

Caterina Satta

**Elinor Ochs and Tamar Kremer-Sadlik (Eds.),
"Fast-Forward Family. Home, Work, and Relationships in Middle-Class America." Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013, 297 pp.**

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Book Review

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What constitutes and how is achieved “the good enough family”? How to reach an adequate standard of “familyness”? These questions, far from receiving an answer, lay at the core of the middle-class families’ struggle for identity documented in the book *Fast-Forward Family*. The researchers of the UCLA Sloan Centre on Everyday Lives of Families (CELf) who have conducted an extensive multi-method research, mainly ethnographic, on the private world of middle-class families in the United States, have spent almost ten years to register family’s efforts to be “good enough” and to disclose the moral framework which orients their practices. The purpose of the study was to grasp family life in its ordinary and extraordinary display through parenting, managing and caring of the domestic sphere, maintaining the couple relationship healthy and working outside the home.

The book examines all of the daily work carried out by families struggling to be good parents, good partners and good house-keepers while remaining equally committed to work duties. Most importantly, it reveals that at the centre of modern-day families there are the practices and the culture of child rearing implicitly inspired by the view of *the child as a project*. CELf parents were not only very concerned with their children’s present, providing them basic care and help for extracurricular activities, but they were full of expectations (and anxieties) about their children’s future.

The sample, composed by thirty-two middle-class families living across the metropolitan area of Los Angeles, was heterogeneous in term of ethnicity, parents’ sexual orientation, employment and salary and for the presence of both birth and adopted children and of children from previous marriages. Some parents had an immigrant background (from Latin America, Europe and Asia); some were from the Midwest or the East Coast while others were from Southern California. Most families were heterosexuals and two were composed by gay fathers, some were more affluent than others but all had in common “the middle-class American Dream of buying their own home and filling it with nice things to make it beautiful and comfortable” [p. 5]. It’s important to note that CELf research started at the aftermath of the Tween Towers attack of September 11, 2001, and was carried out during the breakdown of the American financial system, which affected also the middle-class CELf family. However, despite the social, economic and political transformations of American society, what the study captures is the resistance of the norms and expectations “generated by their social class,” which will continue to “influence everyday family practices and challenges in the near future” [p. 3].

Time, money and reflexive care can thus be considered the pillars of the middle-class American families. The success of the *enterprise* – this is how the book depicts family life – of rising a family will depend on a combination of these three factors. If money is essential to afford the consumer goods and all of the extracurricular activities in which to be involved as a new status marker of the middle-class family, time is the

other crucial element to invest on in order to balance the requirements of care work and housework. Reflexive care refers here to the ever present moral assessment and moral gaze which dominate the site of the family “as one’s actions and stances as mother, father, son, daughter, and spouse or partner were subject to constant evaluation” [p. 233].

The book comprises twelve chapters plus an appendix on the CELF study which describes the two main methodological peculiarities of the study: the research team – composed by experts of different disciplines from academia, like anthropology, archaeology, applied linguistics, psychology (clinical and social), education and sociology, and from multimedia technology – and the vast amount of photographic and video recording data on family life collected during fieldwork and organized in archives stored at the University of California. Every chapter focuses on different aspects of family life. Researchers have identified them following spatial/temporal/relational segments: coming home; being at home; dinner time; the material culture of domestic/family space; housework and the children’s involvement in domestic activities; homework and recreation, not only as time committed to these activities but also as parental investment in children successful performances; nurturing, intending all the forms of love and care exchanged and manifested among the members of the family; the consequences of stressful experiences outside the home (mainly job stress) on family life and on couple relationship, as well as the different ways families cope with them; health and wellbeing as a family matter; time for family conceived as a specific time, activity-driven, devoted to the family *only*; a concluding commentary on the “good enough family” as a moral dilemma which affects the wellbeing of the family as a whole and of its individual members. CELF researchers point out that the widespread feelings of parental inadequacy originates from a “disjuncture between idealized and actual lived ways of being a family” [p. 238] and from the difficulty to match an ideal of being a good parent given that “the moral criteria for being a good parent, a good family, and a good worker were re-examined on a daily basis” [*Ibidem*].

