

Rosy Musumeci

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Book reviews

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Based on in-depth biographical interviews carried out in 2003-2004 with young-adults, this very insightful book written by twelve authors, analyses and compares, from a life course perspective, both the transitions to parenthood and the current experiences of working mothers and fathers across seven European countries (Bulgaria, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden and United Kingdom).

After a brief overview of the main thesis and contents of the book [introduction], chapter 2 moves on, in its first part, to present the theoretical and conceptual features of the life course perspective that forms the overarching framework of analysis of the qualitative data in the following chapters of the book; in its second part, chapter 2 outlines some of the main historical institutional developments in the countries involved in the study.

Chapter 3 discusses the two main methodological features of the study; a comparative qualitative approach, on the one side, and a cross-national embedded case study design, on the other side, in which the transitions to parenthood and the experiences of the working mothers and fathers are analyzed at three different levels: the macro level of national public policy provision; the meso-organizational level both of formal employer policies/provision and informal support in the workplace; and finally, the micro-individual level, namely, the biographical trajectories of working parents.

The two middle chapters examine the transitions to motherhood [chapter 4] and to fatherhood [chapter 5] of a group of women and men born between 1965 and 1975, in relation to other life course trajectories (such as school leaving, gainful employment, moving out of the parental household and cohabitation/marriage) and with reference, on one hand, to social class and educational level of the respondents, and, on the other hand, to institutional arrangements (such as welfare provision for working parents, workplace regulations and systems of education) which are specific and different according to national contexts; chapter 4 compares transitions and trajectories to motherhood of selected cases of mothers from four of the seven countries involved in the study (Bulgaria, Norway, Portugal and United Kingdom); while transitions to fatherhood are compared in three countries (Bulgaria, Portugal and Sweden).

Unlike chapters 4 and 5, the focus of chapters 6 and 7 is on the present. More precisely, chapter 6 describes and discusses the structural characteristics that provide support or, on the contrary, constraints to working parents in the different national contexts involved in the study (for example, labour laws, levels and types of public and private support for childcare and working hours regulation). In chapter 7 the authors select working parents who are similar with respect to gender, age of child, occupation and type of organisational settings (mothers who are low-status care workers in public social services and fathers who are high-status workers in private finance organisations), and compare how they experience their contemporary lives, examining the role of the different resources available in different countries: the cases of mothers were selected

from Bulgaria, Portugal, Sweden and United Kingdom, while the cases of fathers were selected from Norway, Slovenia and The Netherlands.

The final chapter (chapter 8) discusses some issues that are crucial to understanding the phenomenon of working parenthood: time (pressure), context, class and gender.

The authors are highly successful in their use of the life course approach in a cross-national comparative perspective: the outcome is a very complete, suggestive and vivid picture of how similar individuals (in terms of level of education, occupation, type of organisation, age of children) experience working motherhood and fatherhood very differently according to their particular historical, national, institutional and organizational contexts (and to the related structures of opportunity and constraints). This also means, for example, that the levels of “time pressure” and of “parenting stress” experienced by working mothers and fathers vary considerably on the basis of the aforementioned structural characteristics. Also the role of the family of origin, like that of the partner, is taken into consideration. Intergenerational kin support is not legislated but is a key resource of parental support in each societal context in different gradations (for example, it is crucial in eastern and southern countries).

Another fundamental lesson of the book is that ideas about gender equity remain ideals for many today rather than part of established practices, and the extent to which these ideas permeated policies and practices varies among different countries. In this sense, devoting distinct chapters [4, 5] and distinct sections inside the same chapter [7] to motherhood and fatherhood shows very efficiently that experiences of motherhood and fatherhood, especially of working motherhood and fatherhood, continue to be gendered across countries, and influenced by cultural and structural factors.

Furthermore, as the authors underline in the introduction, even if the interviews were conducted in 2003 and 2004, the book still appears very actual now, in a very different historical period, in which most of the world is suffering from the consequences of the economic crisis. This is because it points out some crucial issues about the sustainability of contemporary working parenthood that are highly relevant in times of economic crisis. Over the last few years, radical social and economic changes (such as the economic crisis and the rising rates of fixed-term employment and unemployment, especially among young and young-adult people) seem to have challenged and modified both the individual work, family choices, strategies, solutions and resources provided by welfare states and workplaces to support the reconciliation between work and family life. In this regard, the book highlights that the effect of the economic crisis on mothers and fathers (in these seven countries) will strongly depend on the place they live in, as governments' responses to the needs of families have been very different. It also underlines the potential positive effects of the economic downturn: while this will cause financial hardship to many, it could also create opportunities for more equitable parenting. For example, in some countries of North Europe, employers are encouraging both woman and men workers to reduce working hours in order to avoid redundancy.

Perhaps one limitation of the book is that the research on transitions in life course perspective would require a dynamic, longitudinal approach rather than a retrospective cohort study, which looks back at events that already took place. However, the authors' analysis is really appreciable and efficacious because it very well integrates an attention to the phenomena as processes [chapters 4, 5] and a focus on the present [chapter 7].

Moreover, the peculiar condition and the experiences of the lone parents could have been analysed more deeply; for example, it would have been useful to show if and how the marriage or the civil union could represent an “institutional channel” to forms of welfare provision for working parents unavailable for lone parents; or if lone parents can rely on types of services (in addition to standard child care services) or on welfare provision specifically targeted to them.

Finally, with respect to parents’ wellbeing, according to the authors the main conditions that make parents (especially mothers) secure and satisfied are a good housing situation, a supportive relationship with the partner (at least from an emotional point of view if not in terms of an equitable sharing of childcare responsibilities and household chores), a local and affordable institutional childcare, the support from the family of origin (mainly the grandparents) and some workplace support. In this regard, in the future it might be interesting to deepen and to stress any working parents’ dissatisfaction towards institutional solutions and provisions to support them with respect to their ideal childcare and work-family reconciliation arrangements (ideals that, in turn, are related to their beliefs about “adequate parenting”, good fatherhood and motherhood and what the best is for the children) in order to show how gender and parenting ideologies vary and change within the margins of what is institutionally possible.

Rosy Musumeci
University of Turin