs of the different age groups without polarizing them. Furthermore, focusing on the *un/doings of age* and *family* in the pandemic offers the possibility to make visible other forms of family-making that escape the implicit heteronormative attributions of pandemic politics, even if we could not discuss them here.

The empirical analysis has made it clear that it is not only *doing age* that plays a role in the production of family. Future research in this area could examine intersectional doings as *un/doing gender, un/doing race,* or *un/doing class* and analyse their role in the production of family.

Data availability statement

Please contact Anna Wanka (email-address: wanka@em.uni-frankfurt.de) in order to get access to the data used to do the analyses for the study.

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Information in German

Deutscher Titel

Linking Ages – un/doing age und family in der COVID-19 Pandemie

Zusammenfassung

Fragestellung: In diesem Beitrag wird danach gefragt, wie und durch welche sozialen Praktiken Alter und Familie im Zuge der Pandemie in Deutschland relational hervorgebracht oder auch vergessen, negiert und rückgängig gemacht werden und wie dieses *un/doing* die Generationenbeziehungen prägt, verändert oder sogar auflöst..

Hintergrund: Die Ausbreitung des Corona-Virus und die Versuche von Regierungen, das Virus einzudämmen, prägen weltweit die Lebenssituationen von Menschen. Die institutionalisierte Altersdiskriminierung, die diesen staatlichen Maßnahmen zugrunde liegt, betrifft vor allem die Jüngsten und Ältesten der Gesellschaft (Ayalon et al. 2020; van Dyk et al. 2020). Generationenübergreifende Formen des Zusammenlebens, die unter anderem durch Praktiken der informellen Pflege, intergenerationeller Beziehungen (z.B. Großelternschaft) oder der Freiwilligenarbeit verwirklicht werden, sind in der aktuellen Pandemie erheblich eingeschränkt, da ältere Erwachsene als „Risikogruppe", Kinder als „stille Überträger" und junge Erwachsene als „riskante Gruppe" angesehen werden (Ayalon et al. 2020; Stokes & Patterson 2020). Diese Konstruktionen tragen somit zur Konstitution, Performanz und Re-Stabilisierung von Alter in der Pandemie bei.

Methode: Die Autorinnen stellen Ergebnisse einer qualitativen Längsschnittuntersuchung vor, in der zwischen März 2020 und Februar 2021 problemzentrierte Interviews mit Personen unterschiedlichen Alters durchgeführt wurden, die in verschiedenen Haushalts- und Betreuungskonstellationen in Deutschland leben.

Ergebnisse: Während in nicht-pandemischen Zeiten *doing age* konstitutiv für *doing family* sein kann – als eine Konstellation, die traditionell als generationenübergreifend wahrgenommen wird – sehen wir in der Pandemie das Gegenteil: Da altersbezogene staatliche Maßnahmen zur Eindämmung der Virusausbreitung generationenübergreifende Beziehungen einschränken, besteht für ältere Menschen die Gefahr, aus Familien ausgeschlossen zu werden. Das Alter kann dazu führen, dass sich Familien durch engere Grenzziehungen neu formieren oder sogar auflösen.

Schlussfolgerung: Der Beitrag verdeutlicht das Potenzial eines „Linking-Ages"-Ansatzes für die Untersuchung des Familienlebens und generationenübergreifender Beziehungen in Zeiten von Krisen.

Schlagwörter: Covid-19, generationenübergreifende Beziehungen, un/doing age, Doing und Undoing Family, soziale Praktiken, linking ages

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