“The cohesiveness of the family was a focus of considerable moral inquietude of CELF parents, who talked about the need to carve out of the busy week a special “quality time” to be together” [p. 240]. For example, dinner time, planned as a moment for the family gathering, often resulted in a time of internal stress between parents and children. One of the culprits often evoked of the disappearance of the dinner/meal time as a family time was the consumption of preprepared foods, packaged as individual meals, ready in a few minutes and easy to eat anywhere in the house. This was considered an element undermining children’s interest in coming to the dinner table and moreover, due to the pre-packaged food assemblage of ingredients, difficult to modify in order to accommodate the taste of every family member.

This idealization of family time, overloaded by too many meanings, often precluded the parents from considering and enjoying the unexpected, unorganized moments of intimacy and amusement that spontaneously arose *at home*, during *homework or recreation activities* or even while one was accomplishing some domestic *chores*.

The problem resides here in what is valued, and what is not, in the construction of “family time” and “family togetherness.” It seems that these families are obsessed by the need of self recognition of their family bonds. They need to recognize that they are a family through specific moments and contexts where they spend time together. In this laborious process the home plays an ambiguous role. Having a job outside the

house, and spending a day apart, appeared in this moral framework an open wound never completely cured.

The home is not just a setting for family life, but is central in the process of definition of middle-class families status. Not only its ownership but also the objects and furniture contribute in shaping and defining their identity and wellbeing. The book describes the materiality of the house also as a burden, the origin of more housework because of the need to clean, tidy up, store and re-store periodically the “mountains of things” within the house spaces. However, even if houses are overloaded of stuff that nearly overwhelms its inhabitants, the traditional role of domestic space as family refuge and nest appears persistent and unquestioned. This seems true not only in the perception of the CELF Families, but also in the assumptions of the CELF scholars who have designed and conducted a home-centred research. The authors point out that parents lament the shortage of family time and how the efforts made to succeed as a family always leave them dissatisfied. Could this maybe be ascribed precisely to the location chosen? The house, as observed in one chapter, can be also a source of distress for the family members. What if a specific focus was dedicated to the outdoor life (not only as children-oriented activities, like sport or other extracurricular activities)? Could have this maybe depicted another middle-class family story? The authors cannot obviously answer these questions but they can help readers to frame the findings into a wider academic debate “within the leisure studies community about the role of ‘families’ in contemporary life and the experience of families and their children in the leisure environment” [Schänzel and Carr 2015, 171].

Moreover, a focus on children as family actors, and not only as beneficiaries of parents’ care, would have enriched the portrayal of the middle-class family. If throughout the book there is an implicit critique (based on a deconstructive approach) of an “all-embracing, child-centric parenting” dominant model, the authors seem nonetheless too concentrated on parents’ role and perspectives – as if parents were the only active agents in the domestic sphere and family was not a relational construct based also on the age difference. Quoting Barrie Thorne and her classic article *Re-visioning Women and Social Change: Where are the Children?* [1987], we could similarly ask “where are the children?” and argue that this study should have included more of the children’s perspectives. In this respect, we could claim that sociology of the family (and more in general family studies) have still not recognized the place of children in the family [see Jensen and McKee 2003].

Gender difference as well, especially between mother and father, is often evoked. Quantitative differences (for example in terms of disparity of numbers of hours spent enjoying leisure activities between men and women or in terms of unequal distribution of household labour) are noted but there is no application of a gender perspective required to think critically both family life and family roles.

To conclude, consistently with the concepts of *doing families* [Morgan 1996] and of *displaying families* [Finch 2007] – essays surprisingly never mentioned in the book despite the continuous recall of the importance for the CELF families to have time and contexts where the family can recognize and affirm itself “as a family” – the book offers a very detailed portrayal of family life *grounded* in family contexts.

